INSIGHTS:

I Went to China's Robotics Hub - What I Saw Changed My View on the U.S. vs China Race

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If I had thought the Martial Arts robots at the 2026 Spring Festival Gala was the most impressive robotic advancement I had seen so far, visiting China last week, and its robotics museum, was a wake-up call.

The one thing it made me hone in on, when comparing the U.S. to China in the robotics race, is the key point of differentiation: **Humanoid robotics vs. industrial automation.**

When travelling through China with my colleague this last week, I immediately felt the presence of AI and its integration into everyday life - unsurprising given the country's continued investment in strategic technologies and robotics. **China is building the future of robotics across the full stack, from intelligence to deployment.** Researchers and innovators believe that soon enough machines will increasingly be able to manage their physical environments in the same way AI systems navigate language today. **This adaptability, particularly in taking on human-like form, is expected to translate into factory labour,** streamlining and optimising manufacturing processes, and ultimately reducing reliance on human-led work.

With China's expertise in mass labour and large-scale manufacturing, it is no surprise that it is leading in production automation. Our visit to a Shenzhen robotics manufacturer proved that it has quietly crossed a tipping point in robotics, with UBTECH Robotics deploying hundreds of Walker S2 humanoid robots into real-world industrial settings—marking what it claims is the first true at-scale delivery of humanoid hardware. Backed by an order book exceeding ¥800m and partnerships with heavyweights like BYD and Foxconn, the focus is shifting from "can it work?" to **"can it scale and deliver ROI on the factory floor."** The real inflection now isn't innovation -it's execution, as autonomous features like battery swapping meet the ultimate test: sustained productivity in live manufacturing and logistics environments.

At the same time, **the aspirations of younger Chinese workers are shifting**. As they become less willing to participate in

physically demanding labour. China has both the need and the opportunity to accelerate the development of robot workers. Raising an important question: what does this mean for the future of blue-collar work?

One way to frame it is that the U.S. is being pulled towards creating machines that, much like those seen in *Ex Machina*, can do anything a human can do. China, on the other hand, is training robots to perform highly specific, tailored tasks with precision, where hand movements, angles, and work environments are optimised to improve commercial productivity. While both approaches are shaped by government funding, private capital, and commercial pressures, China is excelling in cost, speed, and scalability. This is reflected in pricing: companies like **Unitree offer production-ready industrial robots starting at around US$30,000,** while comparable American systems are often significantly more expensive despite offering a more limited industrial platform.

Perhaps this **doesn't need to be seen as a race in the traditional sense but more as a divergence in strength.** The U.S. continues to lead in humanised, general-purpose technologies that enhance customer experience, while China advances mass-production systems through increasingly automated, robotised factories - each country leaning into its respective strengths.

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