

China's Tech Moguls Warn of AI's Troubling Trajectory

Never mind the singularity; artificial intelligence could eliminate countless jobs, and perhaps reshape global politics in the process.

by **Will Knight**

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I recently spent a few weeks in the country, talking to researchers and entrepreneurs developing cutting-edge AI technologies and products.

What stuck with me—beyond the growing ambition of China’s researchers and the overall vibrancy of its tech scene—is how much people are starting to talk about the potential for AI to eliminate jobs across the country. Just a few years ago this seemed like much less of a concern. Now the issue of jobs comes up regularly during Q&A sessions and panel discussions at industry conferences.

This is perhaps partly a reflection of the country’s economic slowdown after years of spectacular rise. But I think it also reflects a growing realization among some of the world’s smartest entrepreneurs and innovators that the economic and social impact of AI is likely to be profound.

The sentiment can certainly be detected among some of China’s most prominent and influential technologists.

Speaking at an event organized in Detroit by his company last week, the CEO of Alibaba (50 Smartest Companies 2017), Jack Ma, said that artificial intelligence could displace many workers in both China and the U.S., thereby heightening tensions that some fear could lead the two countries toward armed conflict. This prospect is the subject of several new books, although they do not consider a coming technological shift that could further complicate the picture.

In a compelling op-ed piece in the *New York Times* this week, Kai-Fu Lee, a renowned technical expert, entrepreneur, and educator and the chairman of an AI lab run by his VC firm Sinovation Ventures, argues that AI will cause widespread job displacement in coming years.

He, too, raises the prospect that this could reshape global relations by exacerbating international inequalities. China and the U.S. may see job losses as well, but because they are so dominant in the field, they are likely to emerge as the primary beneficiaries of this technological revolution. This could turn them into global AI-fueled superpowers, generating massive amounts of wealth by hoovering up billions of users’ data and providing software-based services that touch every aspect of our lives. Other countries, meanwhile, could be left to rethink their position in the world order.

The economic and social implications of automation and artificial intelligence are, of course, notoriously hard to predict. But this in and of itself may be a cause for concern, as public perception regarding jobs and economic prospects in both the U.S. and China will be incredibly important in coming years.

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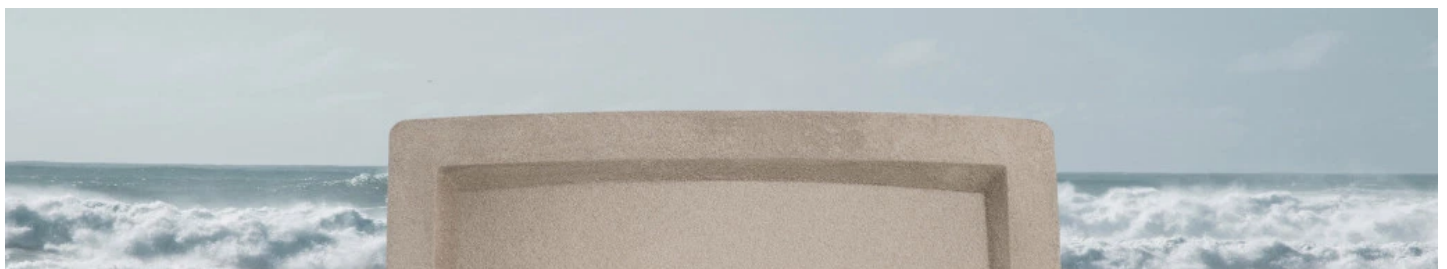
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