

Algorithmic Resistance as Understood via a Cross-Cultural Analysis of AI-Driven Workplace Surveillance in Eastern and Western Contexts

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Abstract

The engagement of artificial intelligence (AI) has been presented as one of relentless and uniform progress reshaping management practices and employee relations across the globe. Or so the narrative goes. This paper argues that the adoption of AI-driven management and surveillance tools is not a culturally neutral phenomenon but contains differences as understood whether in an Eastern or Western context. Through a synthesis of existing literature, this analysis examines this divide by focusing on algorithmic management and workplace surveillance. Western contexts, prioritizing individual autonomy, tend to view algorithmic surveillance with precaution, framing it as an infringement on rights. Many Eastern contexts that emphasize collective harmony and national goals would demonstrate a higher degree of acceptance of these tools as instruments for efficiency and social order. This dichotomy is examined further through an analysis of China's Corporate Social Credit System as an apotheosis of the state-driven, collectivist model. The paper then provides a comparative analysis of worker pushback, and how responses to algorithmic control are themselves culturally coded. The paper concludes that a one-size-fits-all approach to the deployment of workplace AI is untenable, and discusses a few implications for multinational corporations, global AI ethics, and the future of labor rights.

Keywords: algorithmic management, workplace surveillance, individualism vs. collectivism, corporate social credit system

1. Introduction

Artificial intelligence is no longer the stuff of speculative science-fiction but a palpable force in the contemporary workplace (Antulov-Fantulin & Kolm, 2023). Across industries, AI-driven systems are deployed to either optimize workflows or manage resources on an unprecedented scale (Chen, 2024; Wang, 2023). A notable manifestation of this is algorithm-based automated management, where programmed procedures do not only coordinate labor, assign tasks and evaluate performance absent any human intervention, but participate in imposing corporate and individual sanctions (Baiocco et al., 2022; Kellogg et al., 2020; Curchod et al., 2020). Once a phenomenon within the gig economy, these practices now extend into traditional workplaces, accelerated by remote work becoming more and more common in such settings (Baiocco et al., 2022; Craig, 2024).

This technological diffusion, however, strongly diverges in different cultural contexts. To describe these AI tools as culturally neutral artifacts, equally applicable across all societies, is not a serious or scholarly attempt at understanding their adoption as it really exists. The development and reception of AI are deeply embedded in pre-existing cultural values and political structures (Kasirzadeh & Gabriel, 2023; Miyake, 2017; Stanford HAI, 2024). Failure to account for these contexts can lead to stronger employee resistance, a perpetuation of cultural biases, and a sense of Luddite-esque "AI-phobia" that undermines the technology's potential, instead of having culturally responsive and ethical approaches to it (Eguchi et al., 2021).

How, then, should one characterize the kind of international perceptions on AI as they currently exist within the current global economic order? This paper advances the thesis that the global adoption of AI-driven workplace surveillance reveals an essential distinction between Eastern and Western cultural attitudes, that is often explained through the lens of individualism versus collectivism (Hofstede, 1984). This dichotomy manifests in divergent perceptions of privacy and control, producing distinct governance models and culturally specific forms of worker resistance (Brauner et al., 2024). The common cliché goes as such: Western societies, with their traditions of individual rights, often approach AI with precaution. Meanwhile, many Eastern societies that are influenced by collectivist values, exhibit a more noticeable techno-optimism (Jecker & Nakazawa, 2022; Pew Research Center, 2020; Ipsos, 2023).

To explore this thesis, this paper focuses on the specific and often controversial concept of algorithmic management and its associated tools of workplace surveillance, pejoratively referred to as "bossware" or "tattleware" by some (Oravec, 2023; Ajunwa, 2023). This domain has become both a fertile ground for B2B workplace surveillance products and battlegrounds for ethical queries and concerns (Flowace.ai, n.d.; West & Bowman, 2016).

Methodologically, in order to construct a coherent framework, this paper will integrate and synthesize existing literature that draws mainly from academic sources, complemented by surveys, industry reports, and governmental/regional policy documents. It is worth noting that this study relies on secondary sources and as such, its primary contribution is theoretical synthesis rather than the production of new empirical data. The East-West dichotomy in this

case is framed through the lens of individualism versus collectivism as a heuristic device. As a result, the purpose is not to offer an exhaustive cultural explanation nor an essentialist one that brushes over nuances, but to rather dispel the commonly held notion of a universal, culturally-neutral movement toward technological adaptation, and to structure a comparative analysis of the actual reality of emerging divergent approaches.

The methodology involved a synthesis of academic sources ranging from research articles, reports to books, governmental and non-governmental organization (NGO) surveys reports, industry publications from reputable institutions, as well as certain news reports of latest relevant trends and topics. The criteria for inclusion focused on sources that directly address or are useful in culturally framing the adoption of and attitude towards AI, workplace surveillance, and algorithmic management. While this approach allows for a broad synthesis of the current state of knowledge, the author acknowledges its limitations. For example, the conclusions are derived from existing data and analysis, and would be further strengthened by future research involving original empirical data, via conducting direct interviews and surveys, and collecting data from workers across different cultural contexts.

The analysis will proceed in four parts. Section 2 establishes the theoretical framework on the cultural foundations of AI perception. Section 3 applies this framework to the algorithmized workplace to provide a comparative analysis and a case study of China's Corporate Social Credit System. Section 4 examines difference modes of worker resistance along cultural lines. Finally, Section 5 synthesizes the findings and discusses their implications for multinational corporations, global AI governance, and the future of labor rights.

2. Cultural Foundations of AI Perception

The global discourse surrounding artificial intelligence is more or less fractured along cultural fault lines (Brauner et al., 2025). Anxieties and ethical priorities that shape attitudes toward AI vary significantly between Western and Eastern societies (Frimpong, 2024). This section establishes the foundational problem of these divergent worldviews, arguing they are rooted in the distinction between the oft-cited trope of individualism vs. collectivism.

And although this binary is often overused and misused with potential for oversimplifying complex social realities, for the purpose of the paper, it provides the necessary context for understanding the tensions that arise when AI is deployed in the workplace. This paper employs it not as a definitive or essentialist explanation, but as a guiding heuristic framework. As mentioned above, it seeks to challenge the prevailing notion of universal and neutral AI and technological adoption, and the framework allows us to organize and understand the well-documented bifurcations in attitudes and policies between many Eastern and Western contexts, which persist regardless of other socio-political variables.

2.1 Western Attitudes of Individualism and Privacy

In Europe and North America, the conversation around AI is one often wrapped in a precautionary approach (Jecker & Nakazawa, 2022; Sapp et al., 2021). Public and regulatory concerns center on AI's potential to erode individual privacy or how it can introduce mass surveillance, on top of the existing concerns around the misuse of personal data (Carnegie

Endowment for International Peace, 2024).

At its core, this attitude is rooted in individualism, a cultural orientation that prioritizes personal autonomy and self-interest (Hofstede, 1984; Oyserman et al., 2002; Triandis, 1995). Within this framework, the "self" is an independent agent whose goal is to exert control over the environment (Stanford HAI, 2024). This worldview leads to a higher demand for control over technology and a lower tolerance for intrusive systems (Jecker & Nakazawa, 2022; Stanford HAI, 2024). As a result, there is a cultural preference for "internalist" explanations of behavior, which attribute actions to an agent's internal beliefs and desires (Carman & Peters, 2024).

This cultural orientation is reflected in the various forms of governance. Western nations, particularly those in the EU, have pioneered "rights-driven" models like the GDPR and the AI Act (European Parliament, 2024; Swain & Malik, 2023). These frameworks explicitly seek to protect the fundamental rights of the individual by placing strict limits on how AI systems can be deployed (Ajunwa, 2023). This approach demonstrates a willingness in Europe to slow innovation as a necessary trade-off for safeguarding liberties (Access Partnership, 2023; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024).

2.2 The Techno-Optimism of the East

In contrast, the prevailing attitude toward AI in many Eastern societies is one of techno-optimism (AI Index Steering Committee, 2024; Jecker & Nakazawa, 2022). Public perception is significantly more positive, with majorities in countries like China, Indonesia, Thailand, India, etc. viewing AI's development as more beneficial than harmful (Pew Research Center, 2020; Ipsos, 2023). By and large, Asian countries do not view AI as a threat to individual rights but as a catalyst for economic growth, development, and a very crucial tool for achieving national interests (Sapp et al., 2021).

This perspective is grounded in collectivist values, emphasizing group cohesion and the primacy of the common good (Hofstede, 1984; Oyserman et al., 2002; Triandis, 1995). For countries operating within this model, the boundaries between the self and the social environment are more permeable (Nguyen & Trinh, 2025). Technology is thus assessed on its ability on how well it can enhance group collaboration, which by extension serves the greater good (Oyserman et al., 2002). Philosophical traditions like Confucianism, with emphasis on duty, respect for authority and hierarchy, contribute to a greater cultural acceptance of intervention by higher authorities (Nguyen & Trinh, 2025; Mantello et al., 2021). This context leads to less public anxiety regarding individual privacy.

This worldview translates into "state-driven" and "collaborative" governance models. The most prominent example is China, where AI is leveraged to augment national strength, with individual privacy concerns often subordinated to state objectives (Access Partnership, 2023; Canadian Security Intelligence Service, 2020). Japan offers a different but still collectivist approach of collaborative governance to promote human-centric AI that aligns with societal goals (Access Partnership, 2023; Jecker & Nakazawa, 2022).

The seeming discord between these worldviews has several significant implications. For

instance, "Explainable AI" (XAI) contains a hidden cultural bias. Current XAI development, predominantly Western-led, produces "internalist" explanations that anthropomorphize AI (e.g., "The classifier *thinks* you have flu") (Carman & Peters, 2024). This is often associated with the individualistic preference for understanding agency through internal states. However, this may be perceived as less trustworthy in collectivist cultures that prefer "externalist" explanations based on objective rules (e.g., "Based on...diagnostic inclusion criteria, the classifier produces the output that you have 'flu'") (Carman & Peters, 2024). A system deemed "transparent" in the West could be seen as deceptive in the East, creating a barrier to "global" AI ethics.

3. How Cultural Values Drive the Algorithms of the Workplace

When abstract principles of so-called individualism and collectivism meet the realities of the modern workplace, the application of AI-driven management tools also diverges. The algorithmic workplace has become an experiment where these values manifest, which have led to different approaches to control and privacy, as well as the traditional employer-employee relationship.

3.1 Algorithmic Management and "Bossware"

Algorithmic management can be defined as a socio-technical system that utilizes computer-programmed procedures to coordinate labor (Baiocco et al., 2022; Kellogg et al., 2020). This encompasses a series of functions from automated task assignment, real-time monitoring, to data-driven performance evaluation and automated feedback (Keegan & Meijerink, 2023). The tools enabling this, known derisively as "bossware" or "tattleware," range from time-tracking software to invasive systems that can perform keystroke logging, capture screenshots, to the use of webcam analysis to infer an employee's emotional state (Oravec, 2023; Heim 2024; BioEnable, n.d.).

From a managerial perspective, the rationale is framed in terms of efficiency: enhancing productivity, ensuring compliance, better data security, and risk mitigation (Al-Rjoub et al., 2008; Vij & Gil-Garcia, 2012). However, the contextual implementation of these tools is where cultural interpretations take hold.

3.2 Western Perceptions of Automated Management as "Panopticon"

By placing "individual dignity" at the heart of Western attitudes, one can reveal some of the peculiarities of the West's relationship with algorithmic surveillance (Moore, 2020). The constant and automated monitoring of employee activity is often seen as an affront to privacy and personal autonomy. Research shows that excessive monitoring is correlated with a breakdown of trust, with over half of workers believing it reduces trust (Accenture, 2019). This practice undermines the sense of personal control valued in individualistic cultures, leading to feelings of dehumanization (Baiocco et al., 2022; Oyserman et al., 2002).

Central to the Western critique of these tools, is the perception of privacy as a fundamental right that must be regulated, and not something to be exchanged for employment (Bryan, 2025). The collection of vast employee data is viewed as a profound intrusion (Zuboff, 2019).

This concern is enshrined in legal frameworks like the EU's General Data Protection Regulation, or GDPR. The psychological toll of this "automated panopticon" is also significant (Mannan & MNor, 2024). Studies link pervasive workplace surveillance to increased stress and burnout, particularly for women and minority groups (AFGE, 2024; Ajunwa, Crawford, & Schultz, 2017). The feeling of being perpetually watched can stifle creativity and inhibit independent thought (Accenture, 2019).

3.3 A Tool for Order and Performance in the East

The reception of algorithmic management in many Eastern societies presents a different picture. Empirical studies reveal that employees in East Asia are far more likely to express a trusting attitude toward AI-enabled surveillance. One study found that while 75% of European and North American respondents were worried about being managed by AI, a majority of Japanese (64%) and South Korean (56%) respondents professed a trusting attitude (Mantello et al., 2021). This is consistent with collectivist values that prioritize group performance and social harmony. Within this framework, surveillance may be perceived as a neutral mechanism to ensure fair contribution to collective goals (Oyserman et al., 2002; Mantello et al., 2021).

This approach finds its most comprehensive expression in China's Corporate Social Credit System (CSCS). The CSCS is considered a sweeping, state-driven initiative of algorithmic governance (MERICS, 2021; U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2020). The system aggregates compliance data from dozens of government agencies into a "Corporate Social Credit File" for each company (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2020). Companies with poor records are placed on public "blacklists" (U.S. Congress, 2019; U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2020).

The consequences are severe. A blacklisted company could face unified punishment, including restrictions on market access, ineligibility for government contracts, and occasional public shaming (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2020). Perhaps most notably, the system extends culpability to individuals. Key personnel can be held personally liable for their company's infractions (MERICS, 2021). A company's blacklisting can result in personal sanctions for its leadership, such as travel bans and restrictions on luxury consumption (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2020; Pebl, 2023). This creates a powerful incentive for self-policing, self-correcting behaviors that abide by national and state-mandated objectives (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2020). The CSCS thus appears as the apotheosis of a collectivist, state-driven model of algorithmic control.

The introduction of these tools does not merely reflect pre-existing cultural differences, but acts as an amplifier. The technology's core functions are interpreted in opposing ways, which drive workplace norms further apart from one region to another. In a Western context, the technology is perceived as managerial overreach, prompting a pushback for greater rights. In the Eastern context, the same capabilities are embraced as essential infrastructure for social order. Multinational corporations are thus caught in the middle of contradictory demands (Hunt & McKelvey, 2019).

4. A Comparative Analysis of Worker Resistance and Adaptation

Despite these differences in cultural perception of algorithmic, automated tools, employees are not passive recipients of technological change. In both Western and Eastern contexts, algorithmic management has been met with a range of responses. However, the forms this resistance takes are not universal, as they are equally shaped by the cultural values and socio-political realities of their communities. An examination of these strategies reveals that worker agency is itself culturally coded.

4.1 *Forms of Pushback in the West*

In the West, resistance to algorithmic surveillance frequently leverages formal channels steeped in an individualistic culture valuing rights and due process. The discourse is framed in terms of human rights and the legal right to privacy (White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, 2022; Bryan, 2025).

A primary mode of resistance involves public advocacy for stronger legal protections. Initiatives like the White House's "Blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights" and the EU's AI Act are macro-level attempts to codify limits on employer surveillance (White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, 2022; European Parliament, 2024). Organized labor also plays a crucial role in negotiating technology deployment, by pushing for agreements that restrict invasive monitoring while demanding transparency (Ajunwa, 2023). And at the individual level, workers engage in subtle resistance. "Cyberslacking", or using work devices for personal use, is often rationalized not as deviance, but as a necessary act of recuperation to reclaim personal time in a hyper-monitored environment (Oravec, 2023; Miltsov, 2021). Younger workers, in particular, see these small acts as a way to maintain well-being amidst rigid managerial control (Miltsov, 2021). In short, the overarching objective of the Western form of resistance against algorithms is often the re-establishment of an autonomous boundary, to reclaim a private sphere away from the employer's gaze.

4.2 *The Digital "Weapons of the Weak"*

In Eastern contexts, particularly in states like China where formal channels for dissent are restricted, worker resistance takes on more covert and adaptive forms (Huang, 2025). Despite a lack of formal opposition to state-mandated and corporate enforced use of digital technology in China, there exists a significant level of public anxiety, especially in the gig and service industry, where workers must learn to operate within the system's logic (Xiao et al., 2024). This resistance is often characterized by what James C. Scott (1985) termed the "weapons of the weak."

For example, "gaming the system" is a prevalent form of resistance by picking up on the intricacies of algorithmic systems to manipulate them. Ethnographic research on food-delivery drivers in China reveals a sophisticated co-evolution of resistance tactics and platform counter-measures (Huang, 2025). Drivers develop strategies to "dodge," "leverage," or "subvert" the algorithm (Cameron & Rahman, 2021; Huang, 2025).

Or, in the face of opaque algorithms, workers rely on informal peer networks to develop and

share "folk theories" about how the systems work (Zhao, 2025; Xiao et al., 2025). This collective sensemaking is a vital survival tool, allowing workers to collaboratively decode the "black box" of algorithmic management (Möhlmann et al., 2022). In China's live-streaming sector, intermediary agencies known as Multi-Channel Networks (MCNs) have even established the circulation of these folk theories (Zhao, 2025; Xiao et al., 2025). The goal of this resistance is typically not a grand challenge to the system's legitimacy but a form of inwardly-focused struggle for reclaiming agency in a collectively-enforced system (Lee et al., 2015).

The nature of these resistance strategies is a direct reflection of the cultural and political systems in which they arise. In the West, the legal infrastructure is built upon individual rights and adversarial contestation. It is logical that resistance manifests through formal mechanisms designed to change the rules (Roscigno & Hodson, 2004). However, the Chinese framework which prioritizes collective stability nullifies outward, formal resistance as a high-risk, little-return endeavor (Chen & Sun, 2023). Thus, algorithmic resistance must be informal, loose and operate within the system's logic. The goal is not to rewrite the rules, but to learn how to play the game better (Zhao, 2025). This reveals a common, deeper connecting reality: strategies for worker empowerment effective in one context may be counterproductive in another.

5. Conclusion

The integration of AI into the workplace is not a uniform process but a complex, culturally contingent phenomenon. This analysis has demonstrated that the adoption of AI-driven surveillance exposes a profound separation between Eastern and Western contexts, by employing the heuristic lens of individualism versus collectivism to structure an argument that challenges universalist assumptions and provides explanatory power for these divergent trajectories manifesting in reality: the precautionary, rights-focused apprehension in the West and the techno-optimistic, state-driven embrace in parts of the East. The algorithmic workplace has become a crucible where these worldviews shape everything from technology acceptance to worker resistance.

The findings carry some noteworthy implications for three aspects: multinational corporations, global AI governance, and the future of labor rights.

First, for multinational corporations, the analysis underscores the futility of a "one-size-fits-all" approach (Zöll et al., 2024). Deploying standardized monitoring software across diverse regions is a strategy destined for failure. A system perceived as a pragmatic tool in a collectivist context could trigger a severe backlash in an individualistic one. True global competence requires culturally adaptive strategies that move beyond simple translation to a nuanced understanding of local values.

Second, for the architects of global AI governance, this analysis challenges the viability of universalist AI ethics. Although the current landscape of AI ethics is heavily skewed toward Western precautionary values, the case of XAI demonstrated that principles like fairness and transparency are not culturally neutral and what constitutes a "transparent" explanation can

differ based on cultural preferences (Carman & Peters, 2024). For global frameworks to be effective, they must become more pluralistic, acknowledging that different societies will prioritize different values.

Finally, this analysis speaks to the future of work and labor rights. The deployment of algorithmic management has created a new battleground for worker rights. In the West, the struggle is to defend long-standing principles of privacy and autonomy. In the East, the challenge is to carve out islands of agency within sophisticated, collectively-enforced systems of social and corporate control. The diverging paths suggest the future of work may not be a single paradigm but a series of distinct, culturally-inflected models (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2020).

To navigate this future, further research is imperative. It must be re-emphasized that as a synthesis of secondary literature, this paper provides a macro-level framework intended to guide future inquiry; its conclusions would be more persuasive if supported by the kind of firsthand evidence that can only be gathered through more fine-grained, methodical and comparative empirical studies, in order to move beyond broad and simplistic East-West dichotomies, such as how different industries and political-economic systems influence or mediate these cultural tendencies. Answering these questions is essential for developing policies that can harness the efficiencies of AI while nurturing a more equitable and culturally intelligent future of work (Susskind & Susskind, 2017).

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