A Comparative Analysis of US-Chinese Approaches to AI

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Global differences in AI usage and development go beyond corporate or state objectives. AI development is heavily influenced by the social and political environment in which it is based; therefore, understanding the cultural and historical factors that drive national approaches is critical for global cooperation and security. Cultural analysis helps us predict where national AI implementation and integration may diverge, as well as mitigate international conflict. Given their dominance in global AI development, this piece is focused on factors potentially impacting Chinese and American approaches to AI.

One way we see cultural forces shaping AI development is in attitudes towards the *purpose* and *treatment* of AI. This may drive what societies envision as the ultimate goal for AI, as well as what may be necessary to manage perceived risks. In a recent study, when asked to imagine societal integration with AI, White Americans were more likely to describe AI as a controlled tool, while Chinese respondents described a helpful, socially connected being (Ge, et al.,2024). These "national" attitudes may also vary along demographic and class lines: for example, African American respondents had a mix of cultural attitudes, showing some openness to forming connections with AI while still desiring some protective controls over it (Ge, et al., 2024). Though clearly a range of viewpoints exist within each country, it is still worthwhile to consider how national identity and shared values play a role in AI development.

In recent global surveys, Chinese citizens ranked among the top in the world for their optimism and openness towards AI (Wang, 2026). Additionally, Chinese efforts to integrate AI into daily-use tech and businesses are one of the most comprehensive globally (Wang, 2026). Though several East Asian countries have relatively positive attitudes towards AI, this is not solely a regional phenomenon. In a recent global survey, China ranked fourth for trust and acceptance of AI among 47 nations, while Korea ranked 23rd and Japan ranked 46th (University of Melbourne, 2025). Some scholars have attributed this national difference in attitudes to traditional Chinese philosophical thought.

Historically, Taoist and Confucian philosophies have been presented as wary of technological development, with apprehension that any new development was not "in the natural order of things (Leverhulme Center, 2020)". Professor Zhang Baichun has argued against the idea that these schools of thought prohibited technological advancement across Chinese history, stating that innovation occurred throughout Chinese history, regardless of initial trepidation (Leverhulme Center, 2020). At the same summit on the interaction of AI and philosophy in China, several scholars argued that traditional thought actually provides a foundation for living with AI in a productive and positive manner.

Scholar Gai Fei discussed two facets of Daoist thought that may provide a framework for approaching AI: the idea that with any new technology one should consider the way it is used (in this case to increase economic activity, education access, etc) and the process of achieving harmony with it (Leverhulme Center, 2020). According to scholar Bing Song, three major schools of traditional Chinese thought (Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism) emphasize equality among all living beings and in relation to their environment; she asserts that this philosophy may explain generally higher social acceptance scores for AI and lower fear scores than in the West (Song, 2020). An example of these traditional values potentially in use in Chinese AI governance is the 2019 Beijing Principles, which included a desire to "optimize symbiosis" between humans and AI (Zhu, 2022). Several commentators attributed this ideal to a traditional goal of harmony among living beings (Zhu, 2022). Certain scholars have also advocated for considering AI in the future in the role of companion/friend, thus establishing relationship and obligation to it within existing frameworks (Song, 2020). Having such existing frameworks may provide a way to reconcile the existence of a new "entity" in ways that other cultures cannot (Song, 2020).

This is not to say that Chinese citizens or philosophers view AI as a sentient being; indeed there is fierce debate around whether AI can obtain "consciousness" at all. There is also little to say whether values originating from traditional schools of thought will have a tangible impact on regulation or implementation, given that AI has only had a few years to develop. It's possible that these cultural references serve only to make development and state regulation more publicly palatable.

However, the fact that the government is actively encouraging the blending of traditional arts and thought with AI makes studying this intersection worthwhile. For example, at the recent Spring Festival Gala, twelve AI-generated ancient poets recited lines to a large audience, publicly demonstrating the alignment of AI with tradition (Wang, 2026). Additionally, the director of the Beijing Institute for Artificial General Intelligence, Songchun Zhu, has argued that traditional wisdom and reflections on human emotional and moral concepts could be the key to creating the "subjective mind" that is required for artificial general intelligence. Again, while the debate around Zhu's "small data for big tasks" approach is beyond the reach of this piece, his work further affirms the idea that historical philosophy may have a role to play in the development of this new technology.

From a modern point of view, scholar Afra Wang asserts that Chinese attitudes towards AI stem from the "romanticization of technology" and a history of massive improvements in quality of life brought by new tech (Wang, 2026). With the rapid growth and modernization of many regions, citizens have experienced firsthand the proliferation of tech jobs, expansion of public transit, increased access to medical treatment, and more. These experiences may create an openness to AI, and keep the focus on potential benefits of integration. Wang also believes AI is viewed as a path to self-reliance, and protective of China's sovereignty against pressure from the

West (Wang, 2026).

Still others assert that these much-discussed "positivity" stats may simply reflect government censorship of negative opinions of AI in an effort to spur nationwide innovation and adoption (Wang, 2026). There are also concerns that surveys of Chinese citizens have focused primarily on college-educated respondents, skewing the data in the direction of positive, enthusiastic views (Ding, 2025). This is a common issue with datasets globally (that respondents are often affluent and educated), but is especially pronounced in the few studies we have about Chinese AI opinion.

Resistance to AI in China *does* exist, and mirrors some of the same concerns in the US, ranging from potential job loss to complaints about low-quality AI-generated art. Nonetheless, the fact that highly educated Chinese feel strong optimism about AI is likely to bolster the economic and political impact of AI for years to come.

In strong contrast to Chinese views on AI, Americans are primarily negative towards the emerging technology. In a recent Pew study, 50 percent of respondents said they were "more concerned than excited" and only 10 percent "more excited than concerned" about the potential effects of AI (Kennedy et al., 2o25). The remaining 38 percent say they are equally excited and concerned (Kennedy et al., 2025). Americans are concerned about the ability of AI to influence their views, interrupt social connection, and the coming upheaval to the job market. The study also reflected a common theme among the American public, which is the necessity of controlling AI rather than the idea of fully integrating it. 60 percent of those surveyed stated they wanted more control over how AI is used, and only *17 percent* were comfortable with their amount of control over AI in general (Kennedy et al., 2025). However, a large majority were comfortable with using AI for small daily tasks.

These contrasting levels of comfort may be explained by the separation Americans feel from the development process. The previously-mentioned piece from Afra characterizes AI development in the US as "cultishly bullish tech elite producing manifestos that fail to persuade the rest of the country (Wang, 2026)." While this language is fairly strong, there may be truth to the idea that the average American is uneasy because of the ivory-tower nature of AI development. Little about the way AI works or is developed is widely understood, and many profess a sense that they are being pushed to accept AI without clear use or desire for it (Gorelick, 2026). Fears about Silicon Valley's chokehold on AI development are not irrational: as evidenced by the restriction of Anthropic's Mythos to select companies, only a small group of individuals actually have access to this potentially world-changing power.

Others argue that attitudes towards artificial intelligence in the US have been shaped by media portrayals of AI as a cold, nonhuman entity with the potential to dominate and destroy (Ge et al., 2024). These portrayals emphasize the power of AI to infiltrate and influence, and the importance of "control-based" approaches to defend against it (Ge et al., 2024)

There are also cultural and historical roots to the desire for self-protection, control, and individual liberties we see in the response to AI. In a 2022 paper, Pascale Fung and Hubert Etienne argued that European documents upon which many US ideals are based, such as *A Declaration of Human and Citizen Rights,* demonstrate a long history of "negative rights over positive rights," i.e. the protection of an individual against harm from the state. These approaches often frame the state or centralized power as a potentially tyrannical force that must be checked by specific, enshrined rights.

Though many of the founders of the newly-created American state did not believe ordinary people were qualified to participate in their own governance, this view shifted with the populist movement that propelled Andrew Jackson to the presidency (Zakaris, 2022). While not by any means racially or socially inclusive, the Jacksonian presidency's emphasis on the "sovereignty of the people's will" and the assertion of individual rights fundamentally reshaped how citizens saw their role in society (American Battlefield Trust, 2024).

Some scholars attribute the creation of core American "national myths" to this time: that of self-reliant, industrious individuals, with the freedom to achieve extraordinary feats (Zakaris, 2022). Key to this individual attainment were protections against the government's "unnatural" interference with the "natural" market (Zakaris, 2022). This often had a religious basis, with the belief that market laws were a divine creation that needed no intervention (Zakaris, 2022). Though there has since been a gradual progression of federal regulation of the economy, including the Sherman Act and the creation of the SEC, this idea remains at the forefront of the American psyche. The implications of this important national myth in AI development are clear in the US federal approach to AI regulation. From regulation of data collection to the enforcement of copyright laws, the federal strategy has been largely "wait and see."

This is understandable, given AI's ever-evolving capabilities and role in society. However, for the average American citizen, who understands their safety and freedoms to be based in explicit rights and protections, it is disconcerting to navigate such massive change without them. Thus, one of the most fundamental American cultural conflicts presents itself: the desire to harness unprecedented innovation without interference, and the desire for explicit individual protections against unprecedented harm.

AI development has taken off in a moment when American institutional trust is extremely low, with only 22 percent of adults stating that they "trust the federal government to do the right thing most of the time (Deane, 2024)." As evidenced by the recent attack on Sam Altman's home, some have chosen to abandon legal routes for expressing their concerns about AI entirely (Bogel-Burroughs, et al., 2026). AI related data center construction has generated widespread bipartisan backlash, in part because people see no clear benefits even as their communities bear the financial and environmental burdens it brings (Tavernise, 2026). Without these gains, the focus remains almost entirely on the lack of explicit protections. While this

strong cultural concern goes unaddressed, American policymakers and leaders continue to face increasing fear and negativity towards AI.

Comparative analysis of this type is not intended to be prescriptive. There is no "correct" approach to AI development from a cultural lens, and the challenge we face globally is not to collapse all national approaches into the same mold. Rather, the goal is to find ways to build critical international cooperation to manage the potential risks of AI, which impact us all. Without understanding how cultural factors drive national objectives or definitions of "safety," we lose crucial time and clarity.

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