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Cultural and Ethical Foundations of AI Governance Divergence: A Comparative Analysis of China and the West

Fundamentos culturales y éticos de la divergencia en la gobernanza de la IA: Un análisis comparativo de China y Occidente

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How to cite (APA, seventh edition): Cuihong, C., & Yin, J. (2025). Cultural and Ethical Foundations of AI Governance Divergence: A Comparative Analysis of China and the West. *Política Internacional*, VII (No. 1), 215-233. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14473453>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14473453>

RECEIVED: NOVEMBER 13, 2024

APPROVED: DECEMBER 15, 2024

PUBLISHED: JANUARY 7, 2024

ABSTRACT *This research examines the cultural and ethical foundations underlying differences in artificial intelligence (AI) governance between China and the West, highlighting the influence of Confucian ethics and liberalism on governance frameworks. By contrasting the priorities, methods, and visions guiding governance, this study demonstrates that China's Confucian-influenced model prioritizes collective welfare and government-led, performance-based governance, while the liberal values driving Western approaches focus on individual rights and a multi-stakeholder contractual governance model. Analyzing these approaches through the lens of Weberian path theory reveals their impact not only on specific policies and gover-*

nance practices but also on shaping global AI governance frameworks. Findings indicate that the collectivist ethos of Confucianism offers a macro-level perspective favoring cooperation and development in global governance, while the individual rights emphasis of liberalism provides a theoretical basis for rights protection mechanisms. The study suggests that understanding and integrating these cultural and ethical dimensions can foster a balanced global AI governance framework that promotes both development and risk management.

Keywords: AI governance; Ethical Governance; Cultural Divergence; Confucian Thought; Liberalism Ideals

RESUMEN Esta investigación examina los fundamentos culturales y éticos que subyacen a las diferencias en la gobernanza de la inteligencia artificial (IA) entre China y Occidente, destacando la influencia de la ética confuciana y el liberalismo en los marcos de gobernanza. Al contrastar las prioridades, métodos y visiones que guían la gobernanza, este estudio demuestra que el modelo chino, de influencia confuciana, da prioridad al bienestar colectivo y a la gobernanza basada en el rendimiento y dirigida por el gobierno, mientras que los valores liberales que impulsan los enfoques occidentales se centran en los derechos individuales y en un modelo de gobernanza contractual con múltiples partes interesadas. El análisis de estos enfoques a través de la lente de la teoría de la trayectoria weberiana revela su impacto no sólo en políticas y prácticas de gobernanza concretas, sino también en la configuración de los marcos de gobernanza mundial de la IA. Los resultados indican que el ethos colectivista del confucianismo ofrece una perspectiva a nivel macro que favorece la cooperación y el desarrollo en la gobernanza mundial, mientras que el énfasis en los derechos individuales del liberalismo proporciona una base teórica para los mecanismos de protección de derechos. El estudio sugiere que la comprensión y la integración de estas dimensiones culturales y éticas pueden fomentar un marco equilibrado de gobernanza mundial de la IA que promueva tanto el desarrollo como la gestión de riesgos.

Palabras clave: Gobernanza de la IA; Gobernanza ética; Divergencia cultural; Pensamiento confuciano; Ideales del liberalismo.

INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence (AI) technology is already influencing and will continue to transform human social and economic development across areas like economic growth, security and defense, and education and training. Yet, as with past technological revolutions, the rapid progress in AI has brought about challenges—such as privacy protection and algorithm regulation—that require both targeted governance research and ethical considerations at a fundamental level. Given the principle that profound shifts in productivity lead to equally deep reshaping of production relations, examining the ethical dimensions underpinning AI

must run parallel to, or even anticipate, the development of AI itself.

Despite facing similar AI governance challenges, China and the West exhibit significant differences in their governance practices, particularly in their priorities, methods, and visions. In terms of priorities, China's governance approach focuses on performance-based, collective-interest governance, while Western countries favor contractual, individual-interest governance. In terms of governance methods, China emphasizes government-led, coordination-based governance, while the West favors multi-stakeholder, participatory governance. And in terms of visions, China emphasizes leveraging AI

to drive economic growth and enhance social stability, while the West prioritizes safeguarding individual rights against potential AI infringements.

At a foundational level, these divergent AI governance practices reflect deeper cultural mindsets and ethical values unique to each region. This study seeks to illuminate the core ethical differences in AI governance between Chinese culture, rooted in Confucian thought, and Western culture, grounded in liberalism. Further, it explores how these ethical differences, through the critical mediating role of government as the primary actor in governance, contribute to the divergence in governance practices, influence the design of global AI governance frameworks, and shape the broader trajectory of AI governance.

The primary research question in this study is to explore, through Weber's cultural value path framework, the role of Confucian thought and liberalism in shaping Chinese and Western approaches to AI governance ethics and framework development. First, the paper aims to articulate the core ethical distinctions between Confucian thought and liberalism, providing a clearer understanding of the philosophical divides in AI governance ideologies between China and the West. Second, based on this ethical comparison, the study systematically analyzes how these differing value orientations impact policy-making, policy implementation, and governance priorities. Finally, the paper examines how these different ethical and governance paradigms could influence the prospects of establishing a global AI governance framework, including the necessity and feasible pathways for creating a shared future in AI governance and extending the role of ethical values in analyzing the comparative global governance of other technology fields between China and the West.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the ethical foundations and practical

differences between Chinese and Western AI governance. By utilizing a theoretical framework and combining various research methods, it aims to reveal how cultural backgrounds influence governance strategies and the construction of a global AI governance framework.

(1) Theoretical Framework

The study is guided by Weberian Path Theory, which analyzes how cultural values influence policies and governance over time. By using this theoretical framework, the research delves into how Confucian ethics and liberalism shape AI governance approaches in China and Western countries. Specifically, Confucianism emphasizes the organic integration of individuals with society, prioritizing collective interests and government-led governance models. In contrast, liberalism focuses on individual rights, contractual freedom, and emphasizes transparency and the involvement of multiple stakeholders.

The application of this theoretical framework allows the study to systematically analyze the differences between China and the West in terms of governance priorities, methods, and visions, and to assess their potential impact on the development of a global AI governance structure.

(2) Research Methods

Under the guidance of the theoretical framework, this study employs the following specific methods to ensure systematic and in-depth analysis:

Textual Analysis: The research conducts a systematic analysis of policy documents issued by the Chinese government (e.g., "Global AI Development Initiative," "New Generation AI Governance Principles") and those from Western countries (e.g., "EU AI Act," "General Data Protection Regulation"). By examining key policies and ethical principles in these documents, the study uncovers the priorities and underlying cultural logic in Chinese and Wes-

tern AI governance. Additionally, a review of relevant academic literature is conducted to provide a comprehensive understanding.

Case Study: To validate the findings from the theoretical analysis, the study employs case studies to compare typical examples of AI applications in China and the West. Specific cases include China's government-led initiatives in smart cities and intelligent transportation systems, as well as the EU's stringent regulations on data privacy. These cases illustrate how Confucian and liberal ethical frameworks manifest in practical governance, offering empirical evidence to understand the differences in governance approaches.

(3) Data Collection and Analysis

Data Collection: The study relies primarily on secondary data sources, including policy documents, academic journals, government white papers, corporate reports, and guidelines published by international organizations. By integrating data from diverse sources, the study ensures the comprehensiveness and reliability of its analysis. Additionally, expert commentaries and in-depth interviews are referenced to gain broader insights.

Data Analysis: The data is analyzed using content analysis to identify the similarities and differences in ethical principles and governance strategies between China and Western countries in AI governance. Comparative analysis is also employed to contrast China's collectivist approach with the individualist orientation of the West, revealing their impact on global AI governance frameworks. The study further utilizes case analysis to explore policy practices in different cultural contexts, ensuring that the conclusions drawn are robust and evidence-based.

This study primarily relies on literature and policy documents, which may lack the depth provided by primary data collection. Additionally, as policies and practices may evolve over time, the conclu-

sions of this research have certain temporal limitations. Future studies could incorporate fieldwork and cross-national comparative research to further validate and deepen the findings.

Through the above methodology, this study systematically analyzes the ethical differences between China and the West in AI governance on both theoretical and practical levels, providing valuable insights for the construction of global AI governance frameworks.

DEVELOPMENT

III. Confucianism and Liberalism: Ethical Foundations and Governance Philosophies

(1) Ethical Foundations of Confucian Thought

Confucian thought has held a central role in shaping Chinese society for centuries. Rooted in the teachings of Confucius and Mencius, Confucianism underwent significant transformations throughout its two-thousand-year evolution. The moral values and concepts of social order derived from Confucian philosophy have served as the ethical bedrock for China's institutional foundations. With the intertwined historical influences of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, what we now understand as "Confucian thought" retained its governing status throughout China's imperial society. Over time, ethical codes governing human relationships, family, life and death, upbringing, marriage, gender roles, and hierarchy were integrated into Confucianism, in a manner akin to "justification by faith," continuously impacting Chinese social life through generations.

Consequently, Confucianism established a cohesive framework of ethical and normative values encompassing both individual and societal realms, from the personal virtues of "benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trust" to the overarching social ideals of "self-cultivation, family harmony, governance of the state, and peace

throughout the world.” This continuum tightly links ethics with governance (Zhu, 2002).

In practical terms, Confucian ethics, which mediate the relationship between the individual and society, exhibit a dual structure: they include both a top-down collective spirit arising from “subduing oneself and returning to propriety” and a bottom-up heroic ideal, where “when duty calls, do not yield” signifies a commitment to principle and sacrifice. This duality systematically integrates individual conduct, speech, and cultivation with social structure and governance. The journey from personal moral cultivation to societal harmony is mediated by “benevolence,” enabling a continuous interplay between internalization and externalization. In the absence of a focus on “first principles” and derived philosophy, metaphysical moral orders gain explanatory strength, becoming integral to governing ideals, the training of intellectual and governance elites, the management of common people, and the shared moral practice across society.

In this dialectical model, whether moving from bottom-up or top-down, Confucian ethical foundations emphasize that the organic unity between individuals and society is the core of “good governance.” It advocates for individual behavior to be guided by “benevolence” in order to achieve social harmony, or “propriety,” culminating in the political ideal of “unity of heaven and humanity” as envisioned by Dong Zhongshu (Jia, 2011). This influence continues to manifest in modern China in a unique metaphysical form, evident in the public’s high degree of trust and reliance on government governance effectiveness, as well as in the romanticized drive for “good” that infuses public critique of governance. This stands in stark contrast to the liberal principles underlying the formation of government and the distribution of power.

(2) Ethical Foundations of Liberalism

Liberalism is a cornerstone of the modern Western intellectual framework. Western liberal thought

traces its roots to ancient Greek philosophy, where reflections on the nature of existence laid the groundwork for a duality system of mind and matter, fostering ideas of individual autonomy. This notion of individual freedom was later shaped by Christian ideas of original sin, and in modernity, transformed through the Renaissance and Enlightenment. As interpretive authority initially centered in religion and theology was gradually reclaimed by secular thought, underpinned by early capitalist accumulation and technological advances, a shift emerged that reasserted the freedom of scientific and philosophical inquiry, placing interpretive power in humanism. This emphasis on individual development led to new interpretations of classical texts, the division of disciplines, and the growth of capital and technological innovation, further prioritizing individual freedom of will. Through this evolution, liberalism, rooted in legal philosophy, gave rise to a governance framework centered on classical economics, individual freedom, equality, individual rights, and the concept of the social contract.

In the liberal ethical system, the individual—seen as the central unit of society and tied to foundational philosophical thought—serves as the basis for all social institutions. This contrasts sharply with Confucianism, which emphasizes a collective spirit rooted in metaphysical principles. Instead, Western ethics establishes behavioral norms centered on the individual, aiming to foster harmony in personal life, where morality is cultivated through self-awareness to achieve spiritual freedom and personal integrity (Wu, 2000).

From a social perspective, Western ethics, based on principles of individual freedom, “innate depravity,” and social contract theory, emphasizes a limited government’s role as opposed to the individual, asserting that the state must not infringe on individual freedom or privacy unlawfully. Moreover, Western ethics holds that individual freedom is the wellspring of social progress, economic growth, and technological innovation. The

collective result of each individual pursuing their self-interest is viewed as the engine of societal development, reflecting how questions like “how individuals form society” and “how society relates to individuals” have continuously shaped Western social philosophy, leading to diverse theoretical perspectives and scholarly interpretations. Practically, liberalism’s core ethical principle for regulating the relationship between the individual and society is largely one-directional, where the extension of individual rights within society forms the foundation of governance. Social governance does not seek to restrict individual freedom; rather, it exists to safeguard the unrestricted expansion of individual rights.

(3) Different Governance Philosophy in AI Governance

Confucian political philosophy promotes a moral governance model, centered on “public order and good customs” as adaptable principles that evolve to meet societal needs. It posits that political authority derives from a divine mandate or cosmic order, which, due to the absence of foundational metaphysical analysis, allows for a natural acceptance of shifts in authority. This adds a layer of legitimacy to political power, emphasizing a moral and ordered framework that connects personal cultivation with good governance, ultimately aiming to serve the people, especially the fundamental social classes of “scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants.” With a focus on “unity between Heaven and humanity,” Confucian thought places high importance on legitimacy and substantive justice in governance (Qiyong G, 2013). Confucian ethics prioritize not just formal legal adherence but also the moral imperative of governance that tangibly benefits the people.

In the AI governance context, Confucianism has influenced China’s approach to be progressively and pragmatically focused. Given China’s unique modern history marked by semi-feudal and semi-colonial experiences, it has adopted a proactive stance

toward productivity growth, valuing the potential of technological advances to drive social welfare and governance modernization. This Confucian approach emphasizes that societal adaptation to technological progress is inevitable, fostering alignment between technology’s legitimacy and social benefit. China’s AI governance framework thus stresses the importance of harnessing AI for human welfare and advancing the modernization of governance (Tan & Yang, 2019).

These differences between Confucian and liberal governance philosophies in AI result in distinct institutional approaches. Confucianism embeds governance within a collective moral framework of “benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trust,” fostering strong social responsibility. It suggests that governments and technology companies should bear significant responsibility for ensuring that AI benefits society as a whole, prioritizing collective welfare over individual freedoms when necessary. In this model, individual privacy and data rights may be secondary to the social utility of data use, with policies emphasizing AI’s application in public health and safety to enhance collective well-being. This approach values the societal contributions of technology over safeguarding individual privacy.

Conversely, liberal governance centers on individual rights protection and contractual freedom, supporting limited government intervention. It operates on the principle of “individual rights supremacy,” using legal and procedural frameworks to prevent abuses of governance power and protect personal rights (Xiang & Li, 2006).

In AI governance, liberalism emphasizes individual privacy and data autonomy, underscoring transparency and individuals’ rights to know how their data is managed. Each person is entitled to control over their data collection, storage, and usage (Fung & Etienne, 2024). This liberal framework values the social contract, individual privacy, and citizen autonomy, holding governments

and companies accountable for transparency and data integrity, avoiding misuse of power or data violations. Western AI ethics call for companies to uphold user rights in data collection and algorithm development, often through independent ethics bodies or regulators. Another priority is algorithmic fairness, ensuring that AI does not perpetuate social biases. The European Union's stringent AI ethics framework aims to eliminate discrimination based on race, gender, or other factors, thereby reinforcing social justice. Liberal AI governance advocates for technology that respects individual rights, crafting an individual-centered framework to prevent technological overreach from threatening personal freedoms.

(4) Comparative Analysis of Governance Philosophy Differences in AI Governance

In April 2019, the European Union's High-Level Expert Group on Artificial Intelligence published the "Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI," outlining seven core requirements for trustworthy AI systems: human oversight, technical robustness and safety, privacy and data governance, transparency, diversity and non-discrimination, social and environmental well-being, and accountability (European Commission, 2019). In June of the same year, China's New Generation AI Governance Expert Committee issued the "New Generation AI Governance Principles: Developing Responsible AI," which centers on responsible AI and stresses principles such as harmony, fairness, inclusiveness, privacy respect, security, shared responsibility, open collaboration, and agile governance (Ministry of Science and Technology of China, 2019). These principles highlight significant distinctions between the two frameworks. Although both China and the West value aspects like privacy, their specific expressions and underlying values exhibit important differences.

In terms of direct differences, China emphasizes development and collaboration, while Western frameworks focus more on managing AI-related

risks. China's governance principles prioritize harmony, viewing AI as a crucial driver of economic and social progress. By fostering a harmonious development environment, China seeks to integrate AI with various industries, leveraging it for economic growth and social improvement. This emphasis on harmony aims to create a collaborative climate where government, businesses, research institutions, and society work together to advance AI development (Qiao-Franco & Zhu, 2022). For example, China promotes AI applications in sectors like healthcare, education, and agriculture to drive innovation and societal benefits through cross-sector collaboration. This focus on development and collaboration reflects China's belief in technological innovation as a force for social progress and the value of collective efforts in advancing technology. In contrast, the EU's approach emphasizes human agency, reflecting a cautious stance toward potential risks AI may pose, such as privacy breaches, algorithmic bias, and labor disruptions. The EU's focus on human oversight seeks to ensure that AI remains within human control to prevent misuse, protecting fundamental rights and freedoms. For instance, the EU's stringent data privacy regulations require companies to obtain clear consent for data collection and usage, reinforcing its commitment to user privacy. This emphasis on risk management underscores the EU's cautious approach to AI's societal impact and its strong focus on protecting individual rights.

Content-wise, there are also important differences. First, while the EU's emphasis on diversity and non-discrimination aligns somewhat with China's focus on fairness and justice, China's approach emphasizes a broader realization of social equity, aiming to balance the interests of various groups, including vulnerable populations, and to consider the fair distribution of social resources. In contrast, Western diversity and non-discrimination principles are more oriented toward preventing discrimination based on race, gender, and similar factors from an individual rights perspective. Second, in privacy and data governance, both sides value pri-

vacy, but China's approach may prioritize role of data in societal development, permitting reasonable data use for public interest, whereas Western frameworks stress individual control over personal data, strictly limiting data collection to protect privacy. Third, regarding transparency, China focuses on the societal impact and contribution of technology, advocating that technology applications align with public interest and ethical standards. In contrast, Western frameworks stress transparency in algorithms and individual awareness of data handling, requiring companies to clearly inform users throughout data collection and algorithmic processes. Lastly, in accountability, China promotes shared responsibility across government, businesses, and society, fostering a collaborative governance model for AI's healthy development, while Western frameworks clarify accountability through legal measures, emphasizing individual or corporate responsibility in the event of regulatory breaches.

IV. Governance Practices Under Confucian Influence

(1) Governance Priorities

China's AI governance philosophy, influenced by Confucianism, reflects a collectivist approach. In line with this, three primary governance priorities are emphasized: advancing AI technology, promoting its applications, and enhancing AI competitiveness.

First, advancing AI technology is central to China's approach. In October 2023, the Chinese government released the "Global AI Development Initiative," which aims to enhance global welfare and ensure AI's development aligns with humanity's broader advancement (Cyberspace Administration of China, 2023). This goal resonates with Confucian ideals, which see social progress as rooted in cooperation between government and social elites, working together for the benefit of the people. Confucianism promotes a vision of society where enlightened individuals and the

government collaborate to achieve a "harmonious world." As a transformation force in modern society, AI technology is viewed as an essential tool for reaching this ideal, aligning with Confucian values of promoting public welfare and social stability. The Chinese government actively fosters technological innovation through significant investments, support for research projects, preferential policies, and strict standards. For instance, in intelligent manufacturing, the government has promoted the development of smart factories, leveraging AI to automate and optimize production, enhancing both efficiency and quality. In the realm of smart cities, AI optimizes urban traffic, energy management, and environmental monitoring systems, improving city operations and residents' quality of life. In healthcare, AI has made notable progress in disease diagnosis, drug research, and medical robotics, contributing to higher medical standards and public health security. These efforts not only position China as a leader in core AI technologies but also accelerate progress across various fields, shifting China from a follower to a front-runner in the AI landscape.

Second, promoting the practical application of AI is a core priority, consistent with Confucianism's emphasis on the collective good. AI is not seen merely as a research product confined to laboratories but rather as a tool that should be widely integrated into practical applications. At the World AI Governance Conference in 2018, Xi Jinping emphasized that AI's development and application would advance intelligent capabilities across the economy and society, improving public service and urban management (CAC, 2018). To support this vision, the Chinese government provides comprehensive policy incentives. AI-focused companies receive tax benefits to reduce costs, increasing their motivation to implement AI. Dedicated funds are available for the research and promotion of AI application projects, while specialized tech parks offer startup-friendly environments and encourage collaboration among companies. These initiatives have spurred AI's broad adoption across

manufacturing, agriculture, education, and health-care. In manufacturing, AI is utilized for production process optimization, quality control, and equipment maintenance, enhancing company productivity and competitiveness. In agriculture, intelligent farming systems enable real-time monitoring and precise control of crop conditions, boosting yields and quality. In education, AI-based teaching tools support personalized learning, improving educational outcomes. In healthcare, AI applications in medicine, diagnostics, and rehabilitation improve medical service quality and convenience for patients.

Finally, enhancing AI competitiveness is a central objective in China's approach to AI governance. During the 9th collective study session of the 19th Central Politburo of the Communist Party of China in October 2018, focused on the development and trends in AI, Xi Jinping stressed that AI is a crucial driving force in the new wave of technological and industrial revolutions. He emphasized that accelerating the development of next-generation AI is a strategic issue essential to China's ability to seize the opportunities presented by this new wave (CAC, 2018). Viewing AI as key to boosting national competitiveness, China is actively positioning itself in the global AI arena. To accelerate progress, China has implemented a range of measures: it promotes innovation and research in AI technology, increases funding for research institutions and universities, and cultivates a significant pool of AI professionals. Additionally, China has introduced favorable policies to attract leading international talent, providing them with a supportive work and living environment to encourage them to return to or relocate to China for AI research and development. China also plays a prominent role in setting international AI standards, participating in global standard-setting processes to gain influence in this domain. Moreover, China seeks to deepen international cooperation, engaging with other nations in AI collaborations and discussions on development trends and governance, and contributing to global AI ethical standards, aiming to bolster

China's influence within the global AI governance framework. These initiatives align with Confucian cultural ideals of "establishing the heart of Heaven and Earth, securing the livelihood of the people, inheriting the teachings of the sages, and creating lasting peace," highlighting China's strong sense of responsibility and competitive drive in AI.

Influenced by Confucian thought, China's AI governance centers on collectivist values, advancing technology to benefit humanity, promoting applications to elevate economic and social intelligence, and enhancing competitiveness to strengthen national power. China's actions across these areas demonstrate practical features and significant achievements, embodying Confucian ideals in AI governance practices.

(2) Governance Methods

The influence of Confucian thought is evident in China's methods for AI governance, which are marked by government centralism, a focus on functionality and performance, and an emphasis on collective over individual interests.

First, government centralism is a defining feature of China's approach to AI governance. China's AI governance is heavily government-led, reflecting the Confucian belief that the government holds primary responsibility for guiding society, much like the "North Star, around which all stars revolve." In Confucianism, the government is the core force of society, tasked with guiding and managing social order. Through policy-making and resource allocation, the government takes a central role in directing technological progress. In the 2024 Government Work Report, the "AI+" initiative was introduced for the first time, focusing on advancing digital economy innovation. The report outlines policies to support high-quality digital economic growth, promoting digital and industrial integration, fostering the integration of digital technologies with the real economy, advancing big data and AI research, and creating globally com-

petitive digital industry clusters (Chinese Government, 2024). In policy-making, the government has enacted a series of supportive measures, including industrial, science, and talent policies, providing clear guidelines and support for AI development. In terms of resource allocation, substantial funding has been directed to AI research, project support, and infrastructure, establishing a solid foundation for AI progress. Furthermore, the government's regulatory role ensures AI development aligns with societal values, maintaining policy coherence and social harmony. These efforts keep technological advancements aligned with national interests, strengthening governance by mobilizing human, material, and financial resources.

Second, functionalism and performance orientation are prominent in China's AI governance methods. In July 2024, China hosted the World Artificial Intelligence Conference and the High-Level Meeting on Global AI Governance, issuing the "Shanghai Declaration on Global AI Governance." The declaration outlined five initiatives, with the first emphasizing AI development and highlighting its applications across sectors like healthcare, education, transportation, agriculture, industry, culture, and ecology (CAC, 2024). Confucian values emphasize practical benefits and societal contributions, and China's AI governance policies focus on effectiveness and tangible results. This performance-oriented approach is evident across various fields. In public welfare, AI optimizes urban traffic in smart transportation systems, alleviating congestion and improving travel efficiency; it enhances diagnostic accuracy and treatment in smart healthcare systems, raising service quality; and it supports personalized learning in smart education systems, boosting teaching effectiveness. In economic transformation, AI drives the shift toward smart manufacturing, increasing productivity and competitiveness in traditional industries, and in finance, it improves risk assessment and service efficiency. This pragmatic approach aligns with China's fast-paced economic development, advan-

cing national competitiveness and enhancing social services through technology.

Lastly, a collectivist value that prioritizes societal over individual interests is also integral to China's AI governance. Confucianism stresses unity and interdependence between individuals and society, and China's governance approach emphasizes balancing personal and societal benefits, often placing individual privacy below collective security to safeguard data security and prioritize the public interest. In data privacy and security management, the government aims to strike a balance between individual rights and societal welfare to maintain harmony. For example, in big data contexts, data collection and use involve privacy concerns. The government mandates that companies implement measures to protect privacy while promoting reasonable data use for societal benefit. When individual privacy conflicts with collective security or public interest, collective welfare is prioritized, yet privacy protection is ensured through methods like anonymization.

Under Confucian influence, China's AI governance reflects government centralism, functionalism and performance orientation, and a focus on collective interests. The government leads technological development through policy-making, resource allocation, and regulation; emphasizes practical, result-driven AI applications; and prioritizes collective welfare, balancing individual and societal interests.

(3) Governance Vision

The AI governance vision inspired by Confucian thought aims to build a harmonious and mutually supportive AI ecosystem, where technology integrates seamlessly with human values, balancing individual and collective interests, and fostering social harmony as the primary goal.

First, integrating technology with humanity means that AI should prioritize not only efficiency and

precision but also its societal impact and inherent values. AI systems should be designed and developed with a deep respect for human values, ethical considerations, and cultural traditions. For instance, in educational AI applications, teaching approaches should be culturally tailored to meet the needs of local students; in healthcare, AI should respect patient preferences and ethical standards to prevent harm from technology misuse. Furthermore, AI's development should be guided by humanistic values, avoiding a purely technical focus that disregards human dignity and rights.

Second, balancing individual and collective interests is central to Confucian thought. In AI governance, this balance means safeguarding individual data privacy and rights while ensuring AI serves the collective good. For example, in data sharing, mechanisms should be created to allow authorized use of personal data in ways that advance societal progress; in the distribution of benefits from AI, fair mechanisms should ensure that both individuals and society benefit from AI applications, preventing social conflicts arising from unfair distributions of benefits.

Lastly, the ultimate goal of AI governance is to promote social harmony. This involves ensuring that AI applications contribute to fairness, justice, and solidarity within society. In employment, AI should be used to create job opportunities rather than trigger widespread unemployment; in welfare, AI should enhance the fairness and efficiency of welfare distribution; and in social relationships, AI should not foster indifference or alienation among individuals. Achieving these goals will help establish a harmonious and symbiotic AI ecosystem, enabling AI to act as a driving force for social progress.

The Confucian-inspired vision for AI governance seeks to create a harmonious ecosystem that integrates technology with human values, balances individual and collective interests, and promotes social harmony. It spans areas such as education,

healthcare, data sharing, employment, welfare, and social relationships, leveraging AI to support social progress.

V. AI Governance Practices Guided by Liberalism in the West

(1) Governance Priorities

In Western countries guided by liberal values, AI governance prioritizes privacy, transparency, diversity, and accountability. Among these, transparency, diversity, and accountability are the hallmarks of a liberal approach to AI and are therefore focal points in Western AI governance.

First, transparency forms the foundation of liberal AI governance. Western countries assert that the public should have a clear understanding of how AI systems operate and make decisions, safeguarding individuals' rights to information and choice. This transparency is evident in the focus on algorithm explainability and open decision-making, reducing the "black box" nature of AI technology. For example, the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) mandates that data processors inform users about the purposes and methods of data processing, giving users the choice to opt-in or opt-out (European Union, 2018). Transparency also encompasses knowledge of data sources, data processing methods, and model development practices. Many AI systems rely on personal data for deep learning, which raises privacy concerns. Governance efforts aim to inform the public about data collection and usage, granting users control over their data. Transparency also allows users to understand how AI decisions are made, which algorithms are used, and why biases may occur, preventing unfair or arbitrary impacts. Transparency is particularly crucial in fields like law, finance, and healthcare to ensure that AI applications respect individual rights and social fairness.

Second, diversity is another key priority in liberal AI governance, emphasizing equality across diffe-

rent demographic groups and ensuring technology remains free from discrimination and bias. Liberal societies highly value individual differences and diversity. Disparities in AI facial recognition accuracy across skin tones, for instance, could lead to higher error rates for certain groups, impacting diversity and anti-discrimination efforts in practice. Achieving diversity requires a comprehensive approach, from ensuring fair datasets to promoting diverse algorithm developers. Companies like Google and Microsoft, for example, emphasize team diversity in AI hiring practices. For data collection, Western governments and companies work to ensure datasets include varied genders, ages, and ethnicity to minimize biased decisions caused by imbalanced data. Diversity among developers is also essential, as individuals from different backgrounds can more readily identify potential biases in AI model design, enabling a proactive approach to addressing bias during development.

Third, accountability is central to AI governance in the West, ensuring that responsibility is clear when AI systems fail or cause harm. For instance, the EU's Artificial Intelligence Act mandates that system developers, owners, and operators bear legal responsibility for AI failures or adverse impacts (European Commission, 2021). The U.S. Executive Order on the Safe, Secure, and Trustworthy Development and Use of AI, issued in October 2023, advocates a shared accountability mechanism involving government, business, and research entities. Accountability mitigates risks while offering users legal channels to assert their rights. It also includes preventive measures, such as requiring developers to assess risks during AI development (The White House, 2023). Additionally, the principle of accountability includes proactive risk assessment during AI development. Western countries require companies to document data usage and algorithm decision-making processes, which not only reduces post-incident liability issues but also improves AI governance effectiveness by focusing on preemptive risk management.

Guided by liberalism, Western AI governance emphasizes transparency, diversity, and accountability. Transparency includes explainable algorithms, open decision-making processes, and public data usage disclosures. Diversity ensures fair treatment across demographic groups, from data collection to developer diversity, to prevent discrimination. Accountability defines clear responsibility for adverse outcomes, backed by legal frameworks and preventive measures.

(2) Governance Methods

In Western countries, AI governance under liberalism primarily relies on regulatory constraints and market mechanisms.

Regarding regulatory constraints, Western nations have established laws and regulations to standardize AI's development and use. For example, the EU's Artificial Intelligence Act and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) set detailed guidelines on AI research, application, and data management. The United States has taken a leading role by endorsing the G7's "International AI Code of Conduct" and proposing the "UN General Assembly Resolution on AI" (U.S. Embassy & Consulates in China, 2024). These legal frameworks define the rights and responsibilities of AI developers, users, and operators, creating a foundational regulatory framework for AI governance. In the U.S., the federal government participates in multi-stakeholder discussions on AI risks, setting policy goals and encouraging cooperation through voluntary principles and standards to influence AI's practical development (Lucero, 2024).

In terms of market mechanisms, Western countries prioritize free-market competition and self-regulation. In AI, this approach is evident in companies' focus on independent innovation and market competition. Businesses strengthen their competitiveness by developing advanced AI technologies and products, actively engaging in market competition. Conversely, market competition drives

companies to continually improve product quality, enhance service, and reduce costs, fostering an environment where only the strongest survive. Additionally, market mechanisms include activities like venture capital investments and mergers and acquisitions, which provide funding and resource integration opportunities to support AI's growth.

Western AI governance methods emphasize regulatory constraints and market mechanisms. Regulatory frameworks use laws and policies to establish rights and responsibilities, providing a structured governance framework. Market mechanisms encourage free competition and self-regulation, with a focus on innovation, competition, and financial activities like venture capital and mergers to accelerate development.

(3) Governance Vision

The liberal governance vision for AI in Western countries aims to create an open, fair, and transparent AI market environment, where technology can innovate freely, individual rights are fully protected, and market competition remains fair and well-regulated.

First, enabling free technological innovation means that AI development proceeds with minimal government intervention, allowing companies and research institutions to pursue research and innovation based on market needs and their unique technological strengths. During around table on AI infrastructure, the Biden administration emphasized that the U.S. government would bolster support for businesses in policy coordination, research funding, and civil-military integration, maximizing the effectiveness of public-private partnerships (The White House, 2024). By creating an environment that nurtures innovation, Western countries aim to stimulate the innovation potential of companies and research institutions, drive rapid AI development, and attract global AI talent to enhance their competitiveness. For example, in algorithm research, companies can freely explore new

algorithms and models according to their strengths and market demand, which improves AI's accuracy and efficiency.

Second, protecting individual rights is a foundational principle of liberalism. In AI governance, this means prioritizing individuals' rights to information, choice, and privacy, sometimes even before AI development itself. For instance, transparency requirements ensure that the public understands how AI systems function and make decisions, safeguarding individuals' right to be informed and to make choices; privacy protection measures secure individuals' privacy rights. Furthermore, protecting individual rights fully entails establishing effective mechanisms for individuals to seek redress if their rights are violated. For example, among three final guidance documents from the U.S. National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), two focus on mitigating threats and risks, while one emphasizes setting global AI standards (National Institute of Standards and Technology, 2024).

Finally, ensuring fair and orderly market competition is critical for creating an open, fair, and transparent AI market environment. Western AI governance emphasizes that competition should follow principles of fairness, justice, and transparency, prohibiting any form of unfair competition. For example, companies are restricted from monopolistic practices or maliciously lowering prices to gain an edge. Fair competition also requires effective market oversight to identify and address unfair practices, maintaining market order. Through these measures, the Western AI vision aspires to establish an open, fair, and transparent AI market, positioning AI as a key driver of economic growth (The White House, 2023).

Under liberalism, the Western AI governance vision seeks to build an open, fair, and transparent market environment, where technological innovation develops freely with government support for research and industry; individual rights, such as information, choice, and privacy, are safeguarded;

and market competition is fair and orderly, adhering to principles of fairness, justice, and transparency, with robust regulation to foster economic growth.

VI. Impact of Ethical Differences between Confucianism and Liberalism on the Global AI Governance Framework

The ethical differences between Confucianism and liberalism are apparent in their governance priorities, methods, and visions. As China and Western countries like the U.S. and Europe are major players in AI governance, examining how these ethical differences influence the global AI governance framework is crucial.

(1) Positive Contributions of These Differences to a Global AI Governance Framework

Confucianism and Western liberalism, as two influential philosophical systems, offer valuable insights for global AI governance. Their differences provide multiple perspectives that enrich the global governance framework and encourage stakeholders to seek synergies, allowing for a more comprehensive approach to the challenges posed by AI and supporting improvements to global governance.

First, these philosophies broaden governance concepts. Confucianism's emphasis on collective welfare and social responsibility provides a unique perspective that centers on societal welfare in global AI governance. Confucian ethics closely link individuals with society, where individual actions are guided by moral principles like "benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trust," with the aim of achieving harmonious social order. Under this view, AI governance focuses on the broader societal impacts of technology, emphasizing that technological advancement should benefit society as a whole (Hongladarom & Bandasak, 2024). For instance, in global health crises, AI applications should follow Confucian principles of collective

welfare. AI's data analysis capabilities can support medical diagnosis by providing physicians with more precise information, enhancing treatment efficiency, and contributing to global public health. This approach reflects Confucianism's focus on collective welfare in AI, offering a holistic, socially oriented perspective to inform global governance.

On the other hand, liberalism's focus on individual rights and contractual freedom offers critical insights for global AI governance. Liberalism values individuals as the foundational units of society, with a high emphasis on personal freedom and rights, particularly in AI governance. For example, in data privacy, as AI grows, data privacy concerns become more pronounced. Liberalism supports individual control over data, requiring companies to obtain clear consent for data collection and usage to align with user preferences. This approach ensures that global governance frameworks emphasize protecting individuals' data privacy and helps establish rights-based protections in AI governance (ÓhÉigeartaigh & Whittlestone, 2020).

Second, these perspectives foster diversity and complementarity. Confucian values of "benevolence" and social order complement liberalism's individual freedoms, adding practical value to AI governance. Confucianism encourages social responsibility among tech companies and governments by establishing ethical norms. "Benevolence," a core value, calls for compassion and adherence to social ethics. In AI, key stakeholders should promote technology development guided by "benevolence" to benefit society. For instance, companies should prioritize fairness and societal welfare in algorithm development, avoiding discriminatory practices; governments should develop policies with public welfare in mind to ensure responsible technology use. Liberalism's focus on individual rights, on the other hand, serves as a counterbalance, preventing potential overreach by governance authorities. Liberalism opposes excessive government intervention and emphasizes freedom and rights, advocating for effective over-

sight in AI governance to ensure alignment with legal and ethical standards. For example, members with liberal perspectives on AI ethics committees can assess governance decisions through an individual rights lens, preventing power abuse and supporting a fair, accountable global AI framework.

Furthermore, China's focus on development and cooperation, paired with the West's emphasis on risk prevention, enables a balanced approach to technological progress and risk control in global governance. China's development-oriented and collaborative perspective stems from a commitment to technological innovation and the value of collective strength. China encourages cross-sector AI applications to drive innovation and social benefits, supporting precision agriculture and smart education tools, for instance. Meanwhile, the West's approach to risk prevention is rooted in an understanding of AI's potential risks, such as privacy breaches, algorithmic bias, and labor market disruption. By prioritizing human agency, the West ensures technology development remains within ethical boundaries. Combining these approaches, the global AI governance framework can adopt China's model of cross-sector cooperation to integrate technology with different industries while incorporating the West's regulatory rigor and human-centered standards, achieving a balance between technological advancement and effective risk management.

(2) Negative Impacts of These Differences on the Construction of a Global AI Governance Framework

While differences between Confucianism and liberalism may offer opportunities for innovative synergies, they also present the potential for conflict, especially when the ethical principles and governance methods intersect in global multilateral contexts. Examining the negative impacts of these differences on global AI governance can help identify potential challenges early on and facilitate proactive solutions, supporting the development of a coordinated, unified, and effective

global AI governance framework while avoiding cultural conflicts that could lead to governance impasses.

First, ideological conflicts may create divisions. Confucianism's emphasis on collective welfare over individual interests often leads to a prioritization of societal benefit in privacy and data use, which clashes with liberalism's focus on individual privacy rights. Confucian ethics hold that individual actions and interests should serve the collective good. In AI governance, this might manifest in a willingness to permit data use for public benefit. In contrast, liberalism stresses individual control over personal data, limiting data sharing to protect privacy. For instance, in contexts where data sharing is essential for global AI research, such conflicts could make it difficult to reach consensus on data usage rules. Confucianism might advocate broader data sharing to promote societal benefits, while liberalism emphasizes individual data rights, complicating rule-making for data use in a global governance framework.

In addition, Confucianism's government-led, coordinated governance differs from the liberal model that values multi-stakeholder participation. Confucianism sees government as the core agent in social governance, with a leading role in AI policy-making and regulation (Digi China, 2022). Liberalism, on the other hand, emphasizes the inclusion of diverse stakeholders, including government, businesses, social organizations, and individuals, all equally participating in AI governance through collaboration and consensus. In forming AI ethics committees, for example, Confucianism may emphasize government leadership, while liberalism advocates for multi-stakeholder representation. These differences can lead to disagreements over power distribution and decision-making within a global AI governance framework, where a government-led approach prioritizes centralized decision-making, while a multi-stakeholder model values equal participation, making it challenging to establish a unified governance model.

Second, differing values may hinder communication. Confucianism's "public order and good customs" as a foundation for governance contrasts sharply with liberalism's foundation of individual freedom and social contract theory. Confucianism sees morality as central to politics, guiding social behavior and maintaining order through "public order and good customs" with an emphasis on collective welfare and moral norms. Liberalism, however, values individual freedom and rights, considering individuals as society's fundamental units, and government as existing to protect individual rights with limited power. These value differences can lead to misalignment in understanding governance goals and methods, impeding communication and cooperation. For example, Confucianism may emphasize responsibility through moral guidance, while liberalism advocates for legal frameworks to safeguard rights and prevent abuses of power. Such differences can result in diverging approaches to AI governance, with Confucianism focusing on substantive justice and liberalism on procedural justice and individual rights.

Apart from these ideological differences, the two systems' ethical differences in outcome orientation also impact the global AI governance framework. Confucianism's substantive justice emphasizes outcome fairness and social justice, considering practical factors and social contexts to achieve fairness. In AI governance, this might mean a stronger emphasis on societal impacts when assessing algorithmic fairness. Liberalism's focus on procedural justice and individual rights, however, holds that fairness and rights are safeguarded by strict adherence to processes and institutions. In AI governance, this could translate to a focus on individual equality in algorithmic applications. These contrasting priorities can lead to disagreements in setting global standards for algorithmic fairness, with Confucianism emphasizing social outcomes and liberalism prioritizing individual rights, complicating the establishment of a unified standard in global AI governance.

CONCLUSIONS

This study's comparative analysis of Confucian and Western liberal perspectives on AI governance ethics and practices highlights key differences between the two and examines their complex influence on developing a global AI governance framework.

The profound philosophical differences between Confucianism and liberalism form the basis for their divergent approaches to AI governance ethics. Confucianism, with its focus on the seamless integration of individuals and society, upholds "benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trust" as guiding principles for personal conduct and seeks a social ideal of "self-cultivation, family regulation, state governance, and world peace." Its bidirectional ethical framework ties individuals closely to social development and governance. In contrast, liberalism, rooted in ancient Greek philosophy and shaped by religious thought, centers on individual freedom and regards the individual as the fundamental societal unit. Its ethical system prioritizes individual rights and employs a more unidirectional approach to harmonizing the individual-society relationship. In China, influenced by Confucian thought, AI governance focuses on maximizing societal benefits through technology, underlining the social responsibilities of governments and tech companies. This governance framework is embedded in a collective value system where individual interests yield to collective welfare and social harmony. In contrast, Western AI governance shaped by liberalism emphasizes individual rights and contractual freedom, prioritizing transparency, privacy, and data autonomy, with a governance model centered on individuals to protect against potential threats to personal rights.

The findings indicate that the cultural and ethical foundations underlying China's and the West's AI governance models offer both contributions and challenges to constructing a unified global governance framework. To develop an effective global

AI governance structure, the international community must acknowledge and address these differences, seeking a balanced integration of diverse ideas and philosophies. Conceptually, it is crucial to account for both societal welfare and individual rights, avoiding governance imbalances that might arise from an overemphasis on one side.

In terms of governance models, combining the strengths of both approaches could foster a collaborative governance structure that includes diverse stakeholders such as governments, businesses, social organizations, and individuals. For example, a multilateral ethics committee comprising experts from various countries could enhance cultural inclusivity in global AI governance policies, ensuring stakeholder involvement and boosting governance efficiency. Regarding values, fostering communication and exchange across cultures is vital to bridge value differences, reduce conflict, and promote shared understanding. Multilateral organizations, such as the United Nations, could issue guiding principles, encouraging countries to use these frameworks as policy references and collectively advance global AI governance toward a scientific, rational, and efficient trajectory, thereby contributing to the construction of a shared human future in cyberspace.

This study underscores the complementary and essential roles of Confucian and liberalist ethics in global AI governance, offering robust theoretical support for constructing governance frameworks in multicultural contexts. Future research can further explore how to integrate and balance Confucian and liberalism ideals within specific governance practices, providing actionable insights for global AI governance.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the article.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Not applicable.

AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION:

Cuihong Ca: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Research, Methodology, Resources, Validation, Writing - original draft, Writing - revision and editing.

Jiahui Yin: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Research, Methodology, Resources, Validation, Writing - original draft, Writing - revision and editing.

FINANCING

Not applicable.

PREPRINT

Not published.

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