



Vaccine passports, WHO and globalization of China's standards

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April 2021

Abstract

The Covid-19 crisis has provided China with a unique opportunity to export its domestic health standards via the World Health Organization (WHO) to the rest of the world. Beijing's ambition to shape global technology standards, manifested in its China Standards 2035 strategy, is yielding results in areas such as vaccine passports and digital health, social credit system and Internet of Things, 5G and cybersecurity, which are slowly being internationalized through multilateral organizations. These standards are beginning to challenge U.S. and European industrial competitiveness, as well as raise privacy concerns over data security and government surveillance that may erode western democratic governance over time.

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Analysis

The Covid-19 crisis has provided China with a unique opportunity to export its domestic health standards via the World Health Organization (WHO) to the rest of the world.

On March 8, China launched its domestic vaccine passport, which shows a Chinese citizen's vaccination status and virus test results via a program on Chinese social media platform WeChat.¹ The following day on March 9, China urged the WHO to allow Beijing to build and run a global database for "vaccine passports", prompting fears over privacy and expansion of government surveillance.²

The WeChat program and other Chinese smartphone apps include an encrypted QR code that allows authorities to obtain a traveler's health information. The apps track a user's location and produces a color code of green, yellow or red to indicate the likelihood of their having the virus, and whether or not the person can walk around freely.³ These "QR health codes" are already required to gain entry to domestic transport and many public spaces in China.

However, according to a *New York Times* article, using software to dictate quarantines and send personal data to police may set a dangerous precedent for automated social control, and further erodes the thin line separating China's tech titans from the Chinese Communist Party.⁴

Nonetheless, China's state media *Global Times* made a case for Beijing's control over a global "vaccine passport" system, citing its experience with a health code system, ability to build an international platform within one week, in time for the Tokyo Olympic Games scheduled between July 23 and August 8.⁵ China also has experience of an impressive domestic surveillance system, to boot, with over 626 million CCTV cameras for its 1.4 billion population.⁶

Presently the problem with China's health code system is lack of interoperability with other countries, and as such Beijing needs the WHO to internationalize Chinese standards. According to the *Global Times* article, Chinese public health authorities have already been studying the issue, and are concerned "whether different countries would accept the mutual recognition [of health code] remains a major issue considering that the anti-epidemic prevention measures are different with no unified evaluation and standards."

¹ "China launches 'virus 'passport'", *Al Jazeera*, March 9, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/9/china-launches-worlds-first-virus-passport>; "Coronavirus digest: China issues vaccine passport", *Deutsche Welle*, March 9, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-digest-china-issues-vaccine-passport/a-56812262>

² Leng Shumei, [Chen Qingqing](#) and [Liu Caiyu](#), "China to support WHO on setting up vaccination mutual recognition platform", *Global Times*, March 9, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202103/1217876.shtml>; "China urges W.H.O. to Let it Run Global 'Vaccine Passport' System", *Breitbart*, March 10, 2021, <https://www.breitbart.com/asia/2021/03/10/china-urges-who-let-it-run-global-vaccine-passport-system/>

³ Paul Mozur, Raymond Zhong and Aaron Krolik, "In Coronavirus Fight, China Gives Citizens a Color Code, With Red Flags", *The New York Times*, January 28, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/01/business/china-coronavirus-surveillance.html>

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/01/business/china-coronavirus-surveillance.html>

⁵ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202103/1217876.shtml>

⁶ Grady McGregor, "China surveillance system—the world's largest—is growing—and so is the backlash", *Fortune*, November 3, 2020, <https://fortune.com/2020/11/03/china-surveillance-system-backlash-worlds-largest/>; Lauren Dudley, "China's Ubiquitous Facial Recognition Tech Sparks Privacy Backlash", *The Diplomat*, March 7, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/chinas-ubiquitous-facial-recognition-tech-sparks-privacy-backlash/>



To remedy this issue, China has launched “China Standards 2035”, a longstanding strategy to internationalize Chinese standards.⁷

China Standards 2035 – Beijing as new hegemon for global standards

Traditionally, western technology companies have set global standards—which define how technologies and industries work and their interoperability (e.g., two or more systems working together) around the world. For example, U.S. and European companies such as Qualcomm and Ericsson have been setting standards across various industries, but now China wants to set the standards for emerging industries such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), drones, Internet of Things, smart health and retirement, information technology equipment and interconnection, among others, and give Chinese companies a competitive edge over European and American companies.⁸

This ambition is not new, but was clearly stated when China acceded to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 and concurrently launched its National Standardization Strategy. Now, it is furthering this ambition via China Standards 2035.⁹

In the China standards 2035 report, Chinese authorities expressed goals to “seize the opportunity” that Covid-19 created by proliferating China’s authoritarian information system.¹⁰ It aims to co-opt the global industry by capturing the industrial Internet of Things, define the next generation of information technology and biotechnology infrastructure, and export China’s social credit system.¹¹

As Beijing sees it, the Covid-19 pandemic creates a window for a radical global transformation, where new technologies and technical standards are still being formed. According to Dai Hong, Director of the Second Department of Industrial Standards of China’s National Standardization Management Committee in 2018, “This grants China’s industry and standards the opportunity to surpass the worlds.”¹²

Despite this, setting up an international platform may take some time, so meanwhile China is relying on bilateral cooperation. To that end, both U.S. and China are currently seeking bilateral cooperation in health issues, and the Biden administration is already working with Big Tech to adopt China’s health code system and a domestic vaccine passport, possibly using QR codes like China or something simpler such as a green check mark for

⁷ Emily de la Bruyere, Nathan Picarcic, “China’s next plan to dominate international tech standards”, *Tech Crunch*, April 11, 2020, <https://techcrunch.com/2020/04/11/chinas-next-plan-to-dominate-international-tech-standards/>

⁸ Arjun Kharpal, “Power is ‘up for grabs’: Behind China’s plan to shape the future of next generation tech”, *CNBC*, April 27, 2020, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/money/markets/power-is-up-for-grabs-behind-china-s-plan-to-shape-the-future-of-next-generation-tech/ar-BB13eOCz>; <https://techcrunch.com/2020/04/11/chinas-next-plan-to-dominate-international-tech-standards/>; Rebecca Arcesati, “Chinese tech standards put the screws on European companies”, *MERICs*, January 29, 2019, <https://merics.org/en/analysis/chinese-tech-standards-put-screws-european-companies>

⁹ <https://techcrunch.com/2020/04/11/chinas-next-plan-to-dominate-international-tech-standards/>; Andrew Polk, “Quietly, China is starting to set global standards”, *BNN Bloomberg*, May 6, 2018, <https://www.bnnbloomberg.ca/quietly-china-is-starting-to-set-global-standards-andrew-polk-1.1072270>; Alexander Chipman Koty, “What is the China Standards 2035 Plan and How will it Impact Emerging Industries?”, *China Briefing*, July 2, 2020, <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/what-is-china-standards-2035-plan-how-will-it-impact-emerging-technologies-what-is-link-made-in-china-2025-goals/>

¹⁰ “Horizon Advisory China Standards Series—Standardization Work in 2020”, April 8, 2020,

https://issuu.com/horizonadvisory/docs/horizon_advisory_china_standards_series_-_standard

¹¹ Charlie Campbell, “How China is using “Social Credit Scores” to Reward and Punish Its Citizens”, *Time*, 2019, <https://time.com/collection/davos-2019/5502592/china-social-credit-score/>

¹² <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/technology/chinas-next-plan-to-dominate-international-tech-standards/ar-BB12wAs5>



vaccination status.¹³

Other countries are following suit. Israel for one wants to be the first country to sign an agreement on mutual recognition of vaccines with China, according to Israeli Ambassador to China Irit Ben-Abba.¹⁴ Israel had also launched a “green pass” vaccine passport to grant its citizens the right to visit public venues such as movie theaters and stadiums, and reached agreements with Greece and Cyprus to allow “green card” holders to travel freely without being quarantined. As more countries sign bilateral deals based on the China model, China’s vaccine passport and health system standard can eventually be internationalized.

Nonetheless, while other countries begin to mandate China’s vaccine passport model as a criterion to re-open their economies, there remain concerns about individual privacy and data security.

Data access, surveillance and personal privacy

Back in September 2020, China had launched an initiative to set global data-security rules, which supports its current bid to run the global vaccine passport system via the WHO.¹⁵ However, some tech experts have expressed concern with China’s standard setting ambitions. According to Horizon Advisory’s Nathan Picarsic, “China’s standards play overlaps with and intends to expand its strategy of asymmetrical access to data.” The more technology and technical standards are defined by Beijing, the more associated data will be subject to the Chinese government’s access policies, such as Beijing’s intelligence law that obligates all companies such as Zoom and others with nexus in China to share data with Chinese authorities upon request.¹⁶

There are also concerns about mass surveillance and violation of personal privacy. For example, a *New York Times*’s analysis found that in China, when a user grants the health software access to personal data, a piece of the program labeled “reportInfoAndLocationToPolice” sends the person’s location, city name and an identifying code number to a server.¹⁷ In the U.S., this is equivalent to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) using apps from Amazon and Facebook to track coronavirus and sharing user information with the local sheriff’s office. Additionally, the *Times*’s analysis also found scanning a person’s code sends the user’s current location to the systems servers and allows authorities to track people’s movement over time, and risks potential abuse of this information to persecute political dissidents. Moreover, this also exposes the delicate trade-off between public safety and personal liberty, and different preferences of this trade-off between authoritarian

¹³ Guo Lili, Sangeet Sangroula, “Medical and health experts urge China-U.S. cooperation on global covid-19 vaccine efforts”, *Tsinghua University*, March 1, 2021, <https://news.tsinghua.edu.cn/en/info/1002/10743.htm>; Thomas Colson, “The Biden Administration is Developing a Vaccine-Passport Program”, *Business Insider*, March 29, 2021,

<https://www.businessinsider.com/the-biden-administration-is-developing-a-vaccine-passport-program-2021-3?op=1>; David Ingram, “The next vaccine challenge: Building a workable ‘passport’ app”, *NBC News*, March 31, 2021,

<https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/covid-passports-are-coming-not-easy-build-rcna554>

¹⁴ “Israel in talks with China to allow quarantine-free travel for vaccinated”, *The Jerusalem Post*, March 14, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/health-science/israel-in-talks-with-china-to-allow-quarantine-free-travel-for-vaccinated-661909>;

Zhao Juecheng, “Mutual vaccine understanding agreement with China top on agenda of Israeli ambassador”, *Global Times*, March 9, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202103/1217826.shtml>

¹⁵ Chun Han Wong, “China Launches Initiative to Set Global Data-Security Rules”, *Wall Street Journal*, September 8, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-to-launch-initiative-to-set-global-data-security-rules-11599502974>

¹⁶ Arjun Kharpal, “Power is up for grabs” Behind China’s plan to shape the future of next generation tech”, *CNBC*, April 26, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/27/china-standards-2035-explained.html>; Anushka Saraswat, “Understanding the National Intelligence Law of China: Why India Banned Tik Tok?”, *The Diplomatist*, September 5, 2020,

<https://diplomatist.com/2020/09/05/understanding-the-national-intelligence-law-of-china-why-india-banned-tik-tok/>;

Nicole Hong, “Zoom Executive Accused of Disrupting Calls at China’s Behest”, *The New York Times*, February 26, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/18/technology/zoom-tiananmen-square.html>

¹⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/01/business/china-coronavirus-surveillance.html>



governments and liberal democracies.

At this juncture, it is still too early to tell whether the West or China will win the standards war, as some countries are already rushing to adopt the China model while others are still debating over the merits of internationalizing Chinese standards. But as Beijing continues to ascend in power, wealth and military might while the U.S. grapples with domestic instability and political division, it may not be long before the Middle Kingdom replaces America as the new hegemonic power, and along with that privilege, as the new standard-bearer for the rest of the world.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author. This article first appeared in *The Times of Israel* on April 4, 2021.