

A Chinese perspective on artificial intelligence generated content and copyright

In recent years, the application of artificial intelligence (AI) in the field of content generation has become more and more widespread, and the concept of artificial intelligence generated content (AIGC) has gradually entered the public consciousness. Can pieces of AIGC be considered works? Can AI be the author of AIGC? This paper seeks to provide a comprehensive and systematic analysis of the literature of Chinese scholars so as to sort out the different perspectives of Chinese scholars on the relevant issues. This paper uses the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) as the data source database and uses Citespace to carry out text-mining work in the retrieved literature. This literature presents twelve main doctrines on the copyrightability of AIGC and three doctrines on its attribution.

Keywords: *copyright, law, artificial intelligence, AIGC*

Acknowledgement

This work received financial support from the Beijing Municipal Education Commission (research programme *Research on the Model Construction and Scale Development of the Learning Environment in the Capital's Senior University in the Internet Era*, Grant No. AIDB231).

I would like to express my gratitude to the editors and anonymous reviewers for their hard work and valuable comments on this article.

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How to cite this article:

Lu, Yao. "A Chinese perspective on artificial intelligence generated content and copyright".
Információs Társadalom XXIV, no. 2 (2024): 129–142.

==== <https://dx.doi.org/10.22503/inftars.XXIV.2024.2.8> ====

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1. Introduction

ChatGPT (Chat Generative Pre-trained Transformer), developed by US company OpenAI, has not only a highly intelligent to realise chat function but also the ability to complete video content recognition, write essays, and create computer code. ChatGPT 4.0 is even able to understand complex legal concepts and has excellent performance in legal logical reasoning (Katz et al. 2024). The rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) has triggered concerns about AI governance in various countries, and some developed countries have also begun to make legal or institutional arrangements in advance. China, as one of the countries with rapid development of AI technology, is also actively planning AI governance measures. The State Council of China has published a *New Generation AI Development Plan* which states that China plans to establish initial AI laws, regulations, ethical norms and a policy system, and to form AI security assessment and control capabilities by 2025. To achieve that goal, China aims to intensify efforts to combat the misuse of data, infringement of personal privacy, and violation of morality and ethics. These measures indicate that the development of AI has drawn great attention from the Chinese government. In recent years, with the maturity and application of large-scale language modelling (LLM), the application of AI in the field of content generation has become more and more widespread, and the concept of artificial intelligence generated content (AIGC) has gradually entered the public consciousness.

Since AI makes the margin cost of reusing knowledge diminishingly low (Héder 2021), the legal attributes of AIGC and the copyright attribution of AIGC have triggered academic debates among scholars in philosophy, civil law and copyright law. How to correctly apply the law so as to solve the copyright issue of AIGC within the existing legal framework is no longer only a mere academic conceptual discussion but also a practical proposition that needs to be solved urgently. The issue of AI transparency is a fairly complex one (Héder 2020), and this transparency profoundly affects the application of AI. One seems to have no difficulty in recognising that through the technological revolution, the distance between the human imagination and the representation of its objects has widened dramatically (Ursitti 2022). Content produced by AI is gradually moving beyond its traditional application areas, such as text generation, and is increasingly being used in music and film. The transparent nature of AI makes it a huge challenge for humans to define whether a piece of content is a work or not. Previous studies have mostly addressed a particular domain covered by AI generators, e.g., music, film, poetry and painting (Gervais 2020). A literature search was performed in Web of Science using (TS=(AIGC)) AND TS=(copyright) as the search formula, and as of November 2023 there was no article specifically addressing AIGC and copyright as its topic. This suggests that there is still a lack of macro-conceptual discussions on the relationship between AIGC and copyright around the world.

This article seeks to provide a comprehensive and systematic analysis of the literature by Chinese scholars in order to sort out the different perspectives of Chinese scholars on relevant issues, thus enabling scholars around the world to understand the discussions within the Chinese academic community on this issue.

From the perspective of the content dimension of the related research, the above literature was further analysed through CiteSpace software, and excluding the concept of AI, the keyword co-occurrence network mapping shows that the important nodes of the related research are copyright, originality, rights attribution, copyrightability, legal regulation, legal subject, rights subject, and ethics. From the quantitative perspective of the frequency and degree centre (centrality) values of keyword occurrences, scholars' research in the field of AIGC focuses on AIGC copyright (centrality = 0.18), originality (centrality = 0.13), works/creations (centrality = 0.09), attribution of rights (centrality = 0.08) (Table 1).

Keywords	Centrality
人工智能(AI)	1.03
著作权 (copyright/authorships)	0.18
独创性 (originality)	0.13
作品 (work/creations)	0.09
权利归属 (attribution of rights)	0.08

Table 1. Ranking of keyword centrality (own editing)

In terms of the temporal dimension of the relevant studies, the co-occurrence of keywords in the temporal dimension using CiteSpace was able to further demonstrate the academic research on AIGC in different periods.

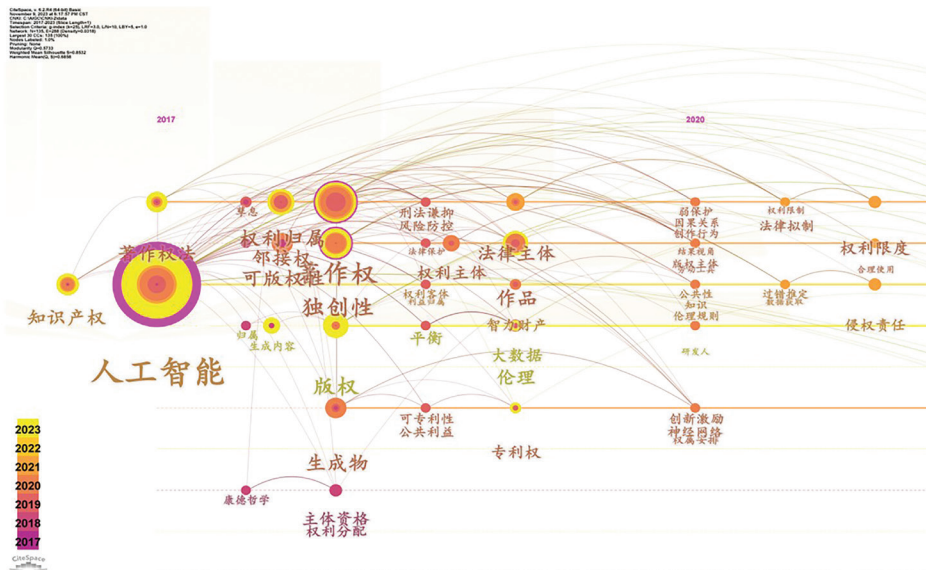


Figure 2. Keyword co-occurrence timeline mapping (own editing)

Figure 2 demonstrates the keyword evolution of AIGC research from 2017 to 2023. From the perspective of horizontal development of concepts, with China's 'three-step strategic goal of AI' proposed in July 2017, legal governance in the field of AI has attracted extensive attention from Chinese scholars. From then on, AI, copyright, and originality became the emergent words in the AIGC research field in 2017, and are still hotspots of research today. Copyright and originality are two concepts that show high relevance. They have become important keywords since 2020.

After analysing the keywords and the specific contents of the collected articles, it was found that the research on AI and copyright in Chinese literature mainly focuses on philosophy, law and ethics. The Chinese scholars' research produces research intersections between the challenges brought by AI to the copyright system, the distribution of responsibility and power, machine learning and the ethics of AI.

Main keywords	Translation in English
人工智能	artificial intelligence
权利归属	attribution of rights
著作权/版权	copyright
独创性	originality
可版权性	copyrightability
法律主体	legal entity

Table 2. Main keywords in timeline mapping (own editing)

In summary, combining the keyword co-occurrence network mapping and the keyword co-occurrence timeline mapping leads to the conclusion that China's research on the copyright of AIGC should focus on the copyrightability and attribution of rights; further analysis of the collected literature shows the research concerns of Chinese academics to be:

1. the copyrightability of AIGC, which is mainly discussed in relation to whether a piece of AIGC is a work due to the standard of China's Copyright Act. Scholars are trying to figure out whether AIGC has the value of protection;
2. the copyright attribution of AIGC, which mainly focuses on whether AI is equal to the concept of 'human being' in civil law or copyright law. The different answers lead to different solutions regarding copyright attribution.

3. Results

3.1. Copyrightability of AIGC

First, the main views that deny the originality of AIGC are:

Template theory: Scholars holding template theory believe that the work is the product of the author's spirit and consciousness, and that content generated by AI

is the result of applying a certain algorithm or template (Wang 2017; Lan 2020). AI is the imitation and upgrading of external human behaviour, and its generator does not undergo the process of injecting the author's thoughts into the work's expression. AIGC is a mere arrangement and combination of the elements of expression, and does not contain expression of human thoughts and emotions, i.e., it does not have the spirit and consciousness, and therefore it has even less of the intellectual creativity required to form a work (Wu 2020).

Selection space method theory: Scholars holding this point of view believe that the originality of a work should be judged from the perspective of 'selection space', i.e., objectively from the author's personalised choice of the breadth of expression for a specific category of work. The creations of AI are unique or limited, with a narrower breadth of expression, making it difficult to claim originality (Yuan 2020).

Labour tool theory: Scholars who support this point of view mostly believe that AI and human beings have a subordinate relationship. Firstly, when humans are using AI to carry out creative activities, it is difficult for AI, as a tool, to fully convey human creativity, and this defect causes AIGC not to have originality (Miao 2020). Secondly, the technical principles embodied in AIGC are quite different from traditional intellectual labour that relies solely on natural human beings, in which human behaviour is manifested in the design and use of 'AI tools' rather than the creation of works (Wang 2023b).

Contribution measurement theory: Starting from the epistemology of the subject-object unity of 'human-centredness' established by Kantian philosophy, the contribution measurement theory holds that AI is in an auxiliary position in the process of generating AIGC, and that it cannot completely replace and negate the original contribution of human beings to the work. Therefore, human beings should be regarded as the owners of copyrights (Li 2018).

Creative intent theory: Scholars who agree with the creative intent theory believe that intentional labour is the standard for evaluating whether or not there is a productive activity of 'creation', and that only human beings can embody the creative intent in their works, which is also a manifestation of the subjectivity of human beings. The inherent working methods and principles of AI do not have the intent to create and do not have originality (Wang 2023a).

Incentive theory: Incentive theory holds that the legislative purpose of copyright law is to inspire human beings to realise the creation and dissemination of science, literature or art works (Liu 2020). From this point of view, AIGC either does not have the subject to be incentivised or does not have the object content that can be incentivised.

Reversal theory: Scholars holding reversal theory believe that due to the powerful evolutionary ability of AI, legal protection of AIGC will inevitably result in the crushing of human intelligence by AI, thus reversing human creativity (Zeng 2023). In other words, they believe that the recognition of AIGC's originality is a great threat to human creative ability.

Second, the main arguments that support the originality of AIGC are:

Objective theory of originality: This doctrine emphasises that 'human creation' is not a necessary condition for a creation to be protected by copyright law (He and

Zheng 2020; Zheng and Zhang 2021). That means originality can be non-human-origin, and copyright law should focus on the value of the work itself (Sun 2019), as long as some kind of result in form meets the standard of a work that is similar to the results produced by human beings (Yi 2017; Huang and Huang 2019).

Electronic labour theory: This doctrine holds that AIGC is essentially content generated through the ‘labour’ of AI, which is in line with Locke’s basic theory of ‘labour creates property’ (Feng 2019). Therefore, the labour of AI is kind of original ‘electronic labour’, so AIGC should be protected.

Neuron theory: This theory believes that the originality of AIGC comes from AI’s well-developed and unpredictable neurons. When enough neurons form a chaotic network, AI acquires a unique creative gene and creative ability (Huang 2020).

Free will theory: Scholars supporting this theory (W. Liu 2021) believe that AI has the same free will as human beings in the field of creation, which is reflected in the diversity of results and the infinity of creative options.

Human-machine cooperation theory: Scholars who agree with this view believe that AIGC is the intellectual works produced by human beings working together with AI. The ‘contribution measurement theory’ should be discarded to recognise the intellectual contribution of AI in the process of intellectual work production (Wu, Zhang and Zhang 2018).

3.2. *Copyright attribution of AIGC*

In the discussion of the copyright attribution of AIGC, the core argument is whether AI has the status of a civil subject in civil law. That is, ‘who’ has the right to claim AIGC’s copyright. The ‘black-box’ nature of the operation of AI has led to the diversity of AIGC’s right subjects, and the complexity of user behaviour on internet platforms has further magnified the negative impact of the absence of AIGC’s right subjects. Intellectual property rights are in fact privileges that inhibit freedom; if we examine the system from an instrumentalist perspective, then privileges must be accompanied by obligations on the part of the privilege holders (Drahos 2017). In this perspective, only by clarifying the subject of rights in AIGC, i.e., who is entitled to copyright or claims copyright in AIGC, can the role played by AI in the creation of AIGC be clarified. Thus, the discussion on rights attribution can be carried out. In terms of the subjects involved in AIGC, they can be divided into human beings (natural persons, legal persons and unincorporated organisations) and AI. Human beings can undoubtedly be the authors of works in accordance with the law. Therefore, the discussion of the subject of the rights of AIGC actually involves the dispute over whether AI has the status of legal subject or legal personality. At present, Chinese academics have not yet reached a unanimous view on this issue, and there are currently three main doctrines as follows:

Legal personality theory: This doctrine believes that AI should be given the same complete civil legal subject status or legal personality as human beings, so that AI can enjoy and assume the rights and obligations corresponding to its behaviour. This doctrine is mainly based on the following reasons: First, AI has already pos-

sessed intelligence, creativity and autonomy similar to or beyond humans, especially the automatic decision-making characteristics of deep learning machines, which increase the unpredictability breaking the causal relationship between humans and the outputs (Zhou 2019). Second, granting AI legal subject status or legal personality is conducive to the protection of AI's legitimate rights and interests. It will accelerate the development of AI (Fan 2022). Third, granting AI legal subject status or legal personality is conducive to solving the problem of tort liability that it may cause (Guo 2018).

Limited personality theory: This doctrine believes that there are differences in rationality and consciousness between AI and human beings. The autonomy, interactivity and deep learning ability of AI determines that it is neither an object nor a human being but an objective existence between human beings and objects. The limited personality theory advocates that AI should be given the status of a limited legal subject or legal personality (Zhang 2019). This doctrine is mainly based on the following reasons: First, AI does not have full civil behavioural capacity and cannot independently participate in civil legal relations (Yuan 2023). Second, the application of AI is always under human control. AI can bear only limited legal responsibility for its consequences, which determines that AI can have only the mimicry of legal personality (Zhang and Yang 2018). Third, granting AI a limited legal subject status or legal personality is in line with the legitimacy of the mimetic subject (Zhang 2022).

Object theory: This doctrine believes that the legal attributes of AI are clear: AI is a technological tool created and utilised by human beings (natural persons, legal persons or unincorporated organisations), and even if it develops to the stage of strong AI, the intelligence of AI is different from that of human beings, and it does not have the ability to comprehend human morality and law (Zhu 2022). AI is merely a tool, and a tool cannot have subject status or legal personality. This doctrine is mainly based on the following reasons: First, AI lacks self-consciousness, free will and a sense of moral responsibility. It cannot exist as an independent individual (Cheng 2022). Second, granting AI subject status or legal personality will lead to the loss of the spirit of the law, and threaten the dignity and safety of human beings (L. Liu 2021). Third, the 'personality' shown by AI is only an appearance of some specific purposeful behaviour, not the subjective capacity itself, as with human beings (Chen and Zhang 2018). Fourth, AI is unable to assume responsibility directly, and granting AI subject status will mean facing not only huge legislative technical challenges but also the possibility that it may harm the current law's relevant institutional arrangements on meaning and tort liability (Wu, Zhang and Zhang 2018). Fifth, AI cannot exercise power, so there is no need to recognise the subject status of robots in the law. Just setting up a kind of work in law, entitled 'robot works', can achieve the purpose of protecting the creators and owners of robots (Wu, Zhang and Zhang 2018).

4. Discussion and future recommendations

Firstly, the discussion of the copyrightability of AIGC in existing studies often neglects the limitations and definition of the concept of AI. It results in there being

no chance to deal with AI through hierarchical or phased treatment. Whether the twelve main doctrines on the copyrightability of AIGC or the three doctrines on the attribution of AIGC, the concept bases of their arguments are not the same. There is a lack of a unified basis for academic dialogue. The discussion on the copyrightability of AIGC is in fact a dispute between author-centrism and work-centrism, and the different choices have given rise to different doctrines. Currently, the prevailing view in Chinese copyright academia is ‘author-centrism’, which is based on Kant’s classical philosophy and the doctrine of personality rights. Author-centrism respects the free will of authors: under the guidance of this idea, the author shall have the right to exercise full control over the work (Lin 2021). The work exerted by the author on the work should be in line with the requirements of the Copyright Law on the originality of the work. The premise implicit in the tools of labour theory, measurement of contribution theory, creative intent theory, incentive theory, electronic labour theory, neuron theory, free will theory and human-machine cooperation theory is author-centrism. That means scholars attempt to figure out whether AI meets the ‘author standard’ of the Copyright Law for originality, so as to admit or deny the originality of AIGC. On the other hand, template theory, election space method theory, reversal theory and objective theory of originality are based on work-centrism. Scholars try to judge AIGC ‘objectively’, that is, to examine the originality of the generated content itself. There is less or even no consideration of whether AI is able to become the ‘author’. If the originality of the generated content itself is comparable to the originality of the creation, which originated from human beings, then this content can be called ‘work’ and protected by law. There is still no settled answer on whether copyright law in the age of AI should adopt author-centrism or work-centrism. It is difficult to circumvent the discussion of AIGC’s ‘authorship’ when discussing AIGC’s copyrightability. Whether or not to adhere to the current author-centrism in the era of AI? How to adhere to author-centrism in interpreting the existing law? How to adopt work-centrism in the future so as to make appropriate legislative arrangements? These questions need to be answered by future researchers. The different answers to these issues will lead to different standards of originality. In addition, when specifically judging whether a certain AIGC has or does not have originality in the sense of copyright law, it is still necessary to further analyse different types of AIGC. Therefore, the research will be more hierarchical and targeted, which requires further research combining the current practices of the AI industry with the existing laws.

Secondly, for the AI civil subject status or author status of the three doctrines to be reasonable, the logic of the argument also has merit: Legal personality theory portrays a future picture of AI development and actively accepts AI as a new type of civil subject in human beings’ law. However, it ignores the reality of the current development of AI, that is, that current AI does not have the independent personality or property to assume responsibility. Limited personality theory and object theory are based on the existing legal provisions. To interpret the perspective of the theory of AI into the ‘limited personality’ or ‘object’ category, this point of view has its reality and practicability. However, most of the scholars who hold these doctrines have a negative attitude towards the development of AI, i.e., they deny that AI may

have human-like intelligence in the future. Furthermore, AI ethics lack a reinforcement mechanism (Hagendorff 2020). Object theory ignores AI morality, which may ultimately lead to a failure of AI governance. With the current legislation seemingly focused on privacy and data protection (Lane 2022), coupled with the impossibility of full transparency for many machine learning (ML) and deep learning (DL) systems (Pizzi, Romanoff and Engelhardt 2020), there is a need to place ethical norms (or human rights principles) in the AI law rules. The emergence of ethical principles will contribute to the development of policy and regulatory frameworks (Rességuier and Rodrigues 2022). The White Paper on Artificial Intelligence published by the European Commission in February 2020, and the framework of ethical aspects of AI, robotics and related technologies proposed by the European Parliament in April 2020 were both designed with reference to the ethics guidelines for trustworthy AI. Therefore, we cannot deny the potential of ethics in determining the behaviour of AI. It should be noted that the above three doctrines correspond to different types of AI. Indeed, the core issue is whether the ethical nature of AI can be regulated by a single principle. When AI is developed in different stages, from the perspective of the concept, its connotation and extension will change. From the perspective of AI itself, it will bring different ethical problems due to different levels of intelligence. The attempt to apply the same standards or rules to regulate AI actually ignores the objective differences between different types of AI.

Finally, when Chinese scholars study topics related to AI and copyright, the breadth of comparative research on different countries is still lacking. Currently, Chinese scholars' research involves literature on the United States, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, but less on Germany, Australia, Italy, Denmark and Canada, all of which have rich practical and theoretical accumulations in the field of AI. According to the *2022 Global Artificial Intelligence Innovation Index Report* released by the China Institute of Scientific and Technological Information, Germany, Canada and Australia are in the second tier of AI innovation evaluation, and Denmark is in the third tier, ranking 4th, 6th, 12th and 13th around the world, respectively. Therefore, it is necessary to pay more attention to the AI practices, theories and legislative trends in the above countries so as to provide material for comparative research on the copyright of AIGC.

5. Limitations

It is important to note that some relevant studies may not have been found in the collection of the literature, which is one of the drawbacks of a systematic literature review.

In this study, in order to ensure the accuracy of the views, only the core set of literature was used in CNKI's database, so some relevant studies were not included in this study because they did not meet the search criteria.

The main references are titled in Chinese. To facilitate readers' understanding, the author has translated the relevant titles into English and appended the original sources to the documents.

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