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Understanding the evolution of China's approach to digital trade: interests, ideas, and institutions

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Abstract

Amid economic globalisation and the rapid development of advanced technologies in recent years, the world economy has shown an increasing trend of digitalisation, whilst digital trade has become the primary pattern of international trade. Based on differences rooted in socio-political systems, as well as the current precarious geopolitical realities, governments adopt different ideas in accordance with their respective interests in the institutionalisation of digital trade. As the world's second-largest economy and a major digital power, China's behaviours and ideological stances attract scholarly attention and states' concern. Whilst Western countries and scholars have criticised China's ideas of "government intervention in data regulation" and "cyber sovereignty" applied in its existing approach to digital trade, warning that China's approach poses a threat to Western powers' adherence to liberalism in the international digital trade system and the idea of "free data flow" in their approaches to digital trade, there has been insufficient research into how China's approach to digital trade has evolved over time and which ideas and interests have influenced it. To bridge this gap in the literature, this paper divides the evolution of China's approach to digital trade over the past three decades (1993–2023) into three phases using a longitudinal approach. This research conducts qualitative content analysis using official documents, white papers, and declarations from official Chinese websites, then adopts the 3I analytical framework to analyse which ideas and interests have influenced China's approach in each phase and how its approach to digital trade has evolved over time.

Keywords: Digital trade, China's approach, Policy making

Introduction

During the past three decades, China has been a major cyber power with the largest internet user base, which has now surpassed 1 billion (Cyberspace Administration of China 2023). The country boasts the second-largest economy in the world, with the potential to influence and even shape the digital trade order at regional and global levels (Wang 2020). Particularly, in recent decades, China has actively participated in and promoted bi- and multilateral cooperation at regional and international levels while actively assisting developing countries in improving their digital capabilities and entering the digital trade arena, thereby advancing international digital trade and bridging the global

digital divide (Chang 2023; Ly 2020). However, China's approach and ideological stance differ from that of Western countries, thereby gaining increasing attention from policy-making circles and academic communities.

Given economic globalisation and global digitalisation, the international trade system has been carried into a period of accelerated reshaping. Based on the liberal international trade order, developing countries have access to the global trade market to pursue economic benefits (Gnangnon 2018). China has also seized this opportunity to actively enter international trade markets and has adhered to multilateralism to participate in and promote multilateral cooperation in order to boost its economic development (Liu and Yang 2023). In the meantime, decades of digital technology development have impacted transaction models and the international trade order itself.

More specifically, since information and communication technologies (ICTs) were first applied in transaction behaviours and resultant concepts such as "e-commerce" and "digital trade" emerged, international trade has experienced the digitalisation of production, consumption of goods and services, and exchange, in addition to the emerging areas of economic activity consequently generated (Yushkova 2014). To spur economic growth and increase its international discourse power, the Chinese leadership has emphasised that e-commerce is the "future direction of trade development" (Xinhua 2001), regarding digital trade as its "opportunity to respond to the challenges set by economic globalisation and the new industrial revolution" (Jiang 1998). Moreover, China has adjusted its strategies in response to the status quo and further developed advanced technologies to achieve its economic and political objectives.

Additionally, in the mid-1980s to late 2000s, scholarly discussion of China's approaches to digital trade was limited, while discussion of how China's accession to the WTO would stimulate its economic growth in traditional economic sectors was more extensive and included topics such as the labour-intensive agricultural and textile industries (Ianchovichina and Martin 2001; Shafaeddin 2004). Scholars have also discussed how the international trade order, primarily characterised by liberalism, free markets, and a Western-centric multilateral mechanism led by the United States, has influenced China. Despite China benefiting economically from joining the WTO and continually opening its economy further, it has been inadvertently influenced by the prevailing standards and norms of this trade order (Zhang 2003). For example, Zhang (2003) pointed out that China adopted a selective approach to the principles or standards of the WTO before joining, whereas the reforms and internationalisation that occurred in the wake of its accession to the WTO have impacted regional income and created growth disparities in the nation (Jiang 2012; Sachs and Woo 2003).

Since then, China has become an emerging power in international trade markets and the digital domain, and scholars have consequently shifted their focus to China's policies, economic and technological power, and its strategic vision at domestic and international levels. Thus, previous literature focuses on how China adopts specific strategies and tactics to impact the existing international digital trade order, while pursuing its domestic and foreign policy interests. There has been insufficient research into the factors that have impacted China's approaches to digital trade and how China's has approached the evolution of digital trade at the domestic and international levels over the past three decades. This paper aims to bridge this gap in the literature by exploring two research

questions: How has China's approach to digital trade evolved over time? What domestic and international factors have impacted its adopted approaches?

To answer the questions posed, this research employs a conceptual framework derived from the existing literature on institutional and policy change. By adopting an interests, ideas, and institutions (3I) analytical framework, this research examines how the Chinese government has adopted different approaches to digital trade in three phases: (1) infrastructure building and policy formation; (2) innovation-driven development and digital trade transition; and (3) data-driven development and internationalisation. In terms of methodology, the paper adopts a qualitative historical analysis approach based on open-source primary and secondary materials, such as official documents, declarations, and white papers from official Chinese websites. Qualitative historical analysis concerns itself with the "similarities and differences" (Palabiyik 2019, 308) of "instances of [an] event or phenomenon" (Thies 2002, 353) in explaining "which conditions or factors [of a given event or phenomenon] were broadly shared, and which were distinctive" (Palabiyik 2019, 308). By exploring through a historical lens, the key characteristics attributed to each phase of China's digital trade evolution can be identified, and further analysis can be conducted.

This article is structured as follows. The first section draws on the literature on institutional and policy change and the concepts of interests, ideas, and institutions to provide the analytical framework – 3I. The second section divides the evolution of China's approaches to digital trade into three phases based on economic and political interests, proposed ideas and strategies, supportive policies, and global integration. The delineation of these phases sheds light on how China's digital trade approaches have evolved over time to respond to internal developments and demands, as well as to external objectives and dynamic market trends. The third section provides a discussion and a conclusion.

An analytical framework based on the three "I"s: interests, ideas, and institutions

The 3I analytical framework examines three major elements – interests, ideas, and institutions – to explain the process of institutional and policy changes (Béland 2016; Goldstein and Keohane 1993). The 3I framework has been widely applied in empirical studies concerning policy analysis. For instance, Shearer et al. (2016) used this framework to unpack changes in public health policy, whereas Parkhurst et al. (2021) used the same framework to compare public health policies related to malaria control in seven African countries. The same framework has been adopted to compare the policies of major cities in Canada, for example, Desroches and Poland (2023) compared the policy of creating social housing for female heads of single-parent families in three major cities. To analyse the policies regarding multilateral cooperation, Drake and Nicolaidis (1992) adopted the 3I framework to analyse the process of promoting the General Agreement on Trade in Services and highlighted the role of ideas in clarifying and framing the issue of the definition of "trade in services" and setting it on the global agenda. Shawoo et al. (2023) used the Paris Agreement and Agenda 2030 as policy comparative case studies while adopting the 3I framework to analyse policy coherence for sustainable development. Based on existing research, this section clarifies the definitions of ideas, interests, and institutions,

paving the way for their application in the subsequent analysis of the evolution of China's approach to digital trade.

Firstly, within the rationalist perspective of international relations (IR), the term "interests" is defined as the objectives that states pursue in order to preserve their sovereignty and to increase their power and security in the international system. Rationalist IR scholars prioritise tangible or material interests, including security enhancement, power, economic resources, and international influence (Waltz 1979). Furthermore, Mearsheimer (2001) pointed out that the main interest of states is to maximise their power. Additionally, interests reflect policy-makers' "preference and power" (Shearier et al. 2016, 1202): in other words, the formulation and implementation of policy largely depend on actors' interests and behaviours (Hall and Taylor 1996). To more precisely define the scope of this study, this paper will adopt the rationalist perspective of IR, defining China's "interests" as its material interests, which include two main aspects: first, economic interests (e.g. economic growth, promoting Chinese enterprises' access to international markets, and financial leverage), and second, political interests (e.g. promoting and participating in regional or international rules or standard-shaping) (Keohane and Nye 1973; Mearsheimer 2001).

Secondly, ideas are key factors in the formation of interests, policy changes, and the establishment of institutions. Hay (2004) pointed out that "material circumstances do not directly determine . . . behaviour, though our perceptions of such circumstances (and of our stake in various conceivable outcomes), may" (209). In other words, ideas determine the construction of interests and make them "actionable" (Hay 2004). However, ideas assume different forms because they can "come from anywhere" and possess broad definitions (Béland 2016, 231). Garrett and Weingast (1993) pointed out that only certain ideas, those which enable political actors to achieve their desired ends, tend to be applied in institutionalisation. Additionally, Kingdon argues that the key to understanding policy change is "what make the ideas [take] hold and grow" (2002, 72). Furthermore, corresponding to Kingdon's point, Béland (2009) proposes three main ways to explain how ideas impact policy change: first, ideas engage in the construction of issues and problems that political actors aim to address in the established institutions; second, ideas can challenge or legitimise the policies and institutions through a policy paradigm; and third, ideas can become ideological weapons to convince audiences, including policy-makers and the general population, to accept the reforms. In this article, "ideas" refer broadly to non-material factors, such as values, beliefs, and knowledge (Goldstein and Keohane 1993). More specifically, this research regards ideas as international actors' principal beliefs that are "located in the foreground of policy debates" (Kangas et al. 2014, 74) and causal beliefs that "provide guides for individuals on how to achieve their objective" and "imply strategies for the attainment of goals" (Goldstein and Keohane 1993, 9), deriving from how policymakers understand proposed strategic choices and the consequences of such choices.

Thirdly, from the perspective of institutional scholarship, institutions are broadly defined as sets of rules, norms, and practices that structure the interactions of the economy, politics, and society. Institutions are the "rules of the game in a society" (North 1990) that are "embedded in structures of meaning and resources that are relatively invariant in the face of turnover of individuals and relatively resilient to the

idiosyncratic preferences and expectations of individuals and changing external circumstances” (March and Olsen 2008, 3). Despite the formal institutions that are officially established, including governmental bodies and enacted laws and regulations that guide political actors’ behaviours (Kern 2011), informal institutions, such as unwritten rules, norms, and practices, play significant roles in facilitating cooperation and coordination (Parkhurst et al. 2021). Although informal institutions have not been officially sanctioned, Putnam et al. (1993) highlighted the roles of social capital and civic engagement in the effectiveness of democratic governance. Because the 3I approach differentiates institutions from ideas, and since the definition of ideas aligns, to some extent, with the conceptual scope of informal institutions, this research adopts a narrow definition of institutions that focuses on formal institutions, such as the establishment of institutional settings and legal frameworks.

The evolution of China’s approach to digital trade

Drawing on the 3I analytical framework, this paper pursues the following key argument: Considering that China’s approach to digital trade has not been static and that economic and political objectives in the digital trade realm can evolve over time, one can observe that changing economic and political interests (e.g. pursuing domestic economic growth and international discourse power) and ideas (e.g. government intervention and carrying out reform and opening up) have jointly shaped the process of institutionalisation in the sphere of digital trade.

Taking into consideration internal factors (e.g. technological abilities, relevant policies, and economic demands) as well as external factors (e.g. global market trends and regional and international trade relations), this research divides the evolution of China’s digital trade into three phases: (1) infrastructure building and policy formation; (2) innovation-driven development and digital trade transition; and (3) data-driven development and internationalisation. During each phase, the 3I framework will be adopted to unpack the interests, ideas, and institutionalisation characterising China’s approach to digital trade. The delineation of these phases helps examine how China’s institutional settings and policy formation in the digital trade realm have evolved over time to respond to changing ideas and interests (Table 1).

Phase 1: Infrastructure building and policy formation (Early 1990s to Mid-2000s)

Interests and ideas

China has been in search of methods to stimulate its development; thus, it has proposed the perspective of “carrying out reform and opening up” (People 2019), which reflects its objectives at the domestic and international levels. With the advancement of internet and digital technologies, Western countries have shifted their focus to e-commerce in order to further boost their economic development. China, in line with its view of development, has embraced this new trade model and regards e-commerce as an important opportunity to achieve its economic interests, including the pursuit of economic growth and increasing opportunities for international cooperation (Xinhua 2001). Meanwhile, China has actively participated in and promoted bi- or multilateral collaborations to

Table 1 Interests, ideas and institutions of the three phases

Phase	Interests	Ideas	Institutions
Phase 1: Infrastructure building and policy formation (early 1990s to mid-2000s)	<p>Economic interests:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic growth through e-commerce • Increased opportunities for international cooperation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carrying out reform and opening-up • The concept of e-commerce • Government intervention • Comprehensive informatisation • Science and technology constitute a primary productive force 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three-Golden Projects • The Information Work Leading Group • Internet projects – CHINANET, CERNET, CSTNET, and CHINAGBN • The Bank of China provided personal internet banking services • The establishment of China International Electronic Commerce Centre • Research project: The Construction and Development of E-Commerce Application Standards • Project 211
	<p>Political interests:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate in bi- or multilateral collaborations to join the WTO 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote international cooperation to respond to the challenges of economic globalisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WTO Accession Team • The bilateral economic and trade joint committee with countries such as the US • CEPA framework with Hong Kong and Macao • Electronic Signature Law of the PRC
Phase 2: Innovation-driven development and digital trade transition (mid-2000s to mid-2010s)	<p>Economic interests:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic growth through e-commerce and digital trade • Promote regional and international cooperation to stimulate domestic enterprises' upgrading and development <p>Political interests:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National stability • Promote regional and international cooperation to obtain developing countries' support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The concept of digital trade • Technological innovation drives the development of e-commerce and digital trade 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Broadband China Project • The establishment of e-commerce demonstration bases • Made in China 2025 • Internet Plus
	<p>Political interests:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National stability • Promote regional and international cooperation to obtain developing countries' support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government intervention in data regulation • Respect each other's sovereignty • Contribute to international e-commerce and digital trade cooperation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regulations on the Protection of Personal Information of Telecommunications and Internet Users • The Criminal Law of the PRC (Revised draft) • The establishment of Foreign Economic Cooperation Websites • E-commerce dialogue mechanisms with the SCO and the BRICS • APEC Initiative on E-Commerce Innovation and Development

Table 1 (continued)

Phase	Interests	Ideas	Institutions
Phase 3: Data-driven development and internationalisation (late 2010s to present)	<p>Economic interests:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic growth through data-driven economic development • Promote the innovation and development of high-tech to increase international competitiveness • Address domestic excessive production capacity <p>Political interests:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National security • Promote international digital trade rules or standard-making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New concept of digital trade highlighting the element of data • Digital industrialisation • Innovation of high-tech 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing governmental investment in R&D • The establishment of pilot free-trade zones • The establishment of high-standard free-trade areas
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National security • Promote international digital trade rules or standard-making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cybersecurity and data regulation • Respect each other's sovereignty • International digital divide • Contribute to developing countries' development of digital trade 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal Information Security Specification • Personal Information Protection Law • Cybersecurity Law • Data Security Law • Establishing a Database System to Maximise a Better Role of Data Elements (aka the Twenty Data Measures) • The establishment of the National Data Bureau • The BRI • The Silk Road E-commerce • The Digital Silk Road • Promote the implementation of the APEC Internet and Digital Economy Roadmap • The DEPA Accession Team

achieve its political interests – accession to the WTO to enter the global trade market and to engage in the establishment of international institutions.

The term “e-commerce” first appeared in the work report of the Clinton administration in relation to the statement on national information infrastructure building (U.S. Department of State 2001). It refers to using information technology, internet technology, and modern communication technology to integrate the resource management of goods with trading activities in order to effectively reduce costs, increase value, and create business opportunities (U.S. Department of State 2001). While this concept was accepted, the Chinese government further highlighted the role of “governmental intervention” in the establishment of information and internet infrastructure while promoting the development of e-commerce domestically (Zhu 2001, 2002).

Moreover, the Chinese government proposed the concept of “comprehensive informatisation”, which is nearly equivalent to “digital inclusion” as referred to by Western countries, which aims to bridge the digital divide at the domestic level and ensure broader access to digital technologies across different regions and socio-economic groups (Gangadharan 2012). To promote domestic economic growth through e-commerce, the Chinese government adopted multiple strategies to maximise its official authority to develop the construction and establishment of digital and internet infrastructure– the preconditions for boosting the e-commerce industry – while providing a foundation for the idea of comprehensive informatisation and for the future development of e-governance (Zhou 2004).

Besides, the Chinese government made efforts to encourage enterprises to shift their trading activities online to promote the development of e-commerce domestically, as well as to participate in regional and international collaborations to help domestic enterprises access the global trade market. More specifically, the role of “macroscopic readjustment and control” has been highlighted in developing the domestic economy during this period, particularly to “promote domestic industrialisation through informatisation” and encourage inter-enterprise e-commerce to “expand the market scale” and integrate traditional products with information products (State Council 2000; Zhu 2001).

Additionally, the Chinese government emphasised the importance of technology and skilled talent in promoting the domestic development of e-commerce and internet technology. In line with the view that “science and technology constitute a primary productive force” (Deng 1988), the Chinese leadership pointed out that backward technologies and the scarcity of skilled professionals limited the development of the domestic economy (Jiang 1995), particularly the development of e-commerce, which relies heavily on digital technologies and the internet. To promote domestic e-commerce and increase international competitiveness, training high-tech personnel and cultivating skilled-talent in e-commerce are necessary.

Internationally, the Chinese government actively participated in regional and international collaborations to provide more opportunities to develop the domestic economy, which aligned with its economic interests, as well as more possibilities to engage in the international trade system and to gain membership in the WTO, reflecting the nation’s political interests. For instance, WTO membership enables China to manage its growing economic relations with other trading partners based on the clear, predictable rights and obligations demonstrated by international agreements. Besides, WTO membership

enables China access to the WTO Dispute Settlement Body (DSB) – dispute settlement panels which are responsible for the effective settlement of trade disputes within WTO members, and have compulsory jurisdiction (WTO 2024). Accession to the WTO also allows China to play a critical role in formulating new rules in the world trading system, rather than being excluded from the GATT/WTO rule-making process (Wu 2011). Therefore, Jiang (1998) pointed out that “promoting international cooperation is the primary approach to address the challenges set by technological development and economic globalisation”.

Overall, to achieve its economic interests, including the pursuit of economic growth and increased opportunities for international cooperation, the Chinese government accepted the concept of e-commerce and shifted its focus to promoting domestic e-commerce development, including government intervention in infrastructure building and encouraging enterprises to participate in the e-commerce market domestically and internationally. Meanwhile, it highlighted the role of technology and training skilled talent in boosting the development of domestic e-commerce. To achieve its political interests, the government actively participated in bi- or multilateral collaborations to seek out opportunities to enter the global trade market and gain membership in the WTO. In the next section, the establishment of institutions related to domestic and international e-commerce is elucidated.

Institutions

As mentioned earlier, at this stage, China focused on the domestic development of e-commerce in order to achieve economic growth, as well as participation in bi- or multilateral international collaborations to gain membership in the WTO, reflecting its political interests, which align with the global trade rules.

Domestically, the Chinese government accepted the concept of e-commerce to further boost its economic growth and regarded infrastructure building as a precondition to promoting the domestic development of e-commerce, thereby highlighting the role of government intervention in the establishment of digital and internet infrastructure construction. More specifically, to build the necessary infrastructure, the government launched a series of projects – “Three-Golden Projects” – including the “Golden Bridge project”, the “Golden Card project”, and the “Golden Gateway project”, which aim to realise information resource-sharing and information system interconnection, support online payment services, and conduct digital governance on the economy and trade (CNNIC 2012; E-governance 2012).

Furthermore, in line with the proposed idea of “comprehensive informatisation”, the government made efforts to promote the construction of internet infrastructure to provide the public with internet service in order to encourage domestic enterprises to enter the e-commerce market. For instance, the Information Work Leading Group of the State Council was established in 1996 to support the construction of internet infrastructure (CNNIC 2012), as well as to promote the informatisation process of the national economy and the development of e-commerce, as proposed in the “Ninth Five-Year Plan” and the “Tenth Five-Year Plan” (State Council 1996, 2001). Moreover, to complete the construction of internet infrastructure, the government launched four major projects – CHINANET, CERNET, CSTNET, and CHINAGBN – which together formed the initial

Chinese internet infrastructure, and completed the interconnection among these networks (Chinese Academy of Sciences 2015).

Although infrastructure building and realising comprehensive informatisation are longstanding processes towards which the government is still making efforts, including building and upgrading digital infrastructure and bridging the regional divide, China completed its initial internet establishment during this phase. For example, at the end of 2002, China boasted 59.1 million internet users, ranked second in the world (National Bureau of Statistics 2003). The initial establishment of digital and internet infrastructure laid solid foundations for China's economic objectives to align with its pursuit of economic growth, as well as from the viewpoint of "carrying out reform" at the domestic level.

In addition to the heavy government investment in the construction of digital and internet infrastructure, the role of government intervention can be seen in encouraging domestic enterprises to adopt the new trade model – e-commerce – and to access the e-commerce market both domestically and internationally. More specifically, to promote domestic e-commerce development, the government encouraged state-owned companies to take a leading role in building e-commerce websites and shifting their transactional activities online, which, in turn, drove other businesses in the supply chain to participate in the e-commerce market (General Office of the State Council of the PRC 2005). For instance, the Bank of China – a Chinese majority state-owned commercial bank – provided personal internet banking services to the public to highlight the convenience of online transactions (Ministry of Commerce 2005).

Moreover, the government made efforts to establish new agencies and to form a policy environment conducive to boosting domestic e-commerce development. For example, the first government agency relevant to e-commerce – the China International Electronic Commerce Centre – was established in 1996 to provide policy support services related to e-commerce and technical assistance, which reflected China's economic interest in utilising the development of e-commerce to achieve economic growth (CIECC 2024). Similarly, the former Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation established a series of official websites, including the official government website, that provide domestic and international trade policies and information for domestic enterprises to participate in the e-commerce market at the domestic and international levels (Ministry of Commerce 2005). In order to provide enterprises with a "fair, transparent, and supportive e-commerce environment", the Ministry of Commerce initiated the Research Project on the Construction and Development of E-Commerce Application Standards to explore how to build a standards system for China's e-commerce market (Liao 2005).

Along with these direct initiatives applying government intervention to promote e-commerce development domestically, the Chinese government highlighted the importance of technology and skilled talent in accelerating the development of e-commerce and internet use. Ever since Deng (1988) proposed the view that "science and technology constitute a primary productive force", the Chinese government has realised that technology is the key factor impacting China's development in various areas, particularly the field of e-commerce, which relies heavily on digital technologies and the internet. Therefore, the strategy of "invigorating China through science and education" was proposed by Jiang in 1995 and emphasised in multiple official documents, such as the Ninth

Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and Long-Range Objectives until 2010 (State Council 1996).

To implement the strategy of “invigorating China through science and education”, the government adopted multiple initiatives to promote the training of high-tech personnel and skilled talent. More specifically, the government initiated Project 211 – a higher education development and sponsorship scheme – which emphasised the construction of key disciplines related to advancing domestic development of the economy and high-tech, such as ICTs, to respond to the challenges set by globalisation and the trend of the knowledge economy (State Council 2008). Meanwhile, to cultivate skilled talent in e-commerce, which aligned with China’s economic interest in boosting domestic e-commerce development, several institutions of higher education established e-commerce as a specialised field of study (Liao 2005). Furthermore, Accelerating the Development of E-Commerce pointed out that it was crucial to “strengthen the education, training, and theoretical research in e-commerce and enhance the e-commerce application capabilities of personnel at different levels in various industries” (General Office of the State Council of the PRC 2005). Thus, institutions of higher education and vocational colleges subsequently increased the number of e-commerce programmes.

Internationally, in pursuit of political benefits (e.g. joining the WTO to participate in the international trade system), the Chinese government actively participated in bi- or multilateral collaborations to gain the support of other member countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1999, 2000).

In particular, the government established a specific leading group – the “WTO Accession Team” – to facilitate the process of joining the WTO. Furthermore, the Ministry of Commerce actively promoted bilateral cooperation with other WTO members on e-commerce. For example, the Chinese government promoted e-commerce cooperation with the United States and Japan under the Bilateral Economic and Trade Joint Committee, as well as developed cooperation with Hong Kong and Macau under the CEPA framework (Jia 2006; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2001; U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission 2015). Moreover, the Chinese government actively participated in multilateral cooperation, such as engaging in international e-commerce legislation initiatives organised by the United States and supporting the establishment of E-ASEAN (Ministry of Foreign Affairs; United Nations 2013).

After joining the WTO, in pursuit of economic benefits, China became more actively involved in international e-commerce cooperation to provide domestic enterprises with more opportunities to enter the global e-commerce market. As Accelerating the Development of Electronic Commerce highlighted, “accelerating e-commerce development is a necessary choice to respond to the challenges of economic globalisation, taking the initiative in development and advancing international competitiveness, because doing so can improve China’s capability to allocate its resources in a global environment and raise the international economic status thereof” (General Office of the State Council of the PRC 2005). In order to provide a policy environment for the development of e-commerce, the government released the Electronic Signature Law of the People’s Republic of China to support companies in conducting transactions online at both the domestic and international levels (State Cryptography Administration 2005).

During this period, the Chinese government completed the basic establishment of digital and internet infrastructure formed policy that aligned with its interest in stimulating domestic economic growth by developing domestic e-commerce. Internationally, by participating in and promoting bi- or multilateral cooperation, China not only acceded to the WTO to its political benefit, but also extended its e-commerce market to help domestic enterprises access more global e-commerce markets.

Phase 2: innovation-driven development and digital trade transition (Mid-2000s to Mid-2010s)

Interests and ideas

Since the Chinese government had completed the initial phase of infrastructure building, promoted domestic informatisation, and encouraged enterprises to access domestic and global e-commerce markets, in this phase, the country put forward new objectives to achieve economic and political benefits. More specifically, China accepted the new term “digital trade”, which derives from the concept of “e-commerce”, to pursue further economic growth by stimulating the basic transformation of its economic models while promoting regional and international cooperation on e-commerce and digital trade to stimulate domestic enterprises’ upgrading and development (People 2018a, 2018b). Furthermore, due to the development of the internet, and considering that digital technology is a precondition for advancing digital trade, the accompanying cybersecurity issues attracted the government’s attention, which then emphasised the importance of government intervention in data and online regulation in order to maintain national stability, in accordance with its political interests (The NPC Standing Committee 2012; Xinhua 2014). Additionally, China’s contributions to advancing regional and international cooperation, particularly in the areas of e-commerce and digital trade with developing countries, reflected its political objective of gaining support from these countries.

The concept of “digital trade”, to some extent, equates to the concept of “e-commerce”, which refers to the “production, distribution, marketing, sale or delivery of goods and services by electronic means” (WTO 1998). After the robust development of the internet and ICTs, the concept of “digital trade” was first proposed in 2013 and regarded as the “products and services delivered via the internet” (U.S. International Trade Commission 2013, 1-1). In 2014, the U.S. International Trade Commission further defined digital trade as “domestic commerce and international trade in which the internet and internet-based technologies play a particularly significant role in ordering, producing, or delivering products and services” (U.S. International Trade Commission 2014, 29). Although, in this phase, there was no generally accepted definition, the Chinese government embraced the new concept of “digital trade”, which depends on advanced internet technology and emphasises transactional behaviour at the data level, to develop internet technology and digital trade domestically in order to boost its economic growth.

Additionally, in accordance with the view that “science and technology constitute a primary productive force” and the strategy of “invigorating China through science and education”, which were mentioned earlier, the Chinese government shifted its emphasis to the role of “innovation” in accelerating the development of internet and digital technologies, which facilitated the transformation to new economic growth models aligned with its economic interests during this period (State Council 2006a, 2006b). More

specifically, Hu (2007) pointed out that it is essential to “enhance China’s capacity for independent innovation in all areas of modernisation”, as well as to “accelerate transformation of the modes of economic growth that mainly rely on scientific and technological progress”.

Despite the new term “digital trade” becoming the new driving force for domestic economic growth in this phase, the resulting cybersecurity issues caused by the development of internet technology and digital trade drew the government’s attention. Li (2013) affirmed that “stealing economic benefits became one of the primary objectives of hackers carrying out cyber-attacks” due to the increase in economic activities online. Meanwhile, more than 600 Chinese website user information databases were openly sold online, leading to an extremely severe situation of personal information leakage (CNCERT 2013). Thus, the government proposed the idea of strengthening online regulation and highlighted the role of government intervention in protecting personal data security as well as ensuring national stability while continuing the domestic development of internet technology and digital trade (The NPC Standing Committee 2012).

Internationally, in this phase, the Chinese government still prioritised economic benefits that increased economic growth by actively participating in and promoting regional and international cooperation in the areas of e-commerce and digital trade to provide more opportunities for domestic enterprises to develop their capabilities to align with the global market (Ministry of Commerce 2013). More specifically, to promote economic growth, China appealed for increased regional and international cooperation to address the challenges of economic globalisation and to provide more opportunities for the development of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2004, 2014). Furthermore, in its role as a leader among developing countries, China pursued political benefits by obtaining developing countries’ support through regional and international collaborations that emphasised developing countries’ economic development (People 2014; State Council 2014).

Institutions

As mentioned earlier, motivated by the pursuit of economic benefits, the Chinese government embraced the term “digital trade” and emphasised the role of innovation in advancing internet technology while embarking on the establishment of institutions relevant to completing initial digitalisation in order to initiate the transformation to new economic growth models. Internationally, China’s active participation and promotion of regional and international cooperation not only enabled domestic enterprises to conduct upgrading and offered more opportunities for development that aligned with China’s economic benefits, but also attracted support from developing countries in return for assistance in opening their e-commerce markets, which was of political benefit to China.

Domestically, in the pursuit of completing the transformation to new economic growth models, the Chinese government adopted a new trade model – digital trade that emphasises internet technology and the data economy. Specifically, to advance the development of digital trade, the State Council (2013) initiated the “Broadband China Project”, which focused on “expanding the coverage of 3G and fibre broadband” in order to promote domestic information consumption by “speeding up the network and lowering the services fees”. In addition, the National Informatisation Development from 2006

to 2020 white paper and the Twelfth Five-Year Plan for National Strategic Emerging Industries for China highlighted the importance of advancing internet technology and ICTs to further drive economic growth through the development of a new economic model (State Council 2006c, 2012). Although, in this phase, the e-commerce sector was the primary driving force of domestic economic growth, digital infrastructure building still contributed to the subsequent development of digital trade.

Furthermore, in line with the “innovation” perspective, to achieve economic growth, Hu (2012) proposed the strategy of “becoming an innovation-oriented nation” in the Report to the 18th Party Congress, in which he further clarified this strategy for the field of e-commerce, promoting economic development through the innovation of technologies relevant to this field. More specifically, to promote technological innovation in e-commerce, the Chinese government pointed out that the government invested in building e-commerce demonstration bases to serve as guidance for standardising e-commerce activities and develop the “national innovation system” – a “market-oriented system with enterprises as the main innovator” that integrates government, industry, academia, and research institutions into a unified approach to promote innovation (Ministry of Commerce 2011; State Council 2008).

Subsequently, in the latter period of this stage, the Chinese government exhibited a shift to develop its new trade model – digital trade – to keep pace with Western countries that displayed rapid economic growth through the benefit of advanced ICTs. For instance, the National Informatisation Development from 2006 to 2020 (2006c) white paper highlighted the development of information technology and digital trade that aim to “promote the widespread application of information technology across different sectors” and enhance the innovation of digital technology in order to spur economic growth through a new mode that relies on advanced technologies.

Moreover, the initiatives “Made in China 2025” and “Internet Plus” promoted the deeper integration of advanced ICTs with various sectors of the economy and society (State Council 2015a, 2015b). In the initiative “Made in China 2025”, a three-decade, three-step strategy, the first decade and step are designed to respond to the new wave of technological revolution and industrial transformation, with a core emphasis on innovation-driven development. This can be regarded as the Chinese “Industry 4.0”, with a focus on the industrial internet to integrate people, data, and machines (State Council 2015a). Meanwhile, this strategy was aligned with the broader “Internet Plus” strategy to form a comprehensive approach that aimed to leverage internet technologies in traditional industries to enhance integration in order to develop new industries and trade models and boost domestic economic development (State Council 2015a, 2015b).

However, as a result of the rapid development of ICTs, cybersecurity issues again attracted the government’s attention. To ensure national stability and personal information security while continuing the domestic development of digital trade, the Chinese government emphasised that government intervention was essential to the relevant regulatory approach at the domestic level (The NPC Standing Committee 2012). More specifically, to protect domestic citizen’s information, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (2013) released the Regulations on the Protection of Personal Information of Telecommunications and Internet Users, which clarifies the rules for the collection and use of personal information, thus addressing this growing concern

of the digital era. Additionally, the Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China was amended to include a new chapter to address contemporary challenges associated with cybercrime in order to enhance legal provisions for safeguarding information and to effectively penalise cybercrimes, such as the “unauthorised sale or provision of citizen's personal data” and “the creation and propagation of misinformation”, thereby reinforcing the regulation of online content (The NPC Standing Committee 2015).

Internationally, as a leader among developing countries, China's active promotion of bi- or multilateral cooperation in the fields of e-commerce and digital trade not only works to its economic benefit, gained by promoted domestic enterprises' upgrading in these cooperations, but also to its political benefit, by gaining developing countries' support by helping them and their SMEs enter the global e-commerce and digital markets. More specifically, the Chinese government established a series of official websites that served as information platforms to provide concentrated economic and trade information services for the enterprises of China and its partner countries (Ministry of Commerce 2015). For instance, the Ministry of Commerce collaborated with commercial authorities, such as ASEAN and Central and Eastern European countries, to establish economic and trade cooperation websites (CAFTA Business Portal 2016; Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024). These platforms played a crucial role in advancing the development of SMEs and improving their competitiveness through inter-enterprise collaboration (Ministry of Industry and Information Technology 2016; Zhang and Wang 2010).

Regionally, under the framework of regional economic cooperation mechanisms, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the BRICS nations, the Ministry of Commerce established e-commerce dialogue mechanisms that aimed to advance the formation of e-commerce and digital trade regulation, reduce barriers, and create a profitable digital trade environment (Gao 2015; Li 2015). Moreover, at the 22nd Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leader's Informal Meeting, China proposed the APEC Initiative on E-Commerce Innovation and Development, marking a significant step towards promoting the advancement and innovation of e-commerce within the APEC member economies (APEC 2015; Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015).

During this period, China completed its initial transformation to new economic growth models relying on advanced ICTs in order to achieve economic benefits. Internationally, China actively promoted various cooperation initiatives to encourage domestic enterprises' upgrading to align with its economic interests and to gain developing countries' support by helping them enter the global market, which is in China's political interest.

Phase 3: data-driven development and internationalisation (late 2010s to present)

Interests and ideas

After the efforts of the past two decades, China has not only completed the initial transformation to new economic growth models, but has also become the emerging power in international digital trade rule-making and even the digital domain. In this phase, the Chinese government has been in pursuit of data-driven economic growth while expanding and confirming the concept of “digital trade”. Moreover, it has been addressing its excess domestic production capacity by actively promoting bi- or multilateral

cooperation internationally. In addition, to achieve political benefits, the Chinese government has continued to clarify data regulatory approaches in order to maintain national security domestically, as well as promoted regional and international digital trade rule-making for bi- or multilateral cooperation.

Due to the rapid economic development of the past few decades, although China has maintained its position as the world's second-largest economy, its economic growth rate has reached a bottleneck period. For instance, in 2018, China's GDP reached \$13.6 trillion (£10.5 trillion), with a 6.6 per cent growth rate, which achieved the government's initial target of a 6.5 per cent GDP increase. Nevertheless, it saw the lowest economic growth rate in 28 years (BBC 2019; National Bureau of Statistics 2019). Furthermore, the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2019 affected China's economic development and even that of the entire globe. To continue promoting domestic growth, China was forced to shift its transformation to new economic growth models away from a high-speed development approach to a high-quality development approach that relied on "emerging industries, products, and trade models" to drive domestic economic growth (ChinaDaily 2019). In the Report on the Work of the Government, Li (2016) pointed out that "we must develop new technologies, industries, and forms of business" and "strengthen the growth of emerging areas of consumption, such as information goods and services".

In this phase, to achieve economic growth, the Chinese government has shifted its focus to a data-driven economic growth model relevant to the trade model of digital trade. In line with the widespread application of advanced technology and the expansion of digital trade activities, the concept of "digital trade" has changed over time. Therefore, the Ministry of Commerce (2023) has defined the concept of "digital trade" as "regarding data as the factor of production, digital services as the core element, and digital delivery as its main characteristics", which encompasses industrial digitisation and digital industrialisation.

Moreover, to promote domestic economic growth while adopting the new economic growth models, President Xi has repeatedly emphasised the need to seize the opportunities presented by digital trade and to promote innovation in digital technology on multiple important occasions, such as the G20 Hangzhou Summit, the World Economic Forum, and the 36th Group Study Session of CPC (Xi 2016, 2017, 2022a). As the new trade model heavily relies on cutting-edge technologies, such as big data, cloud computing, robots, and artificial intelligence, the Chinese government has adopted the idea of "innovation" in the area of high-tech (which is dominated by Western countries, particularly the United States) in search of data-driven economic development and breakthroughs in digital trade (Qiushi 2023a).

Despite the huge economic growth conveyed by the new data-driven trade model, advanced high-tech has brought with it significant cybersecurity and personal data security issues that impact political interests, including national security and cyberspace sovereignty. To ensure national security while developing the domestic economy, the Chinese government has adopted the idea of government intervention in data regulation domestically, as well as promoted the formulation of cross-border data transmission regulation and appealed for creating international cyberspace protocols internationally (United Nations 2024). For instance, the Chinese leadership pointed out the importance

of building a “peaceful, secure open, cooperative, and orderly” cyberspace to respond to the new technological revolution and industrial transformation (ChinaDaily 2017).

Internationally, the promotion of bi- or multilateral cooperation rooted in the ideas of “improving global connectivity” and “bridging the digital divide between the developed and developing countries” has helped the Chinese government to achieve economic benefits, including addressing domestic excessive production capacity and accelerating domestic enterprises’ upgrading to align with digital trade requirements (State Council Information Office 2023; Xinhua 2021). Meanwhile, the Chinese government has proposed the ideas of “respecting each other’s sovereignty and security concerns” and government intervention in data regulation while promoting bi- or multilateral cooperation (State Council Information Office 2023; Xinhua 2021). To further its political benefits, the Chinese government, in this phase, has increasingly utilised discourse power to shape the rules or standards in the international digital trade domain, which is still in a state of disorder.

Institutions

Domestically, in this phase, the Chinese government has focused on institutionalisation relevant to digital trade, particularly in the field of technological innovation to boost economic growth, as well as in the area of cybersecurity to maintain domestic national security while developing the economy. Internationally, fostering bi- or multilateral cooperation not only helps China achieve economic benefits but also plays a crucial role in obtaining discourse power to shape new digital trade rules.

Since the Chinese government highlighted the idea of innovation in promoting domestic economic growth in the second phase, the country’s technological capabilities have dominated the areas of low and medium technology. However, the lack of high-tech capabilities has limited its transformation to new economic growth models and its standard-making power in the area of high-tech (Ministry of Science and Technology 2016). Therefore, to promote high-tech capabilities, the government highlighted government investment in technological innovation. For example, the National Science and Technology Innovation Plan During the “Thirteenth Five-Year Plan” Period promised to “continue to conquer challenges in the high-tech sector” and “increase investment in research and development (R&D)” to “enhance China’s capacity for independent innovation” (State Council 2016a). Accordingly, by the end of 2019, China’s spending on R&D was about \$322 billion, accounting for 2.23 per cent of GDP (Normile 2021).

To promote a new digital trade model, the Chinese government emphasised technological innovation in the field of digital trade. More specifically, the Opinions on Accelerating the Development of New Form of Business and New Models of Foreign Trade white paper was issued to promote the “application of intelligent digital technologies” in new trade models to achieve industrial digitisation and digital industrialisation, as well as to promote the “integration of the traditional economy with the digital economy” (Publicity Department of CPC Central Committee 2022; State Council 2021a). Therefore, the government has invested in building pilot free-trade zones and applied emerging high-tech in the trade model. For example, the pilot Qingdao free-trade zone has adopted blockchain to ensure the full traceability of cross-border goods, and its overseas

warehouses have adopted robots to reduce labour costs while enhancing efficiency (The Special Commissioner's Office of the Ministry of Commerce in Qingdao 2022). Moreover, President Xi (2022b) promised to continue the "national innovation system" to promote the development of "strategic emerging industries" while upgrading pilot free-trade zones and expanding the "globally oriented network of high-standard free-trade areas".

Due to the development of digital trade, cybersecurity issues and data security issues have attracted widespread attention. In line with the government's strategy of striking a balance between economic growth and national security, which accords with its economic and political interests, the Chinese government highlighted the role of government intervention in data regulation while developing a new data-driven economic growth model (State Council 2021b). To protect personal data domestically, the Personal Information Security Specification was issued to respond to issues such as the lack of transparency in personal information collection and the frequent abuse and leakage of biometric information (Standardisation Administration of the PRC 2020). Furthermore, the subsequent promulgation of the Personal Information Protection Law (PIPL), one of the three main pillars of China's legal system for data protection and data security, focuses on the protection of personal information, which ranges from "clarifying the lawful basis for choices in employment scenarios" to "establishing a tiered management strategy for cross-border rules based on the risk levels of different subjects and data" (The NPC Standing Committee 2021a).

As one of the other pillars of China's legal system for data protection and data security, the Cybersecurity Law (CL) mainly addresses all electronic data generated within cyberspace. The CL clarifies the principle of "cyberspace sovereignty" and further establishes rules for the cross-border transfer of critical information infrastructure's crucial data (The NPC Standing Committee 2016). More specifically, it first introduces the concept of "important data", as well as attempts to define the scope and specific catalogue in the context of "critical infrastructure operators providing data abroad" (Hong 2020).

Based on the PIPL and CL, the Data Security Law (DSL) was released to protect data recorded in both electronic or non-electronic forms (The NPC Standing Committee 2021b). As an extension of the concepts of "national security" and "data sovereignty", DSL further establishes the foundational framework for the construction and enhancement of China's legal system for data security, as well as explicitly stipulates extraterritorial effect. For instance, it provides specific rules to impose export controls on data that falls under the controlled items, while further proposing the concept of "national core data" based on the concept of "important data" (Chen and Sun 2021). Although these laws are designed to protect national security, the lack of defined scope and clear protection standards of the "national core data" may impact the data trade activities of multinational companies within China, thereby impacting the development of China's digital trade.

Additionally, to clarify the scope of the data economy and data governance framework domestically, the CPC Central Committee and the State Council jointly issued the momentous document Establishing a Database System to Maximise a Better Role of Data Elements, also known as the "Twenty Data Measures", which includes key aspects of data circulation and transactions, data income distribution, and data element governance

(State Council 2022). In other words, this document is part of China's broader strategy to align with global data governance trends while promoting its own national data strategy and governance framework, as well as positioning itself as a key player in global data governance (National Development and Reform Commission 2022).

As mentioned earlier, China's approach to digital trade in this phase has emphasised its pursuit of seeking a balance between national security and economic growth. The establishment of the National Data Bureau (NDB) reflects China's commitment to this idea and its relevant interests. Specifically, the NDB is a government agency that focuses on "coordinating the development of the data-driven society and economic growth" in China (National Development and Reform Commission 2023). The NDB works alongside the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC); the former focuses more on the economic aspects of data, and the latter focuses on data security. Overall, the establishment of these institutions illustrates that at the domestic level, China's digital trade approach has incorporated the idea of strengthening data regulation in order to strike a balance between economic growth and national security.

Internationally, China's more active promotion of bi- or multilateral cooperation reflects its economic interests (i.e. promoting economic growth by addressing excess domestic production capacity and encouraging domestic enterprise upgrading to enter the global digital trade market) and demonstrates its political interests (i.e. shaping international digital trade rules). Economically, in line with the ideas of "improving global connectivity" and "bridging the digital divide between developed and developing countries", the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was announced by President Xi in 2013 (Xi 2013). Rather than the initially proposed single infrastructure project, Wang (2023) pointed out that by "focusing on connectivity as the main theme, the BRI aims to provide a new platform for international economic cooperation and add fresh impetus to participating countries' development and world economic growth". Under the framework of the BRI, Chinese enterprises have access to international markets while upgrading their businesses to increase international competitiveness. The Chinese government has also obtained partner countries' support to enhance its discourse power internationally (Ly 2020).

Specifically, to promote bilateral e-commerce cooperation, the government proposed a multi-level cooperation framework – "Silk Road E-commerce" – that helps to create a favourable environment for Chinese e-commerce enterprises to explore new markets (Belt and Road Portal 2023). Under this framework, Chinese enterprises and investors would easier to enter the markets of partner countries such as Thailand, while benefiting from the investment incentives offered by these countries and obtaining a viable path for the relocation of supply chains. For instance, the collaboration between China's ZTE Corporation and Thailand's AIS to launch the 5G A-Z Joint Innovation Centre not only aids Thailand in advancing its digital technology upgrades but also marks the centre as a R&D platform for ZTE in testing the localization of its latest technologies (Belt and Road Portal 2022). At the end of 2022, China had established bilateral e-commerce cooperation mechanisms with 23 countries covering various aspects, such as e-commerce platform building, technology exchange, and standard-setting, with the aim of facilitating cross-border e-commerce and market expansion (Belt and Road Portal 2023).

Moreover, the successful advancement of the BRI and “Silk Road E-commerce” has laid a solid foundation for the “Digital Silk Road (DSR)” project, which has been regarded as an integration of digital infrastructure, digital technology, and the BRI that aims to improve global digital connectivity and bridge the digital divide between developed and developing countries (Xinhua 2019). In the 13th Five-Year Plan for National Informatisation, the government announced that “Chinese internet companies were encouraged to engage in the internet construction of the DSR” (State Council 2016b). Moreover, this initiative aims to dismantle trade barriers and establish mechanisms for free-trade negotiations to promote digital cooperation between Chinese enterprises and those of countries associated with the BRI. Thus, in terms of economic interests, this multifaceted strategy has helped Chinese enterprises expand their global market share while improving product quality to align with international standards, as well as mitigated domestic issues of industrial overcapacity.

Furthermore, these initiatives have played a significant role in China’s pursuit of political interests. More specifically, because sovereignty issues have always been of key concern to China, the idea of “respecting each other’s sovereignty and security concerns” runs throughout China’s political interests at the international level. Since the BRI was proposed, the Chinese government has asserted that connectivity is a priority on the basis of “respecting each other’s sovereignty and security concerns” (State Council Information Office 2023). By the end of 2023, the Chinese government had signed cooperation agreements with more than 150 countries and 30 international organisations under the framework of the BRI (Qiushi 2023b). This high number of cooperation agreements reflects the level of basic support that the Chinese government has obtained from these partner countries.

Moreover, the DSR focuses more on the integration of digital infrastructure and digital technology, which reflects the agenda of improving global digital connectivity and bridging the digital divide globally. Under the framework of the DSR, besides the idea of “respecting each other’s sovereignty and security concerns”, the Chinese government also proposed the idea of strengthening data regulation to maintain national security in accordance with its domestic approach to digital trade (Xinhua 2019). The DSR is comparatively more attractive to developing countries that are eager to build internet infrastructure while seeking a balance between national security and economic growth. For instance, although Western countries express willingness to cooperate on African digital infrastructure, they tend to focus more on the principles, rules, and standards of infrastructure, such as free-market conditions and access standards, as well as social infrastructure construction (Eguegu 2022). Furthermore, some Western development finance institutions (DFI) incorporate high standards for environmental, social, and governance (ESG) throughout the entire project, and aim to establish these principles as common norms in infrastructure development through collaboration with DFI partners (Sonko and Sonko 2023). In contrast, China provides financial support for African infrastructure construction through concessional loans, as well as help African countries access the digital trade value chain through China’s mature cross-border e-commerce system. For instance, under the framework of DSR, China enables Africa products to reach Chinese consumers directly via Alibaba’s Electronic World Trade Platform (Belt and Road

Portal 2023). Therefore, as collaborations deepen, China has potential power to shape rules or standards in the realm of international digital trade.

Additionally, in order to shape the rules of regional and international digital trade, China's efforts can be seen as promoting multilateral cooperation. As one of the representatives of developing countries, President Xi (2021) pointed out that "multilateralism is the right way of the world, and all countries should stay on this path", while appealing for multilateral digital trade cooperation to respond to various global challenges, including the global digital divide and the lack of developing countries' access to the global digital market. Therefore, the Chinese government has actively promoted the implementation of the APEC Internet and Digital Economy Roadmap, which serves to "facilitate the cooperation in the formulation of regulatory approaches among member economies" and "bridge the digital divides in the APEC region" (APEC 2023). China also joined the RCEP in 2020 and actively engages in and promotes cooperation in the formulation of digital economy governance (Office of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission 2022). Although China has not yet joined the DEPA or the CPTPP, the government established the "DEPA Accession Team" in 2022 while showing a significant interest in joining the CPTPP (Office of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission 2022). In sum, the establishment of institutions in this phase reflects China's strategic focus on leveraging digital platforms to bridge economic divides to propose a more inclusive approach to international digital trade in order to obtain developing countries' support and access more discourse power in influencing and shaping digital trade rules at regional and international levels.

Conclusion

To provide an overview of the evolution of China's approach to digital trade in the past three decades, this research adopted an analytical framework – 3I – which draws from the literature on institutional and policy change and the concepts of interests, ideas, and institutions. By adopting the 3I framework, this research developed an empirically grounded analysis of how specific interests and ideas jointly drive the process of institutionalisation in each phase. This research makes a further contribution by providing a comprehensive mapping of China's approach to digital trade over the past three decades.

Overall, in the first phase, between the early 1990s and the mid-2000s, based on the perspective of "carrying out reform and opening up", China accepted the new concept of e-commerce and highlighted the role of government in the establishment of infrastructure and the formation of relevant policies that provide the necessary preconditions to develop e-commerce domestically, while participating in multilateral cooperation in order to join the WTO and enter the global trade market. During the second phase, from the mid-2000s to the mid-2010s, despite China's efforts to promote regional and international cooperation to gain support from other developing countries in accordance with its political interests, the Chinese government focused more on its economic interests and domestic national stability. For instance, domestically, the Chinese government took advantage of technological innovation and the new concept of digital trade, which relies heavily on ICTs, to build relevant institutions in order to stimulate the transformation to new economic growth models and emphasised government intervention in data and online regulation to maintain national stability. Finally, in the third phase, from the

late 2010s to the present, despite the Chinese government confirming that the targeted economic growth model relies on emerging industries and high-tech to align with its economic interests, the Chinese government invested more effort in pursuing political benefits at the regional and international levels in the aim of obtaining increased discourse power in order to shape the rules or standards of international digital trade.

In short, the process of institutionalisation related to digital trade reflects that the Chinese government has shifted away from an initial focus on pursuing economic growth towards a more recent emphasis on striking a balance between economic development and national security at the domestic level. In addition, the Chinese government increasingly prioritises its political interests by pursuing international discourse power in order to influence and even shape the rules or standards of international digital trade at the international level. In recent years, considering developing countries' digital capabilities, China's approach to digital trade has become more attractive to them. Specifically, China's approach aims to advance the domestic digital economy and relevant technologies while maintaining security under government regulations that align with developing countries' economic and political interests.

Despite the 3I analytical framework providing a good starting point to explore the evolution of China's approach to digital trade during the three decades, further research is still needed to understand the convergence of China's approach to digital trade at the domestic and international levels. Moreover, the extent to which China has the ability to influence and shape the rules or standards in the realm of digital trade at the regional and international levels remains to be assessed.

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