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BRILL

ASIASCAPE: DIGITAL ASIA 12 (2025) 7–22

ASIASCAPE: Digital Asia
brill.com/dias

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Received 12 June 2025 | Accepted 12 June 2025 |
Published online 18 September 2025

Abstract

This introduction to the *Asiascape: Digital Asia* special issue on AI imaginaries in Asia discusses how people imagine the role of technology in their societies. It reviews how scholarship has made sense of such 'social imaginaries' and their relevance before proposing that research move beyond dominant epistemologies and socio-technical imaginaries to examine Asia as a site for technological innovation and alternative futures. It asks how actors from the region – so often cast in American and European fantasies about technology as the exotic 'Other' – envision their own AI futures. The article offers an overview of the ten contributions to this special issue and concludes with an appeal for policy makers and practitioners to engage with local narratives, affective expectations, and value systems that are rooted in specific language and cultural contexts so that they can better engage with users, particularly those who need help the most.

Keywords

artificial intelligence – Asia – socio-technical imaginaries – technology

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> Imagination is not to be divorced from the facts: it is a way of illuminating the facts. It works by eliciting the general principles which apply to the facts, as they exist, and then by an intellectual survey of alternative possibilities which are consistent with those principles. It enables men [sic] to construct an intellectual vision of a new world.
>
> ALFRED NORTH WHITEHEAD (1967: 93)

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> There is a profound kinship between art on the one hand, and philosophy and science on the other. Not only does one see the creative imagination at work in all of them, but also, art and philosophy and science are attempts to give form to chaos – to the chaos underlying the cosmos, the world, the chaos that is below those successive layers of appearances.
>
> CORNELIUS CASTORIADIS (1996/2007: 80)

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1 Introduction

New Asia is a war zone. Above the pan-Asian nation hovers the gigantic US space station NOMAD, peppering the tropical river deltas with missile strikes as it seeks to obliterate anyone harboring artificial intelligences. Meanwhile, a coalition of robots and humans fights a bitter ground battle against American suicide drones and mega-tanks, to protect a little android girl that can bring an end to this bloody war between the technophobic West and the AI-friendly East …

Such is the conceit of the 2023 blockbuster film *The Creator*, directed by British filmmaker Gareth Edwards of *StarWars: Rogue One* (2016) and *Godzilla* (2014) fame. Edwards's science fiction (SF) epic flips the trope of killer artificial intelligence (AI) familiar from dystopian franchises such as *The Terminator* series to offer a commentary on contemporary issues that range from technology, religion, and the nature of humanity to imperialism, geopolitics, and military power. Projected onto serene Southeast Asian landscapes and bustling cyberpunk cityscapes, the film imagines the potential consequences of a future

in which humans and intelligent machines must learn to coexist. As such, it continues a long-standing tradition in SF literature, film, and videogames of connecting speculation about AI with techno-Orientalist visions of the future (Goto-Jones 2015; Roh et al. 2015). Films such as *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995) both reflected and shaped American techno-visions about Japan in the 1980s and 1990s, and later productions such as *Her* (2013) extended these visions to futuristic Shanghai vistas, much as *The Creator* then extended them to Southeast Asia.

These fantasies are by no means frivolous or trivial. They reflect the hopes and anxieties, assumptions and prejudices, of the seemingly dominant position of 'the West'[1] regarding technology. Technology and the human imagination are intimately linked, and this is certainly evident from the hyperbole surrounding the newest technology: AI. The ideological and discursive underpinnings of advanced communication technologies such as AI in Silicon Valley's SF fantasies and utopian counter-culture are well documented (see Turner 2008). Tech entrepreneurs including Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, and Mark Zuckerberg have declared their love of SF luminaries such as Isaac Azimov, William Gibson, and Neal Stephenson, often treating their works as blueprints, rather than as the cautionary tales that they are.

Discourses about AI and technology represent and reinforce Silicon Valley's dominance in constructing technological paradigms and imaginaries. Modernist metaphysics tend to privilege control, efficiency, and linear progress, often framed in dualistic terms, such as nature versus culture or object versus thought. This worldview is often universalized through global development innovation discourses. However, according to Hui (2020: 2), societies all have their own cosmotechnics, understood as the 'unification between the cosmic order and the moral order through technical activities'. From this perspective, worldviews and imaginaries are not universal but, rather, situated forms of knowledge.

Technology and the human imagination are not singular; instead, they need to be recognized as plural phenomena. As Hui (2016) argues, modern technology, and by extension AI, does not have a singular future or pathway but, rather,

1 The 'West' remains a contested geopolitical concept, as both the source and the object of substantial imagination. Here, we mainly mean the US and, to some extent, Western Europe, at least as far as they are the source of recognizable ideas, institutions, socio-economic practices, and technological innovations associated with the values of the Enlightenment and its Greco-Roman precursors. These ideas, institutions, practices, and innovations have spread to much of the world through a combination of trade, proselytization, and violence, most notably through various imperialist and (neo)colonialist processes. For a discussion of the concept of 'the West', see Lewis (2010).

is characterized by diverse techno-cultures. He argues that there is 'no one single technology', nor is any technology enabled and constrained by its own cosmological context (Hui 2017: 2). To look beyond universalist paradigms is to reject the homogenizing techno-social imaginary about our past and future that has been projected globally as both dominant and inevitable. We need to pay more attention to the ways in which diverse cultures and societies envision and engage with AI.

The SF movies produced by Hollywood filmmakers often depict high-tech, militarized futures defined by conflict between humans and machines. These films and their narratives serve as powerful instruments of soft power to promote knowledge production rooted in Enlightenment rationalism. However, rational knowledge is not absolute: it consists of a process of ongoing critical interpretation and contestation within 'fields' – relational arenas in which social power is produced and contested across different domains. Bourdieu's field theory emphasizes the interplay between structure and agency in each domain, and each is governed by its own rules, power structures, social inequality, and forms of capital (Albright et al. 2018). 'Fields' are multiple and overlapping social realities. This echoes Hui's thesis on plural cosmotechnics. Both challenge monolithic thinking and advocate epistemic multiplicity.

The emphasis on situated and relational modes of power and knowledge production and circulation creates a theoretical basis for our exploration of AI imaginaries. These imaginaries are part of the process of ongoing interpretation across fields of cultural production and in dialogue with heterogeneous accounts of people's lived experience. AI imaginaries are multiple and situated in the 'politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims' – to borrow the words of Donna Haraway (1988: 589) and her feminist approach to science and technology.

Informed by these multidisciplinary theoretical perspectives, this special issue affirms multiple ways of knowing, imagining, and being. We go beyond the dominant epistemologies and techno-social imaginaries to examine Asia as a site of technological innovation and alternative futures. Countries such as Japan, South Korea, China, India, and Singapore are at the forefront of AI and technological advancements. Other countries in the region are also developing their own visions of and frameworks for AI futures. How do actors from the region – so often cast in American and European fantasies about technology as the exotic 'Other' – envision their own AI futures? This question is at the heart of the articles in this special issue.

But, first, we offer a conceptual clarification: what do we mean by the 'social imaginaries' of technology?

2 Social Imaginaries

How do human collectives envision their societies? How do they conceptualize their worlds, and what institutions and technologies do they conjure up to shape those worlds and move them in specific directions? These questions are at the heart of the scholarship that explores *socio-technical imaginaries*. The word 'imaginaries' refers to the things that societies imagine collectively. Whereas individuals have an *imagination*, groups have *imaginaries*. When these imaginaries involve social processes and institutions, we call them *social* imaginaries. As Charles Taylor (2002: 106) put it, these social imaginaries, describe 'the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations'.

The idea of social imaginaries connects in complicated ways with the philosophical and empirical concerns across critical scholarship in fields as diverse as cultural studies, media and communication studies, science and technology studies (STS), anthropology, and political studies. Within this diverse body of work, the 'imaginary' sometimes overlaps with concepts such as discourse, ideology, utopia, and simulation. The distinctions between these terms can be so fluid as to create slippage among the various ontological, epistemological, and ethical concerns that connect to broader research on how the human imagination and our socialities hang together. This is unfortunate, considering the length to which major voices in the discussion on social imaginaries have gone to determine its implications.

For instance, Paul Ricoeur tried to come to grips with the way in which collectively held beliefs either entrench existing power structures or challenge them, which led him to distinguish between *ideological* and *utopian* imaginaries. In Ricoeur's view, ideological imaginaries are static snapshots of how to make sense of our world, and thus they entrench the status quo. By contrast, utopian imaginaries are dynamic and creative in a way that unsettles existing power structures. As Ricoeur (1986: 309–310) wrote, 'All ideology repeats what exists by justifying it, and so it gives a picture – a distorted picture – of what is. Utopia, on the other hand, has the fictional power of redescribing life'.

Ricoeur saw the potential for social change in utopian redescriptions of life, an idea also reflected in Fredric Jameson's (2007) influential work on 'utopian enclaves' – that is, spaces that creative and playful actors, ranging from political philosophers to SF authors, from artists to designers, carve out for themselves to imagine alternative ways of being. These enclaves then 'offer a

space in which new wish images of the social can be elaborated and experimented on' (ibid.: 16).

These arguments about imagination and imaginaries indicate the empirical materials in which we might find their traces. For Taylor (2002: 106), social imaginaries are 'carried in images, stories, and legends'. They are visible in cultural expression and products or, more broadly speaking, in discourse, and hence in the communicative practices through which societies create, shape, and reinforce the objects in their world and, by extension, themselves (see Foucault 1978). So, it should not come as a surprise that studies on social imaginaries frequently draw on the toolbox of discourse analysis and from analytical approaches in disciplines such as media and communication studies, more broadly, to map out what societies imagine. Many of the contributions to this special issue also take this path.

This is not to say that discourse and social imaginaries are the same. Granted, discourse theorists and scholars of social imaginaries are both interested in how human collectives aggregate their thoughts about the world into frameworks that develop their own logic and then form the institutions that govern society. However, imaginaries operate differently from discourse. The Greco-French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis, quoted at the beginning of this introduction, clarified this in what is arguably one of the most ambitious explorations of the relationship between social imaginaries and our socio-political reality. To Castoriadis (1996/2007), social imaginaries are systems of thought that do not (or no longer) have any connection to a priori 'reality'. They might appear to be coherent, even 'rational', especially when they are part of rationalist modernities, as is the case with modern philosophy and science. However, imaginaries are not 'rational' in that sense. They attempt to ensure the verisimilitude of their ideas, but the ideas often have no equivalent in observable reality, and their relationship is assumed, rather than proven. This is not to say that these ideas are misguided or even useless; they provide the creative foundation for the way in which we create knowledge. But to Castoriadis (ibid.: 79), it was important to stress that they do not describe the world as it is:

> The idea *idea*, for example, is not the outcome of any empirical induction or logical deduction; rather, it is a prerequisite for both of these. The same is true of ideas such as *potentiality* and *actuality, cogito, monad*, or *transcendental*. They are all great inventions, thanks to which light is shed on a set of facts pertaining to being, the world, nature, human thought, and its relationship to the other, and so forth. But the same is true in science.

> The great scientific advances are outgrowths of the creation of new imaginary schemes, formed under the constraint of available experience but not 'following from' that experience.

Whereas discourse theories tend to present a complex model on how communication references objects (and subjects) in the world, and in the process coconstitutes these things and people with a coherent rationale, Castoriadis stressed that imaginaries do not have such rationales. They are mythologies that can be neither proven nor disproven and that can be marred by having extensive contradictions. But they develop a great deal of power that can sustain or transform social institutions.

In a sense, Castoriadis's ideas about imaginaries have much in common with Baudrillard's (1983) simulacrum – that is, with the idea that societies end up producing self-referential systems of hyper-mediated meanings that become so divorced from reality that they end up *substituting* for it. Castoriadis's imaginaries, like Beaudrillard's simulations, are elaborate fictions that defy rational argument or empirical testing.

Intriguingly, and in contrast to Beaudrillard's pessimistic view of simulation, Castoriadis believed that this freewheeling ability of societies to devise elaborate ontologies had the potential to spark revolutionary change. Castoriadis remained an ardent post-Marxist revolutionary and anarchist throughout his life, and his political project was to defend human autonomy. So, he saw the act of creating social imaginaries as a potentially creative act that could bring social change. One of his main examples was the way in which ancient Athenians grounded their understanding of society in a cosmology of chaos and how this, in turn, enabled them to create the institutions of direct democracy – a radically creative innovation at the time.

To Castoriadis, the great risk of his own time (about which he seems almost prophetic) was that the oppressive imaginaries of neoliberal capitalism would crowd out human autonomy and would cause true creativity to atrophy, whether in the arts and culture, philosophy and politics, or science. Only regurgitations and collages of existing ideas would remain, infinitely reproduced and referenced, commodified and fetishized, but never leading to anything more than vapid commercialized goods in service of conformity and the status quo.

As Adams and her colleagues (2009: 22) put it, to Castoriadis, 'Modernity is a dual institution comprising the central social imaginary significations of autonomy and the infinite pursuit of (pseudo) rational mastery'. Castoriadis's prescient critique of modernity overlaps with the concerns of other

luminaries of post-structural thought, including Ricoeur and Baudrillard as well as Althusser, Gramsci, Debord, and Latour. So, it is only to be expected that the contributions to this special issue reflect similarly broad intellectual influences and commitments.

3 Myths and Fantasies of Artificial Intelligence

The 'rational mastery' that modern imaginaries conceive is particularly evident in imaginaries about the role of technology in society or what has become known as socio-technical imaginaries. Jasanoff (2015: 4) defines this specific type of imaginary as 'collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology'. Scholars in STS have been particularly interested in this kind of collective imagination, and they have tried to explain how different communities imagine the role of AI in their societies. Socio-technical imaginaries of AI entail a futuristic construction and exercise of power – mainly discursive power – in public, in which mass media (Scott Hansen 2022) and popular SF culture (Cave & Dihai 2019; Hudson et al. 2021) play particularly important roles in shaping public discussions. National governments are crucial actors in this construction of socio-technical imaginaries, and their AI strategies demonstrate the underlying assumptions that inform their policies, often with radically different implications (Bareis & Katzenbach 2022). Other actors and institutions – from key industry players to designers, from academia to creatives, and from consumers to community organizations – also express their hopes and fears about AI (Bory 2019; Campolo & Crawford 2020; Natale & Ballatore 2017), based on their different cultural and historical understanding of technology in society.

As Campolo and Crawford (2020) have shown, what emerges from these interactions is often a 'solutionist' paradigm in which AI is expected to solve the world's problems. Well before the advent of generative AI, Castoriadis was deeply sceptical of this perspective, which he associated with the near-global success of neoliberalism. He believed that truly innovative science had been largely replaced by 'technoscience', an application-driven commercial project with a runaway momentum that propped up existing structures of ownership and power. He was worried about 'the loss of meaning, the repetition of empty forms, conformism, apathy, irresponsibility, and cynicism, along with the growing takeover of the capitalist imaginary of unlimited expansion of "rational mastery" – pseudo-rational pseudo-mastery – of the unlimited expansion of

consumption for consumption's sake, which is to say for nothing, and of technoscience racing ahead on its own, and obviously a party to domination by that capitalist imaginary' (Castoriadis 1996/2007: 86). It is telling that 'innovations' related to so-called AI fall so often into patterns of applied science and that they unapologetically eschew any interest in the inner workings or conceptual implications of black-box neural networks, instead embracing mythical imaginations of magical, enchanted machines (Campolo & Crawford 2020).

The consequences of this can appear bleak. Yet scholarship and philosophy on the power of the imagination overall remain optimistic that a path towards human autonomy is still attainable, even though charting one can be challenging (see e.g. Castoriadis 1996/2007: 86). Do creative and playful takes on AI from outside the Silicon Valley epicentre of AI creation offer such a path? Answering this question requires us to take seriously the cultural and philosophical touchstones that shape how societies far from California – for instance, in Asia – conceptualize AI. What perceptions of risk and merit shape the tech discourses about AI there, and what are the psychological, social, cultural, political, and economic impacts of these imaginings?

Asia is home to the largest share of the world's population and over 60% of the world's youth. That makes it an exciting battleground for testing dystopian and utopian AI narratives that are popular in North American and Western European countries, particularly among young people who have grown up with smart devices, algorithms, drones, and other AI-powered technologies. Thanks to its rich and diverse cultures and histories, Asia offers an opportunity for examining cultural and linguistic diversity in AI imaginaries.

4 Overview of the Special Issue

In compiling this special issue, we asked researchers with multi- and interdisciplinary backgrounds to explore how actors and communities in Asia imagine AI. What do these imaginaries reveal, and what do they obscure? What realms of possibility do they open up or foreclose, and what might the implications be for the future of AI? The contributors to this special issue took up this call and examined how different publics, specialist groups, and policymaking actors across Asia imagine AI and to what effect.

The special issue comprises ten articles, covering East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Technological development in research, applications, and popular culture has been higher in East Asian countries, and so we begin in Japan. Then, we explore cases in South Korea and China. Next, we go to South Asia, focusing on India. Finally, we examine the interregional cultural flow through comparative analysis across East and Southeast Asia.

Our exploration starts with three analyses of Japanese AI imaginaries: Keiko Nishimura's historical analysis of the changing imaginations of AI and robots in Japan, Victor Marquet-Saget's study of Japanese AI imaginaries in animation (anime), and Diletta Fabiani's examination of the Japanese government's narrative on AI from 2021 to 2024. Keiko Nishimura situates the AI representations in the works of Tezuka Osamu within the broader context of Japanese techno-social history from 1920 to 2020. The study examines the production process and background of AI-generated art, referencing the TEZUKA2023 project, which involved AI in the creation of a manga in Tezuka's style. Nishimura discusses the legal and ethical questions surrounding the creation of posthumous art enabled by AI. She notes that a characteristic of Japanese AI in the mid-2010s was 'imitation of the greats', focused on the production of art in the style of well-known artists. By comparing the Japanese discourse on AI and robotics with Euro-American perspectives, Nishimura contributes to cultural studies of technology by viewing Tezuka's depictions of robots and AI as part of the historical development of AI and robotics research in Japan.

Victor Marquet-Saget compares the representation of AI in different eras by analyzing five animated films: two classics, *Astroboy* (1980) and *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), and three modern works, *Vivy: Fluorite Eye's Song* (2021), *Gene of AI* (2023), and *Pluto* (2023). He finds that AI imaginaries in anime often balance a Frankenstein complex with more friendly AI characters, using them to explore fundamental questions, such as humanity, emotion, and the potential of AI. The article also considers the chronological evolution of AI representations, noting a shift from early mechanical imagery to progressively more human-like and completely humanoid depictions in recent works. Marquet-Saget argues that anime is a particularly relevant resource for studying socio-technological imaginaries, because of the variety of genres with AI stories and its role as a digital medium that can represent digital entities such as AI.

Diletta Fabiani looks at AI policy in politics. Her contribution examines the Japanese government's narrative about AI from 2021 to 2024, drawing on official documents and Diet discussions under Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. Fabiani's analysis confirms that the government frequently uses a narrative about AI as an inevitable, disruptive technology subject to international competition, which is consistent with previous research. However, she also identifies unique Japanese narratives, which emphasize the Japan's openness to AI, a desire to lead in the creation of international regulations, and a preference for light regulation that supports adoption, rather than hindering progress. AI is also presented as a potential solution to the problems of an ageing and shrinking population that Japan faces. Although promoting AI adoption is central, awareness of its associated risks, particularly concerning

copyright and disinformation, has increased over time. Fabiani concludes that the government, rather than the population, is the major force that is promoting AI.

The fourth contribution is by Seunghan Paek, who investigates AI images in contemporary Korea, centring on the Dongdaemun Design Plaza (DDP) in Seoul. Paek's phenomenological approach to AI aesthetics distinguishes his work from existing scholarship and enables him to explore what he calls AI-DDP assemblages. Paek concludes this study with an overarching perspective on the implications of AI imaginaries in contemporary Korea.

Next, we present three analyses on China: Yi Yang's research on AI imaginaries by Chinese internet entrepreneurs and workers, Christina Kefala's critique of gender presentations in Chinese AI industry, and Jiaxi Hou's review of Chinese national and local government policies about the metaverse.

Yi Yang investigates the AI imaginaries produced by both Chinese internet entrepreneurs and workers, viewing the recent boom in generative AI (genAI) in the context of the downturn in China's internet industry. By analyzing entrepreneurs' public remarks, interviews with tech workers', and their online discussions, Yang introduces three conceptual tools to explain these intersecting and competing visions: AI manifestos, strategies, and satire. AI mission statements, often articulated by dominant entrepreneurs, present AI as the foundation of a new, technology-centric era. In contrast, AI strategies developed by workers reflect their labour-oriented concerns and practices, sometimes offering alternative imaginaries. AI satire employs humour to contest the authority of large tech companies in shaping social imaginaries. The study emphasizes that technological visions of AI are continually reworked, debated, and contested through interactions among these groups in China's internet industry.

Christina Kefala's article examines representations of gender in China's AI industry, focusing on the influence of AI imaginaries on these representations. The article highlights that digital entities and humanoid robots that are prevalent on social media often reinforce cultural ideals and traditional gender norms by being hyper-feminized. These AI constructs reflect social expectations of femininity while simultaneously initiating discussions about gender and technology. The portrayal of these entities raises significant ethical questions about the objectification and commodification of the female form in the digital realm. By blurring the distinction between humans and machines, these AI constructs challenge existing gender dynamics and necessitate a re-evaluation of the role of gender in a rapidly digitizing society. The study posits that these AI entities are not merely technological tools but also crucial in the ongoing negotiation between social identity and gender relations.

Jiaxi Hou systematically reviews national and local government policies on the metaverse in China from 2021 to 2024, with particular attention to the position of AI in them. Hou's article reveals significant ambiguity, inconsistency, and complexity in China's digital policymaking, especially in light of China's inherent localism. Hou highlights that the dynamic relationships between the central government and local authorities contribute to the variety of AI imaginaries in China. She argues that the Chinese state views the metaverse not only as an engine for economic growth but also as a strategic opportunity to enhance China's global leadership, in which AI is envisioned as a key component. The study emphasizes that the Chinese government, at various levels, acts simultaneously as a designer, implementor, and regulator, playing a pivotal role in shaping AI imaginaries. As Hou convincingly argues, this localism shows the crucial, yet often overlooked, role of subnational stakeholders in shaping global socio-technical imaginaries.

Next, we look beyond East Asia to other parts of the region and examine transnational dimensions of AI imaginaries. Akshaya Kumar focuses on India, where AI has become an important part of governance, for instance, in the form of advanced healthtech. Kumar looks at how financial aspects, such as private equity and venture capital, influence this emerging landscape of tech solutions. A significant portion of Kumar's analysis focuses on the political economy of AI in India, including a discussion about financialization. Kumar draws our attention to the concept of 'intelligence', making connections between a digital ID and the concept of the Kino-eye, thereby broadening our understanding of AI imaginaries.

The penultimate article, by Gerui Wang, explores the issue of AI imaginaries in East Asian societies. Wang explores AI imaginaries through the lens of visual culture, specifically new media art in East Asia. Her article examines how artists in the region integrate technologies such as 3D modelling, computer vision, and motion capture into their practices and how their work critically interrogates the impact of digital technologies. Wang explores key questions, such as how these technologies shape human perceptions of the body and of human experience, whether automation leads to the liberation or exploitation of workers, and the potential environmental consequences of adopting AI. Through an analysis of Chinese artworks and comparison with Japanese and Korean examples, the article highlights themes such as whether cyborgs make humans obsolete and the alienation of humans from their bodies and their lived experience because of techniques such as computer vision. Hence, the article offers a critical perspective on AI's paradoxical promise and peril in rapidly digitizing East Asian societies.

The final article, by Gerard Goggin and Kuansong Victor Zhuang, returns to the pan-Asian theme by focusing on the underexplored topic of disability in AI imaginaries in digital Asiascapes. Goggin and Zhuang make two central arguments: first, that disability is a crucial element of AI imaginaries in Asia, influencing and influenced by Asian disability identities and representations; second, that the power dynamics concerning disability impact the ability of various actors to form and contest imaginaries, which might play out differently in Asian contexts. They introduce critical approaches to disability and AI imaginaries and discuss their characteristics in Asian contexts, particularly in initiatives that employ AI for the benefit of society. To this end, they include intriguing vignettes from AI-related urban initiatives in Tokyo, Seoul, and Singapore to illustrate the kinds of socio-technical imaginaries of disability that are embedded in these initiatives. Goggin and Zhuang believe that disability should become a core focus in studies on AI imaginaries and diversity in Asia.

5 Conclusion

Together, these ten different studies illustrate that the idea of social imaginaries can help us better understand why societies have radically different realities, a phenomenon that has always been observable but has taken off in the wake of radical connectivity and the politics of 'post-truth'. Asian imaginaries of AI are informed by Asian cultural-intellectual-philosophical traditions as well as evolving power-knowledge dynamics. Rooted in Confucianism, communitarianism, Buddhist ethics, and techno-animism, Asian perspectives value relational ethics, moral governance, and social harmony. AI is seen as embedded in interconnected systems – spanning nature and machine – and hence resulting in a less binary distinction between human and machine intelligence, as exemplified by Japanese cases. Moreover, Asian approaches to technology tend to be hybrid and pragmatic, blending indigenous values with regional and global ethical frameworks. In the process, we must critical examine what power-relations become entrenched, as well as what new possibilities are introduced, as artists and designers imagine new realities for AI.

Together, the articles in this special issue also lay out a tentative path for research on AI imaginaries, which promise to complicate the seemingly self-evident, runaway developments of AI. The stakes could not be higher: as various actors imagine AI and its role in culture, science, politics, and economy, the question of what possibilities are emerging may well define our future societies.

Understanding the socio-technical imaginaries of AI in Asia is not merely an academic exercise; it has direct policy implications for how important actors – national governments, industry, research, and community members – regulate, localize, and legitimize or resist AI in their own diverse societies. For industry and transnational organizations, this research reveals the importance of engaging with local narratives, affective expectations, and value systems that are rooted in specific languages and cultural histories and contexts in order to better engage with users, particularly those who need the most help. Designing AI systems that are linguistically and culturally intelligible and sensitive is key for ensuring their long-term sustainability in the region and beyond.

For public policy makers, these discussions can offer critical insights into public perceptions, collective desires, and specific needs in designing AI policies for current and future governments. Attuning policy to these imaginaries can anticipate social frictions, better manage diverse forces for collective benefits, ensure effective civic engagement, foster inclusive governance, and align national AI strategies with the needs and lived realities of diverse populations.

Our contributions on AI imaginaries in Asia offer valuable guidance for researchers, policy makers, tech developers and entrepreneurs, philanthropists, and community activists worldwide as they envision, design, and implement tech for development or tech for good initiatives. We hope our modest efforts in this special issue will inspire broader and more impactful waves of inquiry and action.

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