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REGIONAL DIFFERENCES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHINA'S DIGITAL ECONOMY

Abstract. *This article analyzes the regional differences in the development of China's digital economy from the aspects of digital infrastructure construction, industrial structure, policy support and talent reserves, and explores the causes and optimization paths behind it, in order to provide a reference for promoting regional coordinated development.*

Keywords: *digital economy, regional differences, infrastructure, policy support, talent pool.*

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РЕГИОНАЛЬНЫЕ РАЗЛИЧИЯ В РАЗВИТИИ ЦИФРОВОЙ ЭКОНОМИКИ КИТАЯ

Аннотация. *В данной статье анализируются региональные различия в развитии цифровой экономики Китая с точки зрения строительства цифровой инфраструктуры, структуры промышленности,*

государственной поддержки и кадрового потенциала. Также исследуются причины этих различий и пути их оптимизации с целью предоставления рекомендаций для содействия скоординированному региональному развитию.

Ключевые слова: *цифровая экономика, региональные различия, инфраструктура, государственная поддержка, кадровый потенциал.*

Digital economy refers to a new form of economic activity that is driven by the integration and application of information and communication technologies and innovation, with data resources as the core element and modern information networks as the important carrier. It covers e-commerce, artificial intelligence, big data, cloud computing, the IoT (Internet of Things) and many other fields [3]. According to the "China Digital Economy Development Report" (2024), the scale of China's digital economy surpassed 53.9 trillion yuan (about 7 619 billion US dollars) in 2023, accounting for 42.8 % of GDP [1, p. 2–3; 5]. However, due to China's vast territory and significant differences in economic foundations, resource endowments, and policy support across regions, the development of the digital economy has been uneven. The eastern coastal regions have experienced rapid growth in their digital economies, while the central, western, and northeastern regions have lagged behind. This regional difference not only affects the overall pace of digital transformation nationwide but also poses challenges to achieving the goal of coordinated regional development.

Eastern Region of China: represented by Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen, it has formed high-level digital industry clusters with outstanding technological innovation capabilities; Central and Western Regions: digital infrastructure construction is relatively lagging, industrial chains are incomplete, and the digital economy's driving effect on traditional industries is limited; Northeastern Region: constrained by the significant pressure of traditional industrial structure adjustments, the progress of digital transformation has been slow. Judging from the distribution of China's top 100 digital economy cities, Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Hangzhou, Guangzhou and other cities are at the top of the list, with significant advantages across the country; Shangqiu (Henan) and Ji'an (Jiangxi) are newly included in the top 100 digital economy cities, and the development path of the digital economy in the central region is gradually becoming clear; Chengdu-Chongqing area is still an important gathering area for the digital economy in the west; Gansu, Shanxi, Guangxi, Heilongjiang and other provinces each have only one city on the list, and they need to continue to make efforts (Figure 1).

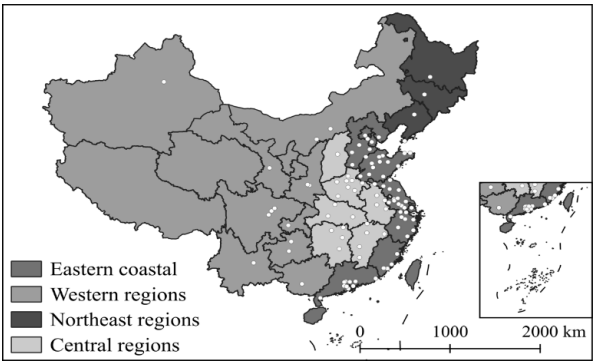

Figure 1 – Regional distribution of China's top 100 digital economy cities in 2023

Source: designed in graphic form by the author based on [2; 4, p. 14].

The characteristics of regional differences in China's digital economy are mainly manifested in the following aspects:

– digital infrastructure development. Digital infrastructure is a crucial prerequisite for the development of the digital economy. The eastern regions, leveraging their strong financial resources and policy support, have taken the lead in completing infrastructure projects such as 5G networks and data centers. For instance, cities like Beijing and Shanghai have achieved full 5G network coverage, while some remote areas in the central and western regions still face inadequate network coverage. Additionally, the density of data centers and computing power resources in the eastern regions is significantly higher than in the central and western regions;

– industrial structure and agglomeration effects. The eastern coastal regions have formed advanced digital industry clusters centered around e-commerce, internet finance, and artificial intelligence. For example, Hangzhou, known as the "E-commerce Capital", is home to world-class companies like Alibaba. In contrast, the central and western regions, with a higher proportion of traditional industries, are undergoing digital transformation at a slower pace and lack leading enterprises with international competitiveness;

– policy support. The level of government emphasis on digital economic development and the degree of policy support vary across regions. For example, cities like Beijing and Shenzhen have introduced a series of specialized policies to encourage technological innovation and industrial development, along with establishing numerous technology parks and incubators. However, some areas in the central and western regions face limited financial resources, resulting in insufficient support for emerging industries;

– imbalance in talent distribution. The development of the digital economy relies heavily on high-quality talent. However, China's high-end tech talent is primarily concentrated in developed eastern regions, such as Zhongguancun in Beijing and Zhangjiang High-Tech Park in Shanghai. Meanwhile, the central, western, and northeastern regions are grappling with a "brain drain" problem. This imbalance in talent distribution further exacerbates the development gap between regions.

The author believes that China's regional differences in the digital economy stem from four key factors. First, historical and geographical advantages position eastern coastal areas as reform and innovation hubs, while remote central, western, and northeastern regions struggle to attract capital and technology. Second, stronger economic foundations and higher consumer demand in cities like Shanghai and Guangzhou drive digital adoption, unlike rural areas with limited market potential. Third, eastern regions benefit from favorable policies such as free trade zones and innovation pilots, whereas central and western regions receive less support. Finally, top-tier universities and research institutions concentrated in cities like Beijing ensure a steady talent supply, while education imbalances hinder innovation in less developed regions.

The author proposes five suggestions to optimize regional differences in China's digital economy development: strengthen infrastructure in less-developed areas with financial support and incentives; promote digital transformation of traditional industries using advanced technologies; enhance policy support through targeted funds and regional collaboration; optimize talent development via scholarships and university-enterprise partnerships; and leverage regional synergies by fostering coordinated development models. Collaborative efforts from the government, enterprises, and society are essential to achieve balanced digital economic growth and common prosperity.

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