

**Living on E-Commerce:
The Politics and Ethics of E-Trading in a Chinese City**

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Abstract

Based on thirteen-month fieldwork in the city of Yiwu, an emergent e-commercial hub in Southeast China, this dissertation looks at the making of a neoliberal e-commerce economy and its political, economic, social, and cultural impacts on e-traders in the locality. Despite some state developmental endeavors, this new economy is largely fostered by grassroots market players and facilitated by large e-platform giants, such as the Alibaba Group. The expansion of this new economy has given individual Chinese e-traders new opportunities to generate wealth and cultural capital, achieve upward social mobility and construct an enterprising subjectivity. Yet, the domination of e-platform giants in this economy has also created a precarious condition for the grassroots e-traders, in which they have to adapt to the changing environment and find creative strategies and tactics to ensure their economic security. Through investigations of their self-reliant discourses and business practices in opposition to state intervention in economy and in individual life, their negotiations over independence and justice under the hegemony of e-platform giants, their struggles for social recognition in urban Chinese society, their moral agency in negotiating and contesting ethics in business encounters, and their employment of self-enterprising and self-disciplining measures in dealing with economic and social uncertainties, this dissertation illustrates how the ongoing formation of the digital regime of accumulation generates an anxious yet flourishing life for the e-traders under neoliberalism as well as speaks to the culturally specific process of subjectivization in China.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The social life of e-commerce

The Western world is said to have entered an age of “digital capitalism,” in which the economy is largely driven by the development of information technologies. Electronic commerce, commonly known as e-commerce, is one of the most important sectors of this new form of capitalism (Schiller, 1999). In the United States, information scholars have observed an “E-Commerce Revolution” characterized by the huge number of e-consumers and the massive expansion of e-commercial transactions as well as rapidly increasing online sales. These phenomena have attracted researchers from multiple disciplines, among whom scholars of business and management, computer sciences, and information technology have contributed most of the current knowledge about e-commerce (Laudon and Traver, 2009: 6-8).

In their authoritative work, Kenneth C. Laudon and Carol Guercio Traver identify two primary approaches to e-commerce in the current academic world: the technical approach and the behavioral approach. Among those who adopt the technical approach, computer scientists see e-commerce as an exemplary application of internet technologies, and they are particularly concerned with its impact on the development of hardware, software, telecommunication systems, and the like. Management scientists are primarily interested in building mathematical models of business processes and optimizing these processes; e-commerce provides these scientists with a good opportunity to explore ways to use the internet for more efficient business operations. Among those who take the behavioral approach, information scientists look more at the implications of e-commerce for firm and industry value chains, industry structure, and corporate strategies. Economists focus on online consumer behavior in e-business transactions. Marketing scholars are concerned with developing brands and using e-commerce technologies to segment and target consumer groups. Sociologists and sometimes psychologists are also involved in studies of e-commerce, but they pay more attention to internet usage among different social groups, the role of social inequality in skewing internet benefits, and the use of the Web as a tool for social networking and group communication (Laudon and Traver, 2009: 49-50). Laudon and Traver’s categorization is tenable, as many other scholarly works and popular textbooks on e-commerce also concentrate on its economic, managerial, and technical dimensions (e.g., Chaffey, 2011; Chan et al., 2001; Turban et al., 2011; Westland and Clark, 1999). Although their own book attempts to be comprehensive and multidisciplinary, it only covers intellectual property, individual privacy, and public welfare policies in a chapter

discussing social issues concerning e-commerce (Laudon and Traver, 2009: Chapter 8).

I believe that more attention should be paid to the political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions of e-commerce. Aiming to develop an anthropological perspective on e-commerce, this project may help us to better understand the “social life”—to borrow a term from Arjun Appadurai (1986)—of this newly emerged form of business practice. As an anthropologist, I try to understand how e-commerce is shaped by the political, economic, social, and cultural contexts in a specific locality.¹ I also try to understand how individual e-traders engage in this mode of business activity in their everyday lives and through which they produce value and meaning. My study not only considers their online lives, such as their communications with customers and e-platforms and other routine in e-business operations, but also their offline lives outside of the internet. Offline life involves their interactions with different social groups in their lifeworld, such as suppliers, logistics workers, state officials, and other relevant people. In doing so, I hope to find out how e-business affects e-traders’ daily practices and how it configures their social relations. These effects determine the ways in which e-commerce is socially experienced by its practitioners.

Digital culture (aka internet culture or cyberculture) is also part of the social life of information technologies. The widespread use of the internet all over the world has enabled its users to produce new cultural memes, construct new identities, and create new communities online (Boellstorff, 2008; Creeber and Martin, 2009; Miller, 2011; Nardi, 2010; Shifman, 2014). Scholars have argued that social media may generate a network/phatic culture (Jenkins, Ford, and Green, 2013; Miller, 2008), and online games may also foster virtual cultures (Boellstorff, 2008; Pearce, 2009). But are there some cultural traits emerging that characterize e-commerce and e-traders? Moreover, scholarly discussion of digital culture has largely been confined to the online life of internet users, which seems to suggest a separation from the offline life of the subjects. Is it true that one’s online cultural memes, identities, and communities are irrelevant to one’s offline existence? Are there cultural phenomena that transcend the online-offline boundary?

¹ Previous studies have documented the social life of IT workers and trading populations in transnational political, social, and cultural contexts. Xiang Biao (2006) and Sareeta Amrute (2016) have both explored the global outsourcing of information technology service and its impacts on Indian IT workers in their home country or abroad. Gordon Mathews (2011, 2017) has written about the global circulation of low-end goods and the life struggles of the involved African traders in Hong Kong and mainland China. While e-commerce also has an international dimension by facilitating transnational business, this study looks more at how it is practiced locally and how it affects its practitioners’ lives in a specific place. It is therefore less an ethnography about global connections (Tsing, 2005) but more a traditional single-site ethnography of this new industry.

To understand the social experiences of living on e-commerce, we also need to situate the e-traders' online and offline life in the political economy of e-commerce development in a given society. Scholars have coined terms such as "digital capitalism" (Schiller, 1999), "technocapitalism" (Kellner, 2002; Suarez-Villa, 2009), "informational capitalism" (Castells, 1996), and recently "platform capitalism" (Srnicsek, 2017) to denote the political economy of the use of information technologies in Western countries, especially in the United States. What underlies these new forms of technology-based capitalism is often said to be a neoliberal/expansionary market logic that supports the commercialization of technologies in serving the corporate sector (Schiller, 1999: 1). As traits of neoliberalism have spread to other parts of the world through globalization (Campbell and Pedersen, 2001; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001; Levi-Faur, 2005; Ong, 2006a), one should explore how it interweaves with local forces and if it fosters a local digital capitalism (Jin, 2008). Furthermore, existing scholarship has found that digital capitalism in the West has drawn much resistance for its exploitative nature (Barassi, 2015), but how similar forms of capitalism are perceived and experienced in other societies remains little known. Are there any tensions that arise in people's encounters with digital capitalism in the non-Western world? How do people understand and deal with these tensions?

This dissertation explores the social life of e-commerce with a specific focus on how it configures its practitioners' social relations with different groups of people online and offline; how it works on their cultures, identities, and daily practices; and how its development is shaped by political-economic forces. I will situate my ethnography in a core e-commerce location in the People's Republic of China, which has surpassed the United States to become the world's largest e-commerce market since 2013 (He, 2013).

E-commerce in China

E-commerce in China first started in the late 1990s, as signified by the establishment of several B2B (business-to-business) enterprises such as Alibaba and Made-in-China.com. The rise of B2C (business-to-customer) e-platforms like Taobao and Jingdong in 2003 and 2004 propelled the industry to experience explosive growth in the next fifteen years.² Among the top ten global e-commerce companies in 2016, four were based in China: Alibaba topped the list with a global market share of 26.6 percent; the other three were Jingdong, Xiaomi, and Suning (Ministry of Commerce, 2017). As the major player in the Chinese e-commerce market, Alibaba's arrival on Wall Street in 2014 surprised

² For a review of the history of e-commerce in China, see Li (2013).

the world when it made \$21.8 billion dollars, the largest initial public offering (IPO) in history (Alden, 2014). This big success made Ma Yun, the founder of Alibaba, the wealthiest man (\$21.8 billion) in mainland China that year. However, not only the large companies and the top economic elites are the beneficiaries of e-commerce development, but also grassroots e-traders and consumers. According to some official statistics, between 2012 and 2016—due to the convenience brought by online shopping—the number of Chinese online customers increased from 242 million to 467 million. The sum of online shopping increased from 8.1 trillion yuan to 26.1 trillion yuan (\$1.35 trillion to \$4.35 trillion), with an annual growth of 34 percent. In 2016, e-commerce and other related industries created a total of 37 million jobs (Ministry of Commerce, 2017; Wang, 2017). Based on these records, the Chinese government has recognized the significant contribution of the e-commerce economy to the country's economic growth and industrial upgrading (Xinhua, 2016).

Early social science studies of Chinese e-commerce published in English generally have focused on its development. Studies have carried this out by performing analyses of relevant domestic factors, such as government policies, legal environment and technical infrastructure, and of relevant international factors like foreign investments and global flow of information and technologies (McLaughlin, 2000; Wong and Nah, 2001). Although their information and analyses are not up to date, these macro studies give us an opportunity to understand the changing socioeconomic and political contexts through which Chinese e-commerce has evolved into its current stage.³ More recent social science research has started to look at the social and economic consequences of e-commerce development in China, especially in the rural areas. Researchers have reported that in fourteen villages of Central and South China e-commerce development has generated a dramatic increase in local villagers' income. The improvements in local economic life have brought many rural migrants back to their home villages, which has helped to solve the problem of left-behind elders and children in these regions (Alibaba Group, 2015). Other research has found that in several poor counties of Gansu, Guizhou and Yunnan provinces e-commerce programs initiated by local governments have reduced local poverty and developed the rural economy significantly (Zhang and Jiang, 2015). Individual ethnographic studies in remote villages also have demonstrated that e-commerce has empowered marginalized communities and helped them achieve ample recognition (Leong, Pan, and Cui, 2016; Lin, Xie, and Lv, 2016).

³ Only a few studies have directly focused on Chinese e-commerce infrastructure and state policies concerning this industry. However, scholars have researched the broader sector of information, communication, and technology (ICT), see Hong (2017) and Segal (2002).

This literature is frequently invoked by the Chinese government and by some major e-commerce companies in their initiatives to develop an e-commerce industry in the countryside. Since 2013 the Alibaba Group has started to nominate villages that have more than 100 online stores and produce total annual e-commerce transactions of over 10 million yuan (\$1.6 million) as “Taobao villages” (*Taobao cun*, 淘宝村). It publicizes developing e-commerce as a new path for rural industrialization. By the end of 2017, there were 2,118 such villages all over China (Gao, 2017). To expand its share in the rural market, in 2014 it launched another project called “rural-Taobao” (*nongcun taobao*, 农村淘宝) by setting up local service centers that provided delivery services in rural areas in about 30,000 villages across 700 counties. To compete with Alibaba, the other Chinese e-commerce giant Jingdong also expanded its service-center workforce to over 300,000 in the rural areas (Xinhua, 2017). The Chinese government instead used e-commerce to develop rural economy and alleviate poverty (Li, 2017). For instance, the Ministry of Commerce initiated a pilot project targeting rural e-commerce in 2014. By the end of 2016, 496 impoverished counties in central and western China had been selected as pilots, and each county was granted a special fund of 20 million yuan (\$3.3 million) for building local e-commerce infrastructure and nourishing startups (The Information Office of the Ministry of Commerce, 2017; Yang and Zhang, 2017). The high-profile actions of state policies and the e-commerce giants made rural e-commerce development a heated topic for media discussion and scholarly inquiry within China.⁴ In comparison, much less attention was paid to the e-commerce industry in urban areas and to its effects on the lives of urbanites and rural migrants living in the cities, despite some scholars having studied the consumption behavior of urban residents (e.g., Clemes, Gan, and Zhang, 2014; Zhang L., 2017).⁵

E-commerce-induced popular culture is another topic that has generated research and media interest. Similar to the situation in the West, scholars working on Chinese internet users have observed the great capacity of computer-mediated communication to reshape individuals’ language use, culture, and subjectivity in everyday life (Liu, 2011; 2012). For instance, one scholar has discussed how internet memes, such as *diaosi* (屌丝, loser), are being appropriated by the young generation to express their self-positioning and understanding of social stratification in contemporary China

⁴ A general assessment of the impacts of e-commerce on rural development in China, see Couture, Faber, Gu and Liu (2018).

⁵ AliResearch, a research institute run by the Alibaba Group, has published a book on the counties that perform well in e-commerce development and categorized them as “county-level e-commerce economies” (县域电商), see AliResearch (2016).

(Szablewicz, 2014). E-commerce terms that e-traders and customers often use to communicate online have also been integrated into everyday language. In this process, some terms retain almost the same meaning as on the internet, but some gain new meanings. The most popular single word is *qin* (亲, dear), an affectionate form of address which e-traders use to address their customers. However, this term is now being widely used by young Chinese people for their amusement or other purposes in daily settings (Yang, 2014). The “Double Eleven Online Shopping Festival” (*shuang shiyi wanggou kuanghuanjie*, 双十一网购狂欢节), an event comparable to “Cyber Monday” after the Thanksgiving holiday in the United States, is another popular culture phenomenon that has attracted wide attention in China. It is said that this annual festival on 11 November was first celebrated by Chinese university students as “Singles’ Day” (*guanggun jie*, 光棍节; a term that reflects the connection between singles and the Arabic number 1). However, it was appropriated by the Alibaba Group in 2009 to promote e-business through offering special sales on that day. As other e-platforms also joined the festival in subsequent years, the date became a well-known e-shopping carnival that was reflective of Chinese consumer culture (Wang, 2014). To further increase the visibility of the festival on mass media, since 2015 Alibaba started to hold “Double Eleven Galas” (*shuang shiyi wanhui*, 双十一晚会) together with several major Chinese TV stations. Media scholars Bingchun Meng and Yanning Huang (2017) have analyzed the 2015 Double Eleven Gala as a discursive site in which they find a highly sexist representation of female consumers. They argue that the state, the market, corporations and the media all have a role in building up patriarchal capitalism in present-day China.

The recent discussions on e-commerce-induced popular culture are indicative of how individual agents use the internet to invent new cultural symbols and practices and make meaning in this process. Yet, this literature concentrates on e-commerce giants and customers and provides much less exposure to the e-traders’ cultural values and practices. A closer look at the ideas and experiences of the e-traders will help us better understand how e-commerce reshapes the everyday lives of its practitioners socially and culturally.

Researching e-commerce in Yiwu

This is an ethnographic study that examines e-commerce development in Yiwu (义乌) and its impact on the daily lives of e-commerce traders’ who work and live there. Yiwu

is located in the center of Zhejiang province and is about 278 km from Shanghai and 140 km from the provincial capital, Hangzhou, with a population over two million (740,000 local residents and 1,433,000 migrants) (For Yiwu's location, see Map 1.1). I chose this city for both scholarly and personal reasons. Yiwu is internationally famous as the site of the largest wholesale marketplace for small commodities in China and across the world (see Figure 1.1). The city represents a remarkable model of industrial and business clustering which has drawn attention from many domestic and international economists (Bellandi and Lombardi, 2012; Ding, 2012; Guo, 2010; Lu, Bai, and Wang, 2003; Wang, Lu, and Yang, 2008). A number of anthropologists, sociologists, geographers, and linguists have also taken an interest in Yiwu, since its market expansion and global outreach have resulted in several social and cultural consequences. A notable demographic change has been its attraction for a large number of traders from the Arab world (Pliez, 2012), Africa (Bodomo, 2012; Cissé, 2015), Central Asia and East Europe (Marsden, 2018) who have transformed the city into an international trading hub with a multicultural environment.

As a result of the considerable advantages brought by the wholesale marketplace, Yiwu has developed into a very major e-commerce center in China. In 2011, it was estimated that over 60 percent of all products sold on Taobao, China's largest online marketplace, came from Yiwu (Zhang, 2012). Every year thousands of people enter the e-commerce industry. By the end of 2013, there were more than 200,000 e-traders in the city; 113,000 of them ran Taobao e-shops, with a 57 percent yearly growth rate (Lin, 2014). The total transaction volume of Yiwu-based e-business reached 85.6 billion yuan (\$14.3 billion) in that year, which exceeded the 68.3 billion yuan (\$11.4 billion) figure of offline business in the wholesale marketplace (Qu, 2014). The booming of e-business also has led to the prosperity of logistics and other industries in Yiwu. According to some statistics, Yiwu was ranked sixth in domestic shipping (630,000 items per day) and fourth in international shipping (250,000 items per day) among all Chinese cities in 2013 (Chen, 2014a), and topped the official list of the hundred best e-commerce counties (and county-level cities) in China (Chen, 2014b). Furthermore, Yiwu became the only county-level city listed in the "National E-Commerce Model City Plan" (*guojia dianzi shangwu shifan chengshi*, 国家电子商务示范城市) initiated by eight central state departments and bureaus (Chen, 2014c). Considering the popularity and rapid development of e-business in this city, Yiwu represents an ideal case-study for research into the political economy of e-commerce and its impacts on the everyday life of e-traders in China.



Map 1.1: Map of the location of Yiwu. The city is located in the center of Zhejiang Province, southeastern China.



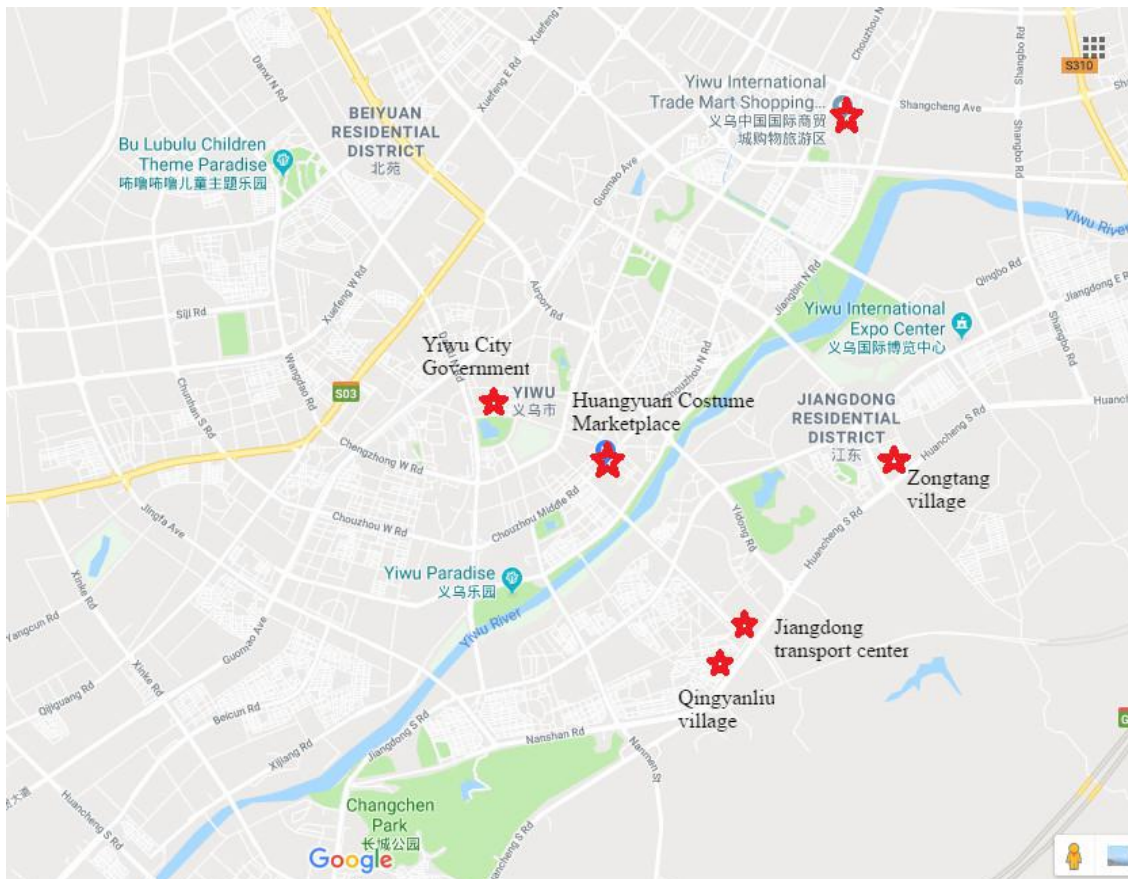
Figure 1.1: Yiwu International Wholesale Marketplace, District One.

The choice of Yiwu as my field site is also personal. Since my MPhil in anthropology in Hong Kong, I had been asked by both teachers and fellow students why

I did not conduct research on Yiwu's marketplace, which is world-renowned. As I am an Yiwu native, they thought I had many advantages to do that particular research. My answer to that question was that anthropologists often studied small groups or communities, but Yiwu's wholesale marketplace had more than 70,000 stalls and 200,000 traders. I believed it was impossible to investigate this large population "anthropologically." As an immature fieldworker at that time, this reflected my rather naïve understanding of anthropological research. But the questions posed by my teachers and fellow students sowed a seed in my mind, as it indicated that a study of Yiwu's market might be of interest to many scholars in the world.

E-business first attracted my attention in 2009 when the local e-commerce economy started booming. Referred to as the second wave of an e-commerce gold rush among the Yiwu-based e-traders, more and more people were interested in setting up startups, namely opening Taobao e-shops in the local context. E-traders assembled in specific areas consisting mainly of residential quarters situated close to the wholesale marketplace and the city's outer ring roads (see Map 1.2). Many of these quarters were urban and suburban villages that had recently undergone reconstruction that were notable for the availability of a large number of cheap two and three suites. These provided an excellent opportunity for the e-traders enabling them to reside, work, and store goods in the same place. As more e-traders were attracted to these villages, other facilitating industries followed. These involved companies focused on logistics, website-design and photography businesses, e-commerce training institutions, and takeaway restaurants. The large concentration of e-traders and the relatively self-contained industrial configuration developed the villages into e-commerce clusters. The most famous example is Qingyanliu (青岩刘). In 2013, this village was honored as "the first Taobao village in China" by the Alibaba Group. In 2014, it was named as "the first village of e-shops" by Prime Minister Li Keqiang. Moreover, since 2014 local and national governments began to publicize "Taobao villages" like Qingyanliu as a new model of industrial clustering and economic development. Some scholarship has offered a general overview of the e-commerce industry and the e-trading population in these villages and of similar examples in other parts of China (Alibaba Group, 2015; Leong, Pan, and Cui, 2016; Li, 2017; Lin, Xie, and Lv, 2016; Wu, 2012a, 2012b). However, the details of e-traders' business practices and everyday lives are still understudied. How do they run e-businesses with respect to China's political-economic and social context as well as the local context of a specific city? How do they interact with each other, with customers, and with other social groups (e.g., producers, wholesalers, landlords, state

officials, and administrators of e-platforms)? What impact do the businesses have on the e-traders' status, social relations, identities, cultural values, and quotidian practices?



Map 1.2: Yiwu's urban districts. A number e-commerce clusters assemble in the Jiangdong residential district, including Qingyanliu village and Zongtang village. Both of them are close to the city's outer ring road.

Before I formally started the fieldwork, my mother told me about a revealing case concerning the social interactions and relations of e-traders. As the local e-commerce economy prospered, my mother's wholesale business selling camping gear, specifically tents, also began to receive an increasing number of orders from online retailers and wholesalers. In early 2014, she was surprised to notice that a rural migrant e-trader who came from Anhui Province had amassed sufficient wealth within only three years enabling him to buy a car and an apartment in Yiwu. Accumulating that much money was not an easy task even for local residents from average families.⁶ My mother told me that initially the guy only placed orders for 20 or 30 tents. Nowadays, he often placed

⁶ To my knowledge, in recent years the average housing price in Yiwu's downtown area was 20,000 yuan per square meter, with the highest reaching 48,000 yuan. This price was comparable to that of many provincial capitals in China.

orders for over 2,000. In the summer of 2014, my mother estimated that this e-trader sold a total of more than 20,000 tents. His success reshaped his interactions with my mother who commented that when he was less successful his manner was always courteous: “He even thanked me for selling tents to him because the other wholesalers paid him no attention because his orders were too small.” But after his business grew he became a “shrewd” businessman practiced in the art of bargaining over prices, requesting credit, and often making excuses for delaying payments. As she succinctly noted: “He is more confident now. If I don’t accept his request, he will threaten to buy from others.” While complaining about the difficulty in dealing with this migrant e-trader, my mother presented him as an industrious exemplar to educate my “lazy” cousin who also ran an e-business selling her products.

The story of my mother’s customer engaged my attention as an anthropologist. His quick accumulation of wealth through e-business and the manner in which this affected his social mobility, social interactions, and subjectivity in Yiwu society offered a fertile area for closer study. During my fieldwork in 2015, I found it was common to hear e-traders narrate how e-business had changed their lives. This was especially true of those who had migrated from inland provinces. They said e-business had helped them to escape poverty and move beyond the cultural stigma of being born as “backward countrymen,” and to shake the pain and trauma of working as migrant workers and the discrimination of being non-locals. It also gave them more self-esteem and self-respect, which are crucial for living a happy life. Transformations in the migrant e-traders’ self-perception were evoked not just by the betterment of material life, but also by the “modern and progressive” image of e-business—an image that was endowed by the high-tech information and communication technology and supported by the top elites of Chinese internet economy such as Ma Yun. Yiwu local residents also noticed that migrant e-traders appeared to be more entrepreneurial than many locals. And, despite disputes arising from their business practices as well as complaints over the noise and traffic jams they caused in residential areas, local residents also recognized the migrant e-traders’ contributions to the city’s economic prosperity.

To understand the e-traders’ business practices, social relations, and other aspects of their everyday life, I conducted thirteen months of fieldwork from February 2015 to March 2016. I lived in two urban villages that had been transformed into e-commerce clusters, namely, Qingyanliu (see Figures 1.2 and 1.3) and Zongtang (宗塘) (see Figure 1.4). I found my informants by developing neighborhood and community relationships and by attending e-commerce training institutions and startup forums. My social

connections established prior to the fieldwork provided access to e-traders residing in other parts of the city. In doing so, I talked with over hundreds of e-traders. Most of my informants were in their twenties and thirties. The majority were migrants from other parts of China, with a significant proportion from provinces such as Anhui, Jiangxi, Hunan, Henan, and Shanxi.⁷ A large number of these e-traders had only a high school education or less. Some were graduates of universities or vocational colleges (*dazhuan*, 大专), but few had studied in elite institutions included in the 985 and the 211 national projects.⁸ Most data for this project was collected through daily conversations with these people (including 106 formal and informal interviews) and through participant observations in ten e-traders' businesses and in everyday encounters. I also recruited thirty informants who were indirectly or not involved in e-commerce, such as logistics workers, website designers, wholesalers, local landlords, cadres, and officials. In doing so, I intended to understand how people in the local community perceived e-commerce industry and its practitioners.

⁷ One of the puzzles I had during the fieldwork was why so many e-traders came from these five inland provinces. My answer to this question is that the provinces of Anhui, Jiangxi, Hunan, and Henan are closer to Zhejiang than other central China (华中) and western provinces and these four provinces were also major suppliers of migrant workers to Yiwu market prior to the emergence of the e-commerce industry. These factors also explain the common career trajectory shared by the e-traders from these four provinces, who have often worked as migrant laborers before starting their own e-business. While there are also migrant worker-turned e-traders from Shanxi province, many are graduates from Yiwu Industrial and Commercial College (义乌工商学院), a local vocational school that specializes in e-commerce training. This college admits quite a few students from Shanxi, as well as from the above four provinces, but only a few from provinces in central, western and north-eastern China. I also have Shanxi-born informants who came to Yiwu after learning about the success that their relatives, friends, or fellow villagers found there. Fewer e-traders come to Yiwu from the nearby coastal provinces such as Shandong, Jiangsu, and Fujian. There are two primary reasons for this: (1) these provinces are economically more developed than the inland ones; (2) if residents of these provinces want to do e-business, they can stay in their own provinces because there are many e-commerce clusters there. These explanations are equally applicable to potential e-traders in other cities of Zhejiang province.

⁸ These two projects were initiated by the Chinese government to foster high-level research and educational institutions nationally. Universities included in the projects are ranked higher than ordinary ones in China.



Figure 1.2: Qingyanliu village and its memorial arch.



Figure 1.3: Street view in Qingyanliu village. An e-trader was packing goods.



Figure 1.4: Street view in Zongtang village. There was a traffic jam the day after Double Eleven Online Shopping Festival.

Although as a native of Yiwu I had quicker access to the research population, entering the e-traders' business and life world was not an easy task for me. Prior to my long-term fieldwork, I had talked to my mother's customers. At first, I found I could hardly understand what they said when they used e-commerce terminologies or when they explained the detailed operations of their e-shops. During the fieldwork, I soon befriended many e-traders by visiting my neighbors and attending startup forums, but the same problem came up again when I tried to inquire about their e-business. Because I had little prior knowledge of e-commerce and could not make appropriate responses to the e-traders except for keeping asking them to explain the meanings of terminologies, my informants suggested I should first learn the basics myself. This forced me to reflect on my research strategy. I then refocused part of my fieldwork on a local vocational school that specializes in an e-commerce curriculum and studied e-commerce foundations together with year-one students for three months. In addition, I attended a course at a local e-commerce training institution every weekend during this period. Since the teachers in the vocational school and e-commerce training institution required their students and trainees to gain practical experiences associated with operating an e-business, I followed my fellow students to open my own Taobao e-shop and learned how to run it. In the end, this practical training not only enhanced my knowledge of the

operation of e-platforms, but also upgraded my research skills in communicating with the e-traders. Because of my familiarity with e-business operations and the jargon in the e-commerce world, I shared a common language with my informants resulting in their willingness to talk about their businesses in greater depth. Later, some of them even wanted to cooperate with me in conducting an e-business. I accepted one invitation in order to observe how a cooperative e-business operated. For the other nine e-traders with whom I did participant observation for certain periods (usually two weeks to one month for each), I repaid them by providing free labor doing e-shop management, customer service, and packaging (typical settings of e-shops, see Figures 1.5 and 1.6).⁹ The above e-commerce training also helped me find many newcomers in the industry and learn their views about and their desires for e-business. Knowing these newcomers was important for this research, as it enabled me to capture some differences in the expectations and business practices between them and established e-traders, which might mirror the thoughts and behavioral patterns of the entrepreneurs at different stages of their careers.

To understand the representativeness and peculiarities of Yiwu-based e-traders' experiences, I visited some e-commerce clusters in other parts of China during a later period of my fieldwork. In December 2015, I visited several Taobao villages and state-sponsored e-commerce industrial parks in Lishui prefecture (丽水市) of Zhejiang province while attending the third Taobao Villages High Summit there, which was organized by the Alibaba Group, the Zhejiang provincial bureau of commerce and the Lishui local government (see Figure 1.7). I spoke with numerous participants who were either e-traders or government officials from other places where Taobao villages were concentrated. This helped me gain information about state policies and e-commerce

⁹ In selecting particular e-shops for participant observation, I used the following considerations: (1) the scale of the e-shops; (2) the gender of shop-owners; (3) whether the owners are Yiwu locals or not; (4) whether the products they sell are popular or representative among Yiwu-based e-traders; (5) whether the products are seasonal. I did so in order to find out how the business operation and self-perception among different e-traders differed as characterized by the above factors. Eventually, among my ten samples of close observation, two had annual sales volumes below 100,000 yuan, five were in between 100,000 and 500,000 yuan, and three were above 500,000 yuan. In terms of gender, seven owners were male while three were female. Seven owners were migrants from inland provinces, one owner was from another city of Zhejiang province, and the remaining one was a local resident. The products my informants sold included leggings, stockings, women's clothes, hot water bottles, snacks, camping tents, toys, baby products, hats, and plasticine. The selection indeed helped me better understand the complexity of Yiwu's e-commerce industry. Because of the scope of this dissertation, I have not presented the impact of some factors, but I plan to do that in my later publications. I should note that one limitation of this research is that I have few informants that would be considered as "big e-traders". In the e-traders' community, that distinction is reserved for sellers who have an annual sales volume over ten or twenty million yuan. This situation is due to the fact that e-traders based in Yiwu are primarily small- and medium-sized businesses selling daily products. As such, my ethnographic descriptions of e-business operation in this dissertation should be read in a way that understands that these sellers are more typical of grassroots small businesses.

development in different regions. In January 2016, I visited Dongfeng village (东风村), another famous Taobao village located in Shaji town (沙集镇), Xuzhou prefecture of Jiangsu province (see Figure 1.8). Besides fieldwork, I also conducted documentary research for this project. Since I decided to study e-commerce in Yiwu in 2014, I have subscribed to several local newspapers, among which the most important was Yiwu Business Newspaper (*Yiwu shangbao*, 义乌商报). This helped me obtain official information on Yiwu's e-commerce development. Considering that the industry developed mainly after 2005, I went to the Yiwu city library to read newspapers published between 2004 and 2013. Moreover, because this dissertation touches upon histories, anecdotes, and legends of e-platforms (e.g., Alibaba's Taobao and Tmall) and of famous internet entrepreneurs (e.g., Ma Yun), which were topics often discussed and circulated among Yiwu-based e-traders, I read a considerable number of popular biographies of e-commerce companies and individual internet entrepreneurs to gain more knowledge of the socially constructed images of these giants and economic elites.



Figure 1.5: A scene of an e-shop selling leggings. E-traders were packaging goods.



Figure 1.6: An e-shop sells baby's hats. E-traders were packaging goods while chatting with customers.



Figure 1.7: The Third Taobao Village High Summit held in Lishui.



Figure 1.8: Dongfeng village, Jiangsu Province.

Understanding the lifeworld of e-commerce traders

This dissertation examines the social life of e-commerce by looking at the e-traders' everyday lives. However, because “everyday life” covers many aspects, my selection of issues for the following chapters focuses on the topics I encountered during the fieldwork that I found most conceptually interesting. I began writing this dissertation by writing what became Chapter 4 on the issue of *suzhi* (素质, human quality) as perceived by both rural migrant e-traders and Yiwu local residents. This issue was important to the e-traders because many of them had been migrant workers and suffered from discrimination from local factory owners and landlords when they first arrived in Yiwu in the 2000s. One way in which they experienced discrimination was that they were labelled as a “low-suzhi” rural population who lacked education, morality, culture, and ability. Previous scholarly accounts typically described migrant workers as internalizing the discriminatory discourse and trying to improve their *suzhi* level by learning how to live an urban lifestyle. In contrast, my migrant worker-turned-traders claimed that they had always rejected the biased assumption that the rural-originated migrant population was poorer in *suzhi*. They suggested that their endeavors to succeed had proved their worthiness and discredited the locals' prejudice. To further establish themselves socially and culturally, the e-traders generated a discourse about “entrepreneurial *suzhi*” which emphasized that the migrants possessed more entrepreneurial spirit and skills than the

locals. Considering their rising economic status and the fact that the majority of e-businesses in Yiwu were run by migrants nowadays, many local residents recognized their contributions and even accepted their new discourse that implied that migrants were superior in entrepreneurship. Taking the suzhi discourse as a point of departure, I finally framed this chapter to explore the changes in migrant e-traders' social status and identity through their interactions with local people.

The next chapter I wrote was Chapter 5, which discusses the e-traders' business ethics. Counterfeits on Chinese e-platforms have drawn heavy criticism in China and abroad. As the largest e-commerce company in China, the Alibaba Group has long been the focus of criticism. In response, the giant blames those individual e-traders who sell fake goods and their customers who intentionally buy these goods. The giant has launched several campaigns against these rogue traders on its e-platforms such as Taobao and Tmall. As a result of the criticism of the public and the anti-counterfeit campaigns on the e-platforms, issues of business ethics have become a topic of concern in the e-traders' community and has affected some peoples' business practices. I have met several e-traders who sold fake goods during the time of my fieldwork, and I found other traders expressed considerable disagreement over their business activities. Some observers believed that their practices had violated both the law and business ethics, and they saw this as a sign of moral crisis in China. E-traders holding this view tended to follow the law and practiced good ethics in their own business operations. But others suggested that doing business was just a way to make money. For them, there was no need to talk about ethics. E-traders with this attitude were less attentive to the ethics the public insisted on in their business operations. However, it was also these people, either being personally involved in selling fakes or being tolerant to such business practices, who became angry when they bought fakes or low-quality goods online. By focusing on fake-selling and other unethical business practices that emerge in the e-traders' interactions with their customers as well as exchanges and competition with their peers, this chapter aims to reveal how these businesspeople treat and adopt different moral frameworks contextually in order to serve their own ideas and interests.

After finishing these two chapters, I found the structure of my dissertation had become much clearer. To live and conduct business in Yiwu, the migrant e-traders have to communicate with local people. This social relationship constitutes an important part of their everyday life. To sell their goods, managing relationships with customers also becomes the daily routine of these businesspeople. And above all, e-traders are not isolated individuals but are often connected to their peers through cooperation or

competition. These social relationships surrounding the e-traders were apparent to me at my field site. But there is still one more relationship that is crucial to all e-traders, namely, their relationship with e-platforms such as Alibaba. As the business intermediary bridging online sellers and buyers, e-platform companies have a huge impact on e-traders. I wrote Chapter 3 to address this impact by discussing the interactions between the Alibaba Group and the e-traders.¹⁰ I found that, although some e-traders do have contacts with Alibaba administrators, for most of the time their relationship with the e-platform giant is based on the traders' imagination of the latter's corporate structure and operational rules seen through the lens of a capitalist economy as well as traditional Chinese culture. Their imagination has two dimensions. Horizontally, the e-traders imagine Alibaba as a business empire that encompasses a large territory and population by controlling and influencing numerous industries. Vertically, they see it as a bureaucratic empire in which its bureaucrats treat dependent e-traders on their e-platforms in a way that resembles how the Chinese government officials deal with citizens. Living under this empire, the traders admired the greatness of Alibaba's power while hating its exploitation and oppression at the same time. This chapter tries to demonstrate that how people perceive and respond to the new power structure generated by modern information technology is often shaped by the existing power dynamics and cultural traditions in a given society.

The empirical data in Chapter 3 shows that e-platform companies, such as the Alibaba Group, seem to play a symbolic as well as an administrative role in China's economic development that used to be enacted by the government. If this is so, then what is the current role of the government in the country's e-commerce development nowadays? What is its relationship to the e-commerce sector? Chinese state-business relations since the economic reform have long been a heightened topic in the field of China studies (Chen and Dickson, 2010; Dickson, 2003; Hsueh, 2011; Kennedy, 2005; Nee and Oppen, 2012; Oi, 1995; Tsai, 2007; Unger and Chan, 1999; Walder, 1995; Wank, 1996), and one important finding of this literature is that Chinese private entrepreneurs have formed cooperation with the state instead of challenging its authority and supporting democratization as predicted by liberal political scientists. Do the

¹⁰ Alibaba has a number of e-platforms concerning different markets. Taobao (淘宝) and Tmall (天猫) focus on the domestic retail market. Juhuasuan (聚划算) is a group buying platform. 1688.com (阿里巴巴批发网) is for the domestic wholesale market. AliExpress (速卖通) targets the overseas retail market. Alibaba.com (阿里巴巴国际站/中国供应商) is directed at the overseas wholesale market. While this dissertation addresses transnational e-business when necessary, it mainly looks at the experiences of sellers who run Taobao, Tmall, and 1688 e-shops. These sellers constitute the majority of Yiwu-based e-traders.

emerging e-commerce entrepreneurs form similar corporative relationships with the state? So far this has been the case for some large e-platform companies (Shih and Qi, 2016), but ordinary e-traders have not yet been the objects of state corporatism. During my fieldwork, I observed Chinese government officials at different levels were eager to publicize e-commerce entrepreneurship, but Yiwu-based e-traders criticized the state publicities as “loud thunder, small raindrops” (*leishengda, yudian xiao*, 雷声大, 雨点小). By “small raindrops,” they meant the officials promulgated few policies that actually benefited their small- and medium-sized e-business. Simultaneously, many e-traders also reported that they had few interactions with the officials. In the course of running e-businesses, they had not registered at the state bureau of commerce and paid taxes. No matter how their businesses turned out, the state did not intervene. Neither did it step in when they sold fake goods. Chapter 2 of this dissertation demonstrates that in the e-commerce industry, although the Chinese state has not abandoned its role as the ultimate supervisor of the market, it has shifted many of its regulatory responsibilities to large e-platform companies (e.g., the Alibaba Group) to manage themselves and regulate their subordinates and other smaller players. By adopting this quasi-neoliberal mode of governance that manages economy at a distance (Rose, 1996, 1999), the state hopes to stimulate market vitality and achieve continuous economic development. Situated in this market environment, the e-traders gradually become adept at solving problems in their business and in everyday life through market mechanisms rather than by relying on state support.

These chapters explore the e-traders’ social and cultural identity, business ethics, and their self-positioning in relation to the Alibaba “empire.” These all have much to do with the traders’ entrepreneurial subjectivity, which touches upon the e-traders’ relationship with their inner selves. In Chapter 6 I discuss *zhuangbi* (装逼), a cultural practice that is especially indicative of the traders’ subjectivity. The term first appeared on the Chinese internet around 2006 and soon became a buzzword among the young. Normally, it refers to the act of being pretentious and implies a negative judgment of practitioners. For this reason, I translate it as “performing affectation.” But my e-trader informants sometimes use it to describe their friends and model fellow e-traders by showing appreciation of or even admiration for the individual courage and capacity to engage in active self-branding. Some informants further apply the label to themselves to express their self-entrepreneurship. By observing the everyday performance of *zhuangbi* among the e-traders, I found that they employ the practice as a technique for

refashioning themselves into enterprising subjects in accordance with the country's growing neoliberal economy. One's economic capital (e.g., earning and spending power, economic independence, desire for wealth), social capital (interpersonal networks), cultural capital (e.g., use of language, reading habits, way of thinking), as well as symbolic capital that builds on previous forms of capital can all be taken as means to articulate his or her entrepreneurial ethos. Nevertheless, the individualistic articulations of entrepreneurship conform to the contemporary Chinese collective values that stress worldly successes as defined by one's social and economic status. Parading individuality in a homogeneous form to meet a uniform social expectation, the e-traders' performances of affectation reveal a distinctive path of individualization in China as shaped by the tension and collusion between neoliberalism, consumerism, and the country's cultural traditions.

In short, this dissertation investigates the e-traders' everyday lives by exploring their daily interactions with the state, e-platforms, local residents, customers, peers and themselves. What underlies these social interactions, I believe, are the growing grassroots neoliberal economy in China and the subsequent entrepreneurialization of most, if not all, spheres of e-traders' life. Each of my chapters will touch upon different aspects of this process, including its political-economic, social, cultural, discursive, and ethical dimensions. I will address broader theoretical implications of this process in the Conclusion. But first, I commence my examination of the e-traders' world in Yiwu by looking at the city's political economy of local e-commerce development.

Chapter 2: State Developmentalism with a Neoliberal Face: Building the E-Commerce Economy in Yiwu

Introduction

One day in late March 2015, Mr. Wang, from Henan Province and a friend of local e-trader Mr. Ding, came to Yiwu. I happened to visit Ding's e-shop on that day and was invited to accompany them to the Yiwu International Wholesale Marketplace, which is the landmark of the city. The wholesale marketplace is divided into five districts. We spent several hours in Districts One and Two, where the prosperity and variety of goods on display deeply impressed Wang. He said it was no wonder that so many e-traders conducted e-businesses in Yiwu, since they could find anything they wanted here. He then asked us if there was a district called the "E-Trader Service District" (*wangshang fuwu qu*, 网商服务区, hereafter ETSD) in the marketplace, an industrial park that the China Central Television had publicized many times as a "paradise for e-commerce entrepreneurs." Ding laughed and responded that Wang would know the truth once he saw it. We next went to District Five where ETSD was located and found an almost empty building with most stalls closed (see Figure 2.1). Wang was surprised at the huge difference between what he saw and what the authoritative news agency had reported. Ding suggested that the news was just a tool for the officials to boast about their achievements and deceive the common people. He added that "E-commerce industrial parks in the city are simply fanciful developmental projects the officials have set up. The officials think they are all-knowing people who can plan for e-commerce development by adopting their old methods of state-led industrial clustering. But in fact they know nothing about the e-commerce industry and the basic needs of e-traders. They fail but keep on bragging to the public." When asked why ETSD and other industrial parks failed to meet the conditions of the e-commerce industry and the needs of e-traders, Ding answered, "Every e-trader knows that to conduct an e-business one only needs to rent a small apartment and get internet access. We live, work, and store goods in the same place. Why bother to rent an expensive separate stall?"

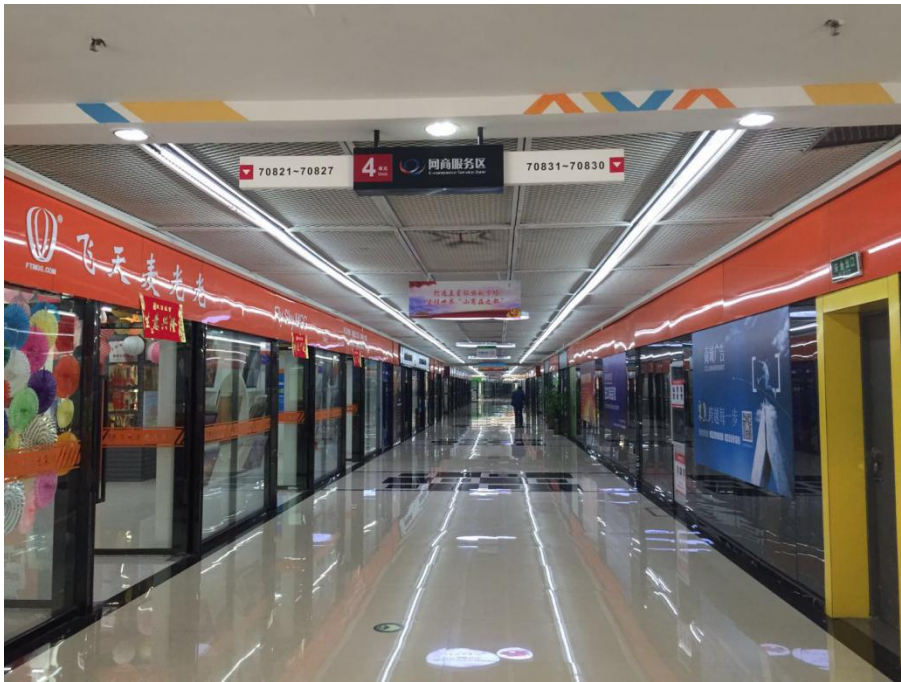


Figure 2.1: E-Trader Service District in Yiwu International Wholesale Marketplace.

Ding further expanded his criticism to the project of Yiwu International Wholesale Marketplace. In his view, although the city had achieved economic development and fame by building this trading center, it did not mean that such a strategy was perfect. Wholesalers in the marketplace had witnessed a sharp decline in customer traffic when District Four was put into use. District Five was locally known as a “ghost town.” Wholesalers in this district had protested to the local government regarding its high rents in spite of low customer turn-over. For Ding, these cases, along with the failure of e-commerce industrial parks, indicated that government officials were not always making the right decisions.

As my field research progressed, I found Ding’s remarks actually opened a door for me to understand how most e-traders think about their relationship with the government. This is important because their thinking was reflective of the model of industrial development in Yiwu, one of the major clusters of e-commerce practitioners in China. Although I had also met a few e-traders who claimed that they had benefited from the state’s e-commerce industry policies, most stated that they had not. Moreover, they had had few interactions with government officials in their course of conducting e-business.¹¹ Quite a few e-traders told me that they neither knew nor cared about state

¹¹ Those who regarded themselves as beneficiaries were mostly owners of well-established e-businesses or brokers making money as mediators between government officials and other e-traders. But a few were socially active individuals who did not actually perform very well in e-business. Being good at social networking, these three groups of e-traders were appropriated by the local government and its grassroots

policies for the e-commerce industry and start-ups. As they saw it, even if the state had preferential policies the benefits would not fall on them, thus these entrepreneurs held that they had to and should be self-reliant. Other traders, such as Mr. Ding, albeit equally lacking in connections with officials, had varying interest in current affairs and obtained their knowledge of the state's e-commerce policies through the mass media. Even so, they too reported that they had not benefited from the state and held negative views of its policies. A predominant view was that the officials who formulated the policies were not real experts on e-commerce, and this lack of expertise resulted in misleading or ineffective state intervention in the development of China's e-commerce industry. These e-traders tended to denounce the state's involvement and saw themselves as the major contributors to local e-commerce prosperity.

From my informants' narratives, we see two forces attempting to advance e-commerce development in Yiwu. My fieldwork and documentary research confirm some of these observations. On the one side, the state tries to develop the e-commerce industry by state-led planning, such as formulating industrial policies and initiating developmental projects. On the other side, most e-traders rely on themselves to develop the industry through everyday business transactions, production, and sometimes new product development and technological innovation. Running a business independently from the state, these e-traders are either indifferent or resistant to state intervention in the e-commerce industry. I argue that the coexistence of these two forces in Yiwu reveals the possibility of convergence of two opposing political-economic models, namely, state developmentalism and neoliberalism, in some specific localities. Studying how the forces interact with each other (or otherwise) can unveil the dynamics and tensions in syncretizing the two political-economic institutions—the Chinese developmental state and the neoliberal market.

Furthermore, while the Chinese state embraces developmentalism in general, my informants observed that in regard to its policies for the e-commerce industry, variations exist between the central and local governments. According to Ding, one motivation for local officials to launch e-commerce developmental projects was that the central government was promoting e-commerce industry as a new engine for China's economic growth. Similarly, my informants in Yiwu's city government and street offices mentioned to me that their developmental projects were "in response to the central

governmental units (e.g., street offices, residents committees, and village committees) as "representative entrepreneurs" to receive visitors (e.g., senior authorities, domestic and foreign delegations, and journalists). Because of their relations with local officials, these people enjoyed priority access to benefits the government offered to e-traders. An example sees Mr. Qin in Chapter 6.

government's call" (*xiangying zhongyang de haozhao*, 响应中央的号召). Therefore, the central and local states were consistent in acting "developmentally." However, on other occasions Ding and some other e-traders suggested that the central government seemed to "do nothing but talk." For instance, they believed that "it encouraged mass entrepreneurship (*dazhong chuangye*, 大众创业) through conducting e-business only by empty talk but no concrete policies," and "its slogan basically means that the state gives up its responsibility of caring for the youths, and we have to rely on ourselves." This role was in sharp contrast to the strong interventionist tendency demonstrated by the local government, even though the latter was not necessarily effective. Comparing their strategies for promoting e-commerce industry and mass entrepreneurship, those informants who were concerned about state policies gained an impression that the central government appeared to be a stingy developer who wanted to avoid spending its own money and encouraged individual citizens to produce fruits through the market (this image was partially true, as I elaborate later), while the local government behaved more aggressively in developing local e-commerce industry. Therefore, in the case of Yiwu, we see on the one hand how the states (central and local) exercised power to intervene in the economy by varying strategies with developmental ambitions but resulted in many failures, and how on the other hand the private e-businesses kept prospering despite facing severe market competition. The compatibility of the developmental state(s) with a predominantly laissez-faire local market economy, signifies a theoretically ambiguous yet subsistent political-economic form that I call "grassroots neoliberalism." This represents a type of "actually existing neoliberalism" (Brenner and Theodore, 2002) with signs of a massive emergence of un-regulated private enterprises at the grassroots level, and a wide application of economic reasoning to the various domains of human life among their owners, arising from an interventionist state apparatus.

The anticipated and unanticipated convergence of state developmentalism and neoliberalism

In political economy studies, the developmental path of post-World War II East Asian economies is characterized as the model of a developmental state (DS). First coined by Chalmers Johnson (1982), the model was used to summarize the historical experience of industrialization in Japan from the 1920s to the 1970s, in which the state played a key role in fostering national development. Later scholarship found similar development trajectories in South Korea and Taiwan (Amsden, 1989; Evans, 1995; Kohli, 2004;

Wade, 1990). Inspired by these studies, since the late 1980s observers in the Western China studies also started to interpret China as a follower of the DS model as a whole or in some parts, while recognizing its distinctiveness (e.g., Baek, 2005; Beeson, 2009, 2017; Blecher, 1989, 1991, 2008; Blecher and Shue, 1996, 2001; Bolesta, 2012; Gabusi, 2017; Knight, 2014; Nee, Opper and Wong, 2007; Oi, 1995, 1999; Thun, 2006; Unger and Chan, 1996, 1999; White, 1988, 1993; Zhu, 2004). Among these scholars, those who did macro-comparative research tended to describe the Chinese reformist state as sharing the key components exhibited in the economies of its newly industrializing neighbors. These were described as autonomous and powerful states staffed by technical bureaucrats who intervened readily in the economy with policy measures aimed at achieving industrial development in the service of its national interests. But scholars who did local empirical research in China sometimes adopted a more simplified definition which emphasized the state's ambition and policy initiatives for achieving development. Considering that the states these scholars studied were mostly local governmental institutions, they invented the concept of the "local developmental state," since the classic theorists in the paradigm only looked at central/national governmental bodies (see particularly Blecher and Shue, 2001; Thun, 2006; Zhu, 2004). In the case of Yiwu, the economic sociologist Bai Gao and his colleagues have defined the Yiwu city government as a local developmental state by looking at its adaptive policies in promoting industrial and business clustering (Zhen, Gao and Feng, 2016). Building on the dual conceptualizations, this study also tries to demonstrate that the Chinese central and local governments play a developmental role in fostering e-commerce development in the city of Yiwu, even though the outcomes do not satisfy all stakeholders.

The Chinese DS literature has drawn some criticisms. Jude Howell argues that the Chinese Party-state is not a developmental but a polymorphous state assuming multiple and complex forms and behaviors across time and space (Howell, 2006). Although Howell should be credited for pointing out the complexities and contradictions in the workings of the Chinese state, she is too inflexible in understanding intellectual ideas that are essentially social constructs. The concept of developmental state has been loosely defined (Stubbs, 2009) and is only one of the terms coined by scholars to explain the nature of the states in East Asian economies. For example, the "strong, development-oriented state" (Deyo, 1989), the "mercantilist state" (Woo, 1991), the "cohesive capitalist state" (Kohli, 2004), and the "developmental network state" (O'Riain, 2004), have appeared in various academic inquiries, and some authors believe their concepts are more accurate or analytically superior than others. Furthermore,

although Chalmers Johnson is the founder of the DS model, later scholars have constantly added new components (such as “embedded autonomy” and “governed market”) to it (Evans, 1995; Wade, 1990), which indicates that the model itself is a growing enterprise rather than a fixed package. In fact, while DS scholars generally tend to emphasize commonalities in successful government interventions in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, some analysts note that these classic cases vary in many institutional conditions and choices of developmental strategies (Cheng, 1990; Hsieh, 2011; Onis, 1991; Pempel, 1999), which can be understood as multiple forms of developmental states (O’Riain, 2004: 19; Hayashi, 2010). Some shared features in the classic DS model have also been challenged. For example, David Kang argues that the autonomous and uncorrupt bureaucracy in South Korea is just a myth, and the country does not actually have a “pilot agency” directing its development (Kang, 2002: 8). Howell follows DS scholars of the earlier generation to assume that efficient and effective state intervention is a crucial factor in defining a developmental state (Howell, 2006: 286-287; see also Breslin, 1996), whereas other researchers find that successful developmental states may fail in some developmental projects (Wang, 2016; Wong, 2011). Considering the complexities of the DS model, this study follows the Chinese DS literature that defines a developmental state mainly through its developmental ambition and policies, while also considering the extent of its autonomy, capacity, and bureaucracy (see also Beeson, 2017: 176-177; Pirie, 2016: 141).

However, numerous scholars have argued that China’s post-socialist transition has followed a neoliberal path (e.g., Anagnost, Arai and Ren, 2013; Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005; Harvey, 2005; He and Wu, 2009; Hoffman, 2010; Ong, 2006a; Rofel, 2007; Wu, 2008; Yan, 2003; Zhang and Ong, 2008). In regard to the political economy, policies such as rural decollectivization, marketization of labor, fiscal decentralization and weakening of the central state, privatization and corporatization of the state sector, commodification of state services, and deepening of trade liberalization are all taken as evidence of this trend (Harvey, 2005; So, 2009: 51-53). Although some scholars assume that neoliberalism in China is manifested in a homogeneous form as in the West, namely a minimal state facilitating the expansion of market mechanisms, more have written about its specificity. Focusing on the state’s role in economic management, David Harvey argues that China has created a special model of “neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics” in which neoliberal measures are interwoven with authoritarian centralized control (Harvey, 2005: 120). Aihwa Ong suggests that Harvey still sees China as a rather deviant case since his neoliberal typology relies on a normative

definition of neoliberalism. Taking the present existing neoliberal examples found in China and Southeast Asia as a point of departure, Ong proposes that there are multiple forms of neoliberalism that can be utilized by different regimes in different ways to compete in the global economy (Ong, 2006a: 12). While the above scholars concentrate on the spatial diversities of neoliberal assemblages around the world with an eye on the Chinese case, sociologists Alvin So and Yin-Wah Chu have analyzed the evolution of neoliberalism in China in different periods of the Post-Mao era. To them, Chinese reform in the 1980s and 1990s was largely in the neoliberal direction in the classic sense, which has generated tremendous resistance in society. Thus, since the 2000s the state has shifted its reform to “state neoliberalism”, an alternative form of neoliberalism in which the state introduces marketization, deregulation, and privatization, and simultaneously maintains or even strengthens its role as a promoter of economic development and as a welfare provider (Chu and So, 2010; So and Chu, 2012). This literature implies that the Chinese state, despite its strong authoritarian nature and socialist planning legacy, is adaptive to a changing environment and experienced in appropriating neoliberal measures to foster economic development and enhance the nation’s global competitiveness.

Drawing together the Chinese DS literature and the neoliberal China literature, I argue that in developing an e-commerce industry in the country the Chinese state in fact works as a hybrid state that adopts developmental and neoliberal strategies simultaneously. However, the weight of developmental and neoliberal elements vary in the way that the DS model serves as the fundamental principle of the hybrid state, while neoliberal measures are adopted for practical uses. This state operational rationale resembles that of the “neoliberal-developmental state” in contemporary Singapore, which employs neoliberal strategies for developmental purposes (Liow, 2012). Yet, some researchers have noted that the central and the local state may have different degrees of engagement with neoliberalism. On the issue of urban development, geographers Shenjing He and Fulong Wu find that the central state is moderate in adopting a neoliberal land policy as it needs to balance the interests between the market and society, whereas the local state is more radical in promoting neoliberal urbanization (He and Wu, 2009).

However, in the case of e-commerce development in Yiwu my e-trader informants offer a different understanding. They portrayed the central state as more neoliberal and the local state as more developmental. My own fieldwork and documentary research found that the central state does have some policies that may be considered neoliberal

(e.g., advocating self-reliant private business and having the market mechanism play a more important role in e-commerce development), but it also has developmental policies such as financial support for e-commerce enterprises. Because the latter policies are mostly reserved for underdeveloped regions to achieve economic development, Yiwu is excluded from the list of beneficiaries. Having not benefited from the central state's developmental policies and rarely learning detailed information about them from the mass media except for the slogan "mass entrepreneurship and innovation" (*dazhong chuangye wanzhong chuangxin*, 大众创业, 万众创新) Yiwu-based e-traders therefore gain an impression that the central state is "doing nothing but talking." The local state has also formulated some neoliberal policies to facilitate domestic and international trading, such as simplifying customs procedures (both export and import) and visa extension for foreign traders.¹² But because many of my informants are not aware of the recent policy changes, as they are not involved in transnational e-business, in addition to the fact that the local developmental projects are much more visible in the mass media, the impression of the local state as an aggressive developer is constantly reinforced.

More importantly, after giving their views on the roles of the central and the local states in Yiwu's e-commerce development, the e-traders often added that neither of them had contributed to their business growth. The central "neoliberal" state was useless to them because it provided few incentives. The local "developmental" state was useless because its developmental projects went in a wrong direction, which was caused by its officials' inadequate knowledge of e-commerce industry and bureaucratism.¹³ Although they were disappointed by the lack of state support, the e-traders were happy that their businesses had not yet been regulated. They described e-business as a zone out of state control. For instance, to run a Taobao or WeChat business they do not need a license from the government, which helps them avoid taxes and other government fees. Also

¹² Most county-level city governments in China do not have the authority to formulate policies like these. Yiwu is an exception because it has been selected as an experimental point both for Zhejiang provincial government's administrative decentralization reform and the State Council's pilot program of international trade reform. Some scholars have pointed out that Yiwu is arguably the most autonomous county in the entire country (Wu, Ramesh and Yu, 2017).

¹³ Taking the East Asian miracle for granted, earlier DS literature tried to uncover the secrets of this success. The scholarship is therefore largely a post-factual analysis. Efficient and effective bureaucracy was assumed to be a core element of the East Asian developmental states. However, Robert Wade has admitted in his work that despite much research, the DS scholars still knew "rather little about the inner workings of East Asian bureaucracies generally" (Wade, 1990: 337). Since the 1990s, more scholars have started to conduct research inside the bureaucratic systems and have found that the bureaucrats might not always make the right decisions and carry out policies effectively because of their inadequate knowledge of certain industries as well as market uncertainty (Wang, 2016; Wong, 2011). In other words, developmental states may also fail. This study adds a subjective dimension to the DS literature. To assess the effectiveness of a developmental state, we should study not only figures (such as the rise of GDP and GNP) but also the personal experiences of common people. After all, they are the targets of and participants in national development.

because of the lack of business registration and the fact that their businesses are operated online, the e-traders are flexible in choosing offline locations in order to avoid state surveillance—this is especially important for those who sell counterfeit goods. By investigating the e-traders’ perceptions of and experiences with the hybrid states and their understanding of the emergence of a laissez-faire local e-commerce economy, I further argue that although the Chinese hybrid states may play a certain role in shaping the neoliberal e-commerce market in Yiwu, it is the practically un-regulated private (mainly small and medium-sized) e-businesses that generate its prosperity. More broadly, this study suggests that a neoliberal economy may be driven not only by neoliberal states, transnational corporations and international financial institutions (e.g., World Bank, IMF, and WTO), but also by grassroots market players in creating a form of grassroots neoliberalism.¹⁴

To elaborate my argument, the hybrid states may help build grassroots neoliberal e-commerce economy in the way that their neoliberal strategies lead to relative toleration and un-regulation of private e-businesses, because the booming e-commerce sector may serve as a new engine for the country’s continuous economic growth. This reflects the anticipated convergence of state developmentalism and neoliberalism. However, there is also an unanticipated convergence, as the hybrid states’ exclusive developmental strategies (which my informants understand as misleading and ineffective) may divert their attention and energy from intervening in the grassroots e-commerce market, which opens a door for the grassroots market players to operate the market on their own. The reason for highlighting the unanticipated convergence is that the DS model often assumes that the bureaucracy of a developmental state is highly rational and that its bureaucrats are competent enough to make and implement the right industrial policies, and therefore the given country’s ultimate economic success is a result of the state elites’ planning (Kohli, 2004: 10-13). In this study, although the e-traders acknowledge the officials’ capacity in initiating the wholesale trading clusters and accelerating economic growth in Yiwu in the past two decades, they are skeptical of the latter’s full competence. In particular, they are critical of government officials’ inadequate knowledge of their industry and bureaucratism that cause many problems in local e-commerce developmental projects. Considering the ineffectiveness of the state’s intervention, the e-traders tend to see e-commerce development in Yiwu as a

¹⁴ The idea of grassroots neoliberalism is partially inspired by Latin American anthropologist Verónica Gago. She has explored how informal business activities of marginalized groups, such as migrant workers, vendors, and sweatshop workers, generate neoliberal discourses and practices in a street market in Argentina. She terms the process “neoliberalism from below” (Gago, 2017).

spontaneous consequence of the evolution of the grassroots market rather than as a result of state planning.¹⁵

The e-traders' view reminds us to take notice of the statist tendency in the DS literature, and to make a balanced assessment of the roles of the state, market and other participants in local industrial development. Although Chalmers Johnson states that he has never said or implied that the state was solely responsible for the economic achievements in the East Asian newly industrializing economies (Johnson, 1999: 34), the DS model has been part of the scholarly trend that replaces the market with the state at the center in the analysis of economic development since the 1980s (e.g., Evans, Rueschemeyer and Skocpol, 1985; Leftwich, 2000; Weiss and Hobson, 1995). This study aims to bring the neoliberal market back into the political economic analysis of countries with developmental states.¹⁶ In the Chinese case, I suggest that while the state is important in fostering economic development and nourishing certain industries, the role of a grassroots neoliberal market should not be ignored or underestimated. We should pay attention to the dark side of neoliberalism, such as exploitation and repression, as many left-wing scholars have found (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001; Ferguson, 2006; particularly in China, see Anagnost, 2004; Pun, 2005; Yan, 2003). But we may also need to note its potential for inducing grassroots entrepreneurship and economic prosperity. The economist Yasheng Huang has argued that the true economic miracle in China's three-decade reform was not created by the state but by the bottom-up (rural) entrepreneurship. He remarks that "When small-scale, market-oriented, broad based, and politically independent rural entrepreneurship is accorded greater operating freedom and supported by policies, entrepreneurial capitalism thrives and produces many of its associated virtuous effects" (Huang, 2008: 9). Similarly, sociologists Victor Nee and Sonja Opper contend that private enterprise, as the actual engine of China's economic miracle, does not originate at the top but grows up from below by overcoming the obstacles set up by the state (Nee and Opper, 2012). These discussions resonate in my informants' explanation of the e-commerce miracle in Yiwu and their own business

¹⁵ Despite the e-traders' neglect, I should mention that the central and local governments have built an excellent transport infrastructure of highways and train lines linking Yiwu to other places. For e-traders, this infrastructure is another advantage for conducting e-business in Yiwu.

¹⁶ Existing literature has discussed the neoliberalization of East Asian developmental states since the mid-1990s. Opinions are divided in this discussion. Some scholars emphasize that neoliberal reforms have brought the developmental states to termination (Kim, 1999; Pirie, 2016, 2018), but others argue that the DS model remains in this region but works in a modified way (Lee and Han, 2006; Weiss, 2003; Thurbon, 2016). I suggest the Chinese hybrid state is closer to the latter description, but it adopted neoliberal measures a long time ago. Apart from the neoliberalization of the state, this research also looks at the role of grassroots neoliberalism in reconfiguring Chinese society. For a comprehensive review of the convergence of state developmentalism and neoliberalism in East and Southeast Asia, see Carroll and Jarvis (2017).

successes. They do not know scholarly concepts such as neoliberalism and the developmental state, but their experiences in the grassroots e-commerce market have shaped their understanding of the roles of the state and market, which are close to the definitions of the concepts. Considering that the statist (and elitist) DS scholarship has seldom taken ordinary people's views into consideration, this study approaches the political economy of e-commerce development by investigating how state developmentalism, mixing with neoliberalism, is locally experienced.

The initiative of “mass entrepreneurship and innovation” (MEI): a “neoliberal-developmental” project of the Chinese central state

Mr. Wu was in the welcoming crowd when Prime Minister Li Keqiang visited Qingyanliu village on 19 November 2014. When I interviewed him half a year later, he still felt excited to have seen the state leader. However, when asked what impact Li's visit had on e-traders in the village, Wu started to complain. Because Li held Qingyanliu as a model of his “mass entrepreneurship and innovation” initiative, Wu thought his visit might bring public attention and beneficial policies to e-traders. The village indeed attracted public attention when it captured the headlines of the Chinese mainstream media, but Wu said they had not received any material benefits, because the government did not have concrete policies to support individual e-traders. Instead, since the village had become famous nationwide, the rent almost doubled in 2015. Many e-traders were planning to move or had left. Wu poked fun at his fellow e-traders for gaining fame but losing a fortune, while the local villagers obtained both fame and wealth even though they had not actually become involved in e-business.

To date, the state's promotion of e-commerce entrepreneurship has mostly been carried out under the name of “mass entrepreneurship and innovation” (MEI). This has made the phrase well-known among my informants in Yiwu (see Figure 2.2). The MEI initiative was first proposed by Li Keqiang when he gave a speech at the Summer Davos Forum in September 2014. After his visit to Yiwu, Li delivered another speech on MEI at the First World Internet Conference-Wuzhen Summit. This time, he praised Qingyanliu as a case exemplifying grassroots entrepreneurship. Thereafter, the idea of MEI appeared frequently in executive meetings of the Chinese State Council, and it became part of the national strategy of building “Internet Plus” economies in China.¹⁷

¹⁷ “Internet Plus” refers to the application of the internet and other information technology in conventional industries. By adopting this strategy, the Chinese government wants to use the internet as a driving force to upgrade conventional industries and foster new industries. Ultimately, this is meant to

China observers have pointed out that Li's reform initiative is largely pro-market or even neoliberal, as he has tried to reduce the state's role in the economy and stimulate market liberalization (Barboza and Buckley, 2013; So and Chu, 2015: 104-106). This tendency is also observable in his MEI initiative. The Prime Minister has formulated a number of policies that aim at cultivating an entrepreneurial ethos in the younger generation and facilitating their businesses when they set up private start-ups. For instance, in a resolution on promoting grassroots entrepreneurship nationwide launched in June 2015, the State Council suggests that the market should play a *determining* role in allocating resources, while the state should facilitate market mechanisms.¹⁸ Detailed measures include abolishing outdated regulations and restrictions on private enterprises, reducing the tax burden of small businesses, encouraging start-ups to acquire capital from the financial market or foreign investors, simplifying administrative procedures for business registration and inspection, breaking down local trade protectionism, strengthening the protection of intellectual property, eliminating institutional obstacles for labor mobility, and so forth. In so doing, the State Council expects to liberalize the market and nourish more active market players (SCPRC, 2015b; see also SCPRC, 2015c).

propel economic development in the country, see the State Council of the People's Republic of China (hereafter, SCPRC) (2015a).

¹⁸ It is important to note the changing position of the market in the so-called Chinese "socialist market economy." There was little place for the market to play a role in the Maoist years. Since the mid-1980s, the market was defined as an important mechanism supplementing the central-planning state. The 14th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Congress in 1992 decided to have the market play a "foundational" (*jichuxing* 基础性) role in the Chinese national economy. Starting from its 3rd plenary session of the 18th central committee in 2013, CCP upgraded the status of market as the "determining" (*juedingxing* 决定性) mechanism and wrote this into its Party Constitution in the 19th Party Congress in 2017. For interpretations of these rhetorical changes, see Huang (2013).



Figure 2.2: A billboard of “Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation” outside an e-commerce industrial park.

In parallel with its introduction of the above neoliberal measures to enhance the role of the market in fostering and advancing grassroots entrepreneurship, the Chinese central state takes on many tasks that a typical neoliberal state may not do. For instance, it has claimed to increase government spending on supporting small e-commerce and other information technology enterprises, help their businesses grow by giving them government projects, urge state banks to lend them money, and even encourage state-owned enterprises to invest in them (SCPRC, 2015b). Furthermore, although it stresses the importance of protecting intellectual property, the state wants to propel large internet companies to share their data and technologies with small start-ups in order to have the latter grow more rapidly (SCPRC, 2015c). To monitor the implementation of existing policies and plan new ones, the State Council has established a “pilot agency” called “the joint committee for boosting mass entrepreneurship and innovation” (*tuijin dazhong chuangye wanzhong chuangxin buji lianxi huiyi*, 推进大众创业万众创新部际联席会议). This committee is made up of high-ranking representatives from twenty-four ministries and bureaus (SCPRC, 2015d). These state interventions, as the State Council describes it in its resolutions, aim to maintain economic growth, upgrade industrial structures, create more job opportunities for citizens and increase their income, and ultimately make China a strong nation globally (see for example, SCPRC, 2015b). Reading the resolutions on the MEI initiative, we can easily find the Chinese central

state's developmental ambition and its agenda to achieve its goals. Although scholars often use "developmental" and "neoliberal" to describe two polar forms of political economies in terms of the state's actions and orientations, the Chinese state has no difficulty in combining measures from both in its agenda.

Considering that the central state has launched so many seemingly supportive policies, why do e-traders in Yiwu still see it as useless? There are several reasons. First, timing is important. Before Li Keqiang proposed the MEI initiative, there were few central government policies targeting individual e-commerce entrepreneurs. And most policies of the MEI initiative came out after 2014. At that time, the majority of my informants had already started their businesses without support from the state. Their past experiences led them to deny that the state might be a potential helper for private entrepreneurs.

Those e-traders who started their careers in 2014 and 2015 have also found the central state policies meaningless, because they were unspecific and unenforceable. For instance, in the above resolutions the State Council addresses the grassroots businesses signifying "mass entrepreneurship and innovation" as "small- and micro-enterprises" (*xiaowei qiye*, 小微企业), but it has not defined the size of these enterprises clearly. Some of my informants who had just begun their careers thought their self-employed businesses met the state's categorization of "small- and micro-enterprises" and they thus approached state banks for loans.¹⁹ All of them received rejections because the banks saw them as unqualified. One e-trader felt especially angry because a loan officer told him that the bank only lent money to well-performing "small- and micro-enterprises." In one recent case, the enterprise had about fifty employees with an annual turnover of two million yuan. The e-trader argued that the bank's exclusive lending discriminated against self-employed businesses and thus violated the state policy of encouraging mass entrepreneurship. In response, the officer asserted that the bank was also a business that tended to avoid market risk, "We are not a charity giving out money; we need sustainable loan interest to run the institution and pay our staff." The e-trader then turned to criticize the central government for its failure in clarifying and enforcing the MEI policies.

The new start-ups failed to obtain bank loans because they had not proved their profitability, whereas some promising enterprises also received rejections because they

¹⁹ Except for a private entrepreneur who cooperated with the local government in building an e-commerce industrial park, I had few informants approach the government for funding support. This was because they never thought they could get financial aid from the state.

lacked the collateral that the banks wanted. Although many banks claimed that they had credit-based loans for small- and micro-enterprises, they preferred borrowers who could provide collateral, especially real estate. As a strategy to lower risk, this lending preference was institutionalized in the banks to the extent that the loan officers seldom mentioned credit-based plans to borrowers unless the latter specifically asked. When borrowers did ask, the officers would tell them that the loans in those plans were very small and that it was difficult to get approval from bank authorities. As a result, my informants who received loans from banks were exclusively people that owned property in Yiwu. Until now, the state has made no effort to regulate the lending preferences of the banks.²⁰

However, the most crucial reason why e-traders to consider the central state useless is that its policies for small- and micro-enterprises are not relevant to the majority of Taobao and WeChat e-businesses. The targeted enterprises in the state policies are those that have registered at the State Bureau of Industry and Commerce and received business licences. But most Taobao and WeChat e-businesses are not officially registered since these platforms do not require government licences but just personal identification cards.²¹ In fact, to start a business without a government licence is attractive to the e-traders, which means that they can save both time and energy of negotiating with the state in the course of business registration and inspection. More importantly, they are able to evade taxes and other state charges. Meanwhile, the state policies of encouraging enterprises to join financial markets and protecting intellectual property mean nothing to e-traders, and may even harm them, since their small businesses have little chance of ever being listed on the stock exchange and their commodities often copy other sellers' products. Furthermore, the wide reach of the e-commerce market has already broken down trade protectionism for e-shops. Considering that many e-traders only have an abstract idea of the state policies on grassroots entrepreneurship and do not actually care about issues concerning financial markets, intellectual property, and trade protectionism, money becomes the single most important factor for them in deciding whether or not to obtain a government licence.

²⁰ Kellee Tsai (2002) finds that, in the 1980s and 90s, state banks only lent money to state-owned enterprises, and private businesses had no access to official sources of credit at all. After the private sector was officially recognized and private entrepreneurs were allowed to join the Chinese Communist Party in the early 2000s, large private enterprises might have an easier time obtaining loans from state banks. But small private businesses still faced institutional obstacles.

²¹ However, e-traders who run business on Tmall, Jingdong, and Amazon have to obtain government licences since this is a requirement for these e-platforms. My discussion focuses on Taobao e-traders because they are the majority of the e-trading group in Yiwu as well as among my informants. WeChat e-traders are included because most of them also do not have licences.

Most Taobao and WeChat e-traders choose not to. As one informant explained, “I don’t see any advantage in getting a licence, only disadvantages. A licence does not help you obtain state financial support or bank loans, but is sure to charge you taxes and fees. Even if the government reduces the tax burden on the enterprises, it takes a lot in taxes. By not registering with the government, I can keep all my profits.”

Based on the above entrepreneurial experiences and calculations of the benefits and costs of state policies, e-traders in Yiwu portrayed the MEI initiative as “empty talk.” Some of them further generalized their situation to include grassroots entrepreneurs from all over the country. From their point of view, what the central state had no desire to intervene but only stood by and left the entrepreneurs to fend for themselves in the market. This might be true in Yiwu, if we consider the gap between the e-traders’ expectations and the local implementation of the MEI policies, but it may not be the case elsewhere in China. During my fieldwork I attended the 3rd Taobao Village High Summit that was co-organized by the Alibaba Group and Zhejiang Provincial Department of Commerce. Participants of this summit included not only representative e-traders but also village cadres and government officials from all over the country. A county official from Hebei Province told me that the central government had initiated a project that provided each county with 25 million yuan to foster a local e-commerce industry. Since I had never heard of this project from either Yiwu-based e-traders or my friends in the local government, I had to do some documentary research to find out about the project. Eventually, I discovered that in 2014 the Ministry of Commerce initiated a pilot project called “Having E-Commerce Enter Villages” (*dianzi shangwu jin nongcun*, 电子商务进农村), and each selected pilot county received a fund of 20 million yuan (The Information Office of the Ministry of Commerce, 2017; Yang and Zhang, 2017). However, because this project mainly targeted underdeveloped regions in central and western parts of China, Yiwu was excluded from the list of beneficiaries.

“Upgrading the marketplace with e-commerce”: the local state’s developmentalist implementation of the MEI initiative

In contrast to the central state, my informants believed that the local state has been more aggressive in developing the e-commerce economy. Its general strategy is locally known as “upgrading the marketplace with e-commerce” (*dianshang huan shi*, 电商换市). First proposed by the Zhejiang provincial government in 2012, this strategy aims to e-commercialize trade and consumption in order to expand the market for Zhejiangese

entrepreneurs and to upgrade industrial structures in the province (Zhejiang Provincial Government, 2012). The Yiwu local government has adopted this strategy by developing e-commerce as the “strategic and guiding industry” (*zhanluxing xiandao chanye*, 战略性先导产业) in the local economy. To carry out the strategy, the Yiwu city government has established a special administrative unit named “the head office of e-commerce work” (*dianzishangwu gongzuo lingdao xiaozu*, 电子商务工作领导小组). Its missions include: (1) formulating annual plans of e-commerce development for the city and monitoring progress; (2) guiding, managing, and supervising the e-commerce industry in the city; (3) bringing in and fostering e-commerce enterprises, encouraging offline business to move online, and building a complete service system facilitating e-business; (4) distributing state funds to start-ups, monitoring their uses, and assessing the results; (5) publicizing the local e-commerce industry and promoting national and international cooperation; (6) designing and constructing e-commerce clusters (e.g., e-commerce industrial parks and model e-commerce villages), and guiding local operators to recruit investment (Yiwu City’s Head Office of E-Commerce Work, n.d.).

With the assistance of the head office of e-commerce work, the local state has taken numerous developmental measures. It has (1) guided the state-holding enterprise Yiwu China Commodities City Group to establish the Yiwugou (义乌购) e-platform and have all wholesalers in Yiwu Marketplaces to move online; (2) brought in several national and transnational e-commerce enterprises (e.g., DHgate.com and IZP) to set up subsidiaries in Yiwu; (3) constructed 18 e-commerce industrial parks (by May 2014); (4) held several international e-commerce exhibitions; (5) launched a training program to foster 300,000 e-commerce talents locally through publicly-funded training within two years (Chen, 2014; Jin, 2014; Lin, 2014; Wang, 2014). These measures were later placed under the name of “mass entrepreneurship and innovation” after Li Keqiang proposed the phrase, which made the projects of “upgrading the marketplace with e-commerce” finally serving the local implementation of the MEI initiative.

The developmental projects of the local state allocate tremendous resources to the e-commerce industry. For instance, in order to recruit large national and transnational e-commerce enterprises, the local state promises them privileges to use land and loans in the city. The state has established a sector fund of 100 million yuan to support potential e-commerce enterprises, in addition to an extra 50 million yuan financial budget for the head office of e-commerce work to subsidize model e-commerce enterprises. If the enterprises are willing to settle down in existing e-commerce industrial parks, they can

use the space free of rent for a fixed term (usually more than one year). If their annual taxes exceed 500,000 yuan, the state will give them monetary rewards (reducing 100% of their taxes in the first three years, and 50% in the next two years). If they have high-tech research projects, the state may give them one-off funds that cover 50% of their total research expenditures (the maximum is two million yuan per project). Local e-commerce enterprises may equally enjoy these benefits as long as they are large and famous. The state also encourages local large manufacturing enterprises to move online by providing them with monetary incentives (Yiwu City Communist Party Committee and City Government, 2013).

So far, more resources have been spent on building an e-commerce infrastructure (e.g., e-commerce industrial parks, logistics parks), publicizing Yiwu's image as an e-commerce center nationally and internationally, and training e-commerce talents. The construction of e-commerce industrial parks has probably taken the largest proportion of the state's spending. In May 2014, only 4 of 18 e-commerce industrial parks in Yiwu were built and run by the private sector (Bao, 2014). By November 2017, the total number of industrial parks in the city had increased to 30, and it seemed that most of them were still operated by state institutions (Wang, 2017). The largest park named "Yiwu International E-Commerce City" (later renamed as "Lugang E-Commerce Town") was built by a local state-owned enterprise, and occupied 3.3 square kilometers and cost about 8 billion yuan. Its first phase was completed and put into use in December 2016 (Chen and Fu, 2016) (see Figure 2.3). The project for building Yiwu's public image was also costly. In recent years, the Yiwu city government has created a fixed annual budget of 5 million yuan for this "publicity work" (Yiwu City Communist Party Committee and City Government, 2013), in addition to the countless "official reception expenditures" spent on entertaining visitors (e.g., senior authorities, journalists, and investors). Although I have not found the figure of the expenses on training e-commerce talents, some critics have pointed out that the training courses are completely managed by the government (Zhu, 2016). Since the scale of the activity is as large as 300,000 trainees and its duration lasts for many years, the cost could be considerable.



Figure 2.3: Lugang E-Commerce Town, Yiwu's largest e-commerce industrial park.

Like other East Asian developmental states, the local state in Yiwu has long been keen to promote export-oriented trade. Before the 2008 financial crisis, Yiwu's wholesale business mainly targeted the Euro-American markets. But in the last decade, the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia and Russia have become its major export markets. In 2011, the city was selected by the State Council as a pilot point for experimenting by way of a free-trade zone along with Shanghai Pudong, and transnational e-commerce became an important part in the second phase of this pilot project (Jin, 2015). With the advantages brought by the wholesale marketplace, the local government was quite optimistic that transnational e-commerce would be a new engine fueling the city's economic growth and accordingly implemented a series of measures to encourage this sub-industry. Policies that were designed for all e-commerce enterprises state that the conditions for e-traders conducting transnational e-business to enjoy state benefits are much lower than those for their counterparts engaging in domestic e-business. For instance, the local government stipulates that "leading" e-commerce enterprises may use the space in local industrial parks free of charge. In order to qualify for this benefit, an e-trader conducting a domestic e-business has to have an annual sales volume of 100 million yuan or an average daily sales of 3,000 items. But his counterparts in a transnational e-business only needs to have an annual sales volume of 30 million yuan or a daily sales of 2,000 items (Yiwu City's Head Office of E-Commerce Work and the Bureau of Finance, 2013). Furthermore, the government has formulated special policies for more support of transnational e-commerce. For instance, to attract transnational e-platforms and internet service providers (eBay, Amazon, AliExpress and Google as the

given examples) to set up subsidiaries in Yiwu, the government promises to provide them with subsidized office space and refund all their taxes in the first two years. “Leading” e-commerce companies, including transnational enterprises, are favored with heavy discounts on property in order to construct office buildings or purchase offices in existing e-commerce industrial parks. The government has also established a special sector fund of 1 billion to support promising enterprises in transnational e-business. These e-traders are also entitled to a reward of 0.04 yuan for each dollar of exports based on the customs’ trade statistics (for other measures, see Yiwu City Government, 2016).

What impact have these local state policies and projects had on Yiwu’s e-commerce industry so far? How do Yiwu-based e-traders perceive these policies? Although the local government has succeeded in recruiting some e-platforms (e.g., DHgate.com, IZP and LightInTheBox) which have set up subsidiaries in the city, it has not yet been able to attract its ideal targets, such as eBay, Amazon, AliExpress, and Google. Neither has it assembled other online sellers with large sales volumes. In an auditor’s report, the Yiwu City Audit Office revealed several problems in the implementation of these policies. For instance, the head office of e-commerce work has an annual budget of 50 million yuan to subsidize e-commerce enterprises. But in 2014, only 62 enterprises made applications and 47 of them finally received the subsidies, amounting to merely 8.7 million yuan. In particular, while the government had allocated money to subsidize high-tech research projects, no e-commerce enterprises actually got the fund in that year. The reason for the ineffective implementation of the policies, as the audit office figured out, was that the government set a high criteria for the enterprises to be beneficiaries in terms of their sales volumes, amounts of taxes, and sizes of office space. Since small- and medium-sized e-businesses made up the majority in Yiwu, few of them could meet those criteria (Yiwu City Audit Office, 2015).

The audit office’s finding resonates with my informants, who are mostly running small- and medium-sized e-businesses. A common perception among these people is that the local government is picking big winners while ignoring smaller ones. The e-traders who have learned the state policies from the mass media bear in mind the government’s emphasis that for enterprises to be selected, they must be “large,” “leading,” “national,” or “transnational.” Mr. Wu commented that these criteria were unrealistic. He noted, “How could the government expect eBay and Google to set up offline subsidiaries in Yiwu? A nonlocal e-commerce enterprise with an annual sales volume of 100 million must have built a stable supply chain in the place where its

headquarters is located, so why does it want to move to Yiwu?” Wu believed that the government should make more effort to foster local small- and medium-sized e-businesses. It had indeed done some work for them, such as providing e-commerce training, but the result was far from satisfactory.

The e-commerce training initiative was carried out like an educational campaign (see Figure 2.4). The targeted population included factory owners, traders in wholesale marketplaces, and commercial streets, as well as government officials. For the first two groups, training courses for wholesalers were organized by operators of the marketplaces, whereas those for factory owners and traders in commercial streets were organized by urban street and rural township officials. With the funding provided by the head office of e-commerce work, the marketplace operators and officials employed “experts” from nearby universities and local e-commerce training institutions to give lectures to audiences. Although some of my informants thought the courses were fine, quite a few suggested that they were just a waste of time. Miss Zhu is a wholesaler in the Yiwu International Trade Marketplace, but she also runs a Taobao e-shop. She had been required by the marketplace operator to attend a series of e-commerce training courses. The first course taught the audience “what e-commerce is and why it is important.” The second course was about “how to use some computer software.” The third course introduced some basic skills of establishing and operating e-shops. As an experienced e-trader, Zhu said that these courses were too simple after she attended the first class. However, when she tried to skip the following classes, she was told by the marketplace operator that it was compulsory for all wholesalers to complete the courses. Mr. Wu’s business partner Mr. Mao ran a factory in a town of Yiwu. He was also asked by local officials to attend similar training courses, even though he had told them that his products were already being sold online. According to Wu and Mao, the city government had assigned quotas to the urban street offices and rural township governments. To achieve the goal of training 300,000 e-commerce talents for the city in two years, local officials sometimes even paid peasants to attend the courses. While Wu had heard officials justify their practice as inspiring peasants about e-commerce with material incentives, he believed it was more a tactic (known as “counting heads”) to produce figures for the higher authorities. Being discontented with the local government’s predilections for large and transnational e-business and its troubling “help” to small and local ones, my informants tended to see the local developmental state as useless.



Figure 2.4: State-led e-commerce training campaign.

Problematic state developmentalism vs. grassroots neoliberalism: ordinary e-traders' narratives of Yiwu's e-commerce development

Experiences with central and local state policies constitute an important part of the e-traders' narrative of entrepreneurship and the e-commerce miracle in Yiwu. By stressing the central state's inaction and the local state's ignorance, my informants identified themselves as self-reliant entrepreneurs whose small- and medium-sized e-businesses laid the cornerstone for the booming e-commerce economy in Yiwu. This narrative not only counteracted the local state's developmental plan of propelling local e-commerce development by recruiting large and transnational e-commerce enterprises and constructing e-commerce industrial parks, it also is distanced from the central state's neoliberal-developmental agenda of mobilizing mass entrepreneurship under the state's guidance.

Criticizing the problems in state developmental projects is a common strategy for Yiwu-based e-traders to assert their self-reliance and independence. In our visit to the "E-Trader Service District," Mr. Ding criticized the local government for being too old-fashioned in developing an e-commerce industry by building industrial parks, which he believed would not have any effect because this approach failed to consider the local conditions and the needs of e-traders. For Ding, "local conditions" referred to the fact that most e-traders in Yiwu ran small- and medium-sized e-businesses (this is also acknowledged in the above Yiwu audit office's report). A crucial need of these e-traders was inexpensive housing where they could live, work, and store goods in one location.

The empty and desolate environment of the E-Trader Service District appeared to confirm his criticism. Mr. Liu was also critical of the Yiwu city government's developmental approach, but he had moved his criticism beyond a focus on this single locality. I learned his view when we attended the third Taobao Villages High Summit in Lishui Prefecture, Zhejiang Province. One program of this high summit was to visit local e-commerce industrial parks. In one state-run park, after listening to a guide's introduction, we were given time to look around a branded enterprise on the first floor. Liu and I soon finished and went upstairs to the second and the third floors where we found most of the enterprises closed. Even though the nameplates of the enterprises were still displayed on the wall, most offices were empty. Some offices had desks and shelves, but it appeared that these facilities had not been used for a long time. Two e-shops remained open, but there were only three people there. Observing this scene, Liu recalled his visits to several e-commerce industrial parks in Yiwu that had similar problems. Many offices in the parks remained unused, and some enterprises moved out after a short period. Liu recalled his friend's experience of working in a large e-commerce enterprise located in one park.

The offices are empty because the parks want large enterprises. But Yiwu does not actually have so many large e-commerce enterprises. (I asked why they had this preference.) It is because large ones have larger sales volumes. That's important for the industrial parks. They are under the heavy pressure from the government to produce fruits in a short period of time. The government sets targets for them, and they pass on the tasks to the enterprises. If the parks achieve their official targets, they will receive both honors and more subsidies from the government. If they do not, they will be criticized and receive fewer subsidies. These parks impose similar rules on the enterprises in their jurisdiction. I know some will terminate their contracts if the enterprises do not meet their targets. Businesses are risky undertakings, but how can we guarantee the consequences? Moreover, in the state-run parks entrepreneurs are often asked to receive visitors, usually government officials, to give speeches at start-up forums and to attend political training, which are of little relevance to their own business needs. I won't move into the parks even if they are free!

Liu believed the industrial parks in Lishui must follow the same pattern, otherwise

there would not be so many closed-down enterprises. Combining the examples of Yiwu and Lishui, Liu described the massive construction of e-commerce industrial parks as a case of an “E-Commerce Great Leap Forward” (*dianshang dayuejin*, 电商大跃进) and suggested that this developmental approach was unlikely to succeed, not only because of the officials’ bureaucratic intervention, but more fundamentally because of their overconfidence in their expertise and power, “as if they can achieve e-commerce development overnight as long as they want to, regardless of market risk.”

My informants were not only dissatisfied with the Yiwu city government’s current developmental approach, but with its promotion of packaging itself as a farsseeing government that had long ago drawn a blueprint for local e-commerce industry. Mr. Ye migrated from Henan Province to Yiwu in 2006 and started his e-business in 2009. He suggested that the e-commerce success in Yiwu had little to do with the local government, but was rather a result of the e-traders’ own endeavors. The government put its main effort into building e-commerce industrial parks, which all came out after 2012. At that time, Yiwu was already famous nationwide for its concentration of e-traders who had generated large sales. But as the industry prospered, the government claimed credit (“shamelessly,” as Ye emphasized), which contrasted with its dismissive attitude just a few years earlier. Having stayed in the e-traders’ circle for a long time, Ye was quite knowledgeable about local e-commerce anecdotes and told me one story. In 2006, Ma Yun, the founder of the Alibaba Group, requested Lou Zhongping, who was honored as “the king of straw” in Yiwu, to help him contact the local government for business cooperation. The government refused because the officials thought Ma and Alibaba were not qualified to merit such cooperation, regarding e-commerce as insignificant in comparison with Yiwu’s wholesale marketplace, which was already the biggest in China at that time.²² With this attitude, the government was also indifferent to grassroots e-traders. It was not until 2010 or 2011, several years after the global financial crisis that the officials realized that Alibaba was creating a business miracle online and that the local e-commerce economy in Yiwu was rapidly expanding in contrast to the poor growth rate of the wholesale market economy. It was at this time that the government began focusing on the importance of the e-commerce economy.

Numerous e-traders who started their e-businesses before the 2010s mentioned to

²² Lou Zhongping is a local entrepreneur who was said to be the largest seller of straw in China. He had succeeded in expanding the market for his products through online channels. As a case exemplifying how traditional manufacturing industries could adapt to the internet age, his entrepreneurial experience was widely taught at local e-commerce training institutions. I heard about Ma Yun and Lou’s story from several informants who said it had been reported by the media. But I have not found any written sources on it.

me that the local government was less attentive to the e-commerce sector before the financial crisis, as there were few state policies and news reports on it. Even after it started to intervene, it made no significant difference or change to the grassroots e-traders because the local government paid more attention to the recruitment of large e-commerce enterprises and the construction of e-commerce industrial parks. The previous state of ignorance and the current inattention both contributed to the lack of state support for the small- and medium-sized e-businesses. However, these state actions also created a less regulatory business environment in Yiwu, in which small e-traders could retain their own agency.

This situation gave rise to the emergence of a grassroots neoliberal e-commerce market, which was characterized by the expansion of private and unregulated enterprises, and the penetration of market logic into the entrepreneurs' everyday life. Every year thousands of people are attracted to the industry. By the end of 2013, there were more than 200,000 e-traders in the city, and 113,000 of them ran Taobao e-shops (Lin, 2014). There is little doubt that the vast majority of these e-businesses are privately owned. There are only a few exceptions, such as the Yiwugou e-platform (owned by a state-holding company) and the state-run industrial parks (if they may be defined broadly as e-businesses). Because they are numerous but small in size and because the local government favors large and transnational enterprises, most of these private e-businesses have not become the objects of local state corporatism (cf. Oi, 1995; Unger and Chan, 1999). Neither does the state impose constraints on this private sector. The resulting grassroots neoliberalism resembles classic neoliberalism with respect to the declining role of the state and the rising role of the market in the local economy. However, there are still differences between the two. In particular, classic neoliberalism assumes that state intervention in an economy is always evil and should be limited. An ideal positioning of the state is therefore as market-facilitating machinery. But the grassroots neoliberalism I found in Yiwu, as a form of "actually existing neoliberalism," was a consequence of the confluence of market dynamics, the local state's ignorance, and probably also the central state's conscious toleration. And the e-traders, as the subjects of the grassroots neoliberalism, were indifferent or resistant to state intervention not because they were believers in classic neoliberalism, but because they were dissatisfied with the existing state actions.

Mr. Wu's narrative in this context is illustrative. During our conversation about his opinion on the impact of Li Keqiang's visit to Qingyanliu village, Wu complained that it had not generated any concrete policy from the state to support e-traders. "I used to

think that there was no policy for e-traders because the government had not noticed the e-commerce sector. Now the Prime Minister has noticed it, but there is still no concrete policy. So I tell my friends, ‘Don’t place hopes on the government, but on yourselves.’” Wu saw himself as an example of how a member of the lower class person could start from scratch on his own initiative. Born into a poor rural family in Jiangxi Province, he said he had dreamed of having his own business when he was young. After graduating from high school in 2004, he migrated to Yiwu. Wu first found a job in a factory and worked hard to save enough to go into business. In early 2006, he bought a second-hand pickup truck and started to make a living by transporting cargo for wholesalers in the marketplaces. One day in 2008, he transported a whole carload of daily necessities to a customer who ran an e-business in Qingyanliu village. The e-trader told Wu that his Taobao e-shops sold out his entire stock within a matter of days. Wu was startled and decided to enter the business. He requested that the wholesaler who had hired him previously to transport goods to supply him with products. But the wholesaler refused, claiming that the volume of his orders was too small. In the following days, he encountered similar problems when looking for other suppliers in the wholesale marketplaces. “The wholesalers just did not pay attention to small buyers. When you went into their stalls, they would not even talk to you if you did not dress like a big boss. Some wholesalers might talk to you, but after learning that you only wanted one or two dozens, they would say they did not retail. You know, two dozen goods were still retail business to them.” Finally, Wu overcame the problem by only going to stalls that were run by elderly businesspeople. As he explained, this was not because the elderly were nicer, but that they also wanted small profits in addition to big ones.

Finding suppliers is not the only problem e-traders have to face. The operation of e-shops itself is a hard task. Although opening an e-shop is not very difficult (on the procedure of opening Taobao e-shops, see Chapter 4), developing a profitable business requires dedication. Wu described to me at length about how he spent a lot of money, time and energy on learning and practicing e-commerce skills such as testing the marketability of various products, updating the e-shops, and communicating with customers. After his business prospered, he hired two employees to help him with customer service and parcel packaging, but oftentimes he still had to work to midnight. “My computer is 24 hours online. I will get up to answer customers even when I am sleeping.” Therefore, I often observed signs of sleep deprivation in Wu. Also, because he was busy, Wu formed an irregular eating habit which caused health problems. Despite these concerns, Wu was proud of his growing business. “I don’t quite regret

sacrificing my health for my career. We have to pay for every success. E-shops are business. Our lives are also business.”

The analogy between individual life and business is a telling example of how economic reasoning gets embedded in the e-traders’ minds. The experience of conducting e-business in Yiwu not only commercializes their everyday thinking and way of life, but also strengthens their identification with the market. Without state support, e-traders have to find all the resources for their business and lives from the market. In dealing with them, their landlords, business partners, suppliers, employees, customers, and other service providers (e.g., e-platforms and logistics companies) all calculate costs and returns in monetary terms. In Chapter 4, I will discuss the perceptions of Yiwu local residents towards migrant e-traders. Because of their rising financial and sociocultural standing, the e-traders have earned respect from the locals. This respect, which is often expressed through the locals’ appreciation of the e-traders as “useful people,” indicates a pragmatic rationale: the e-traders are respectable not only because they have contributed to local economic development in general, but also because they have contributed to the income of the local people generated by renting their houses as well as purchasing their wholesale products. Thus, monetary exchanges, one of the embodiments of economic reasoning, plays a key role in shaping human relations in the e-traders’ social world. Like other social groups in Yiwu, the e-traders are desirous of money and confident in its power. As Wu stressed,

It seems that there is no problem that cannot be solved by money. If there is, it must be solved by doubling or tripling the money. To start up an e-business, you can buy whatever you need from the market. If you want to learn e-commerce skills, you can buy courses online from Taobao College or offline from training institutions. If you don’t have sufficient fund, you can borrow from e-platforms, private lending individuals or agencies by paying interests. Not to mention the houses to live in and the products to sell. The whole industry is marketized.

Due to the fact that the grassroots e-commerce market worked well, Wu and some other e-traders saw little necessity for state intervention. Like Wu, Mr. Ye remarked that the central state’s MEI initiative was of little significance. This is because local e-traders started up e-businesses not because the government asked them to do so, but because they believed the online market was profitable. In Ye’s view, “If there was no profit, no

matter how strong the government's promotion was, nobody would have joined the market. Not to mention that the government was just doing nothing but talking." He was equally critical of the local developmental state because it did not benefit the grassroots e-traders like him. Experiences with the "useless" states inspired my informants to be more independent and self-reliant. However, the e-traders also found that the unsupportive states might appear positive to them because they imposed fewer regulations. Ye recalled that he had not faced any restriction from the government since he started up his e-business.

I feel small e-business is a domain that the government has not yet intervened. It pays more attention to larger companies. Up to now, I have not met any government officials who come to see me for my business. Neither do I go to see them. I don't apply for business licences. I don't pay taxes, fees, or social insurance for myself and my employees. Nobody asks for these.

I then asked about state punishment of the e-traders who sold fakes, which was often mentioned on Chinese mass media during my fieldwork. Ye responded that he had seen some news reports on the issue, but he doubted that few e-traders had actually been punished. To Ye, those who got caught were just unlucky, and they became news simply because they were rare cases. "I know many e-traders in Yiwu who earn big money by selling fakes, but none of them are punished by the government for doing that. The worst case so far is that an e-shop was caught and closed down by the Taobao e-platform, but its owner soon opened another e-shop and sold the same fakes." This kind of experience was widely reported by my informants, which was read as a sign that the state (in particular the central state) had largely withdrawn from a role of monitoring the market and enforcing laws concerning copyrights and consumers' rights. Some e-traders believed that even the short-term state campaigns against illegal business practices, such as selling fake goods as reported in the news, were just strategic responses of the Chinese central government to domestic and international critics. They suggested that the government would not prohibit these practices thoroughly because it needed impressive economic figures from the Internet economy to maintain citizens' confidence in the national economy in an era of economic downturn.²³ Considering that the state still intervenes in the market by launching campaigns, my interpretation takes a middle position: the state has not abandoned its role as the ultimate supervisor of the

²³ For more discussion on this view, see Chapter 5.

market, but it has rather shifted many of its regulatory responsibilities to large market players, such as the Taobao e-platform, to manage themselves and regulate their subordinates and other smaller players.²⁴ To a large extent, this kind of state intervention resembles the neoliberal mode of governance in the West in which the state governs at a distance (Rose, 1996, 1999), but its ultimate purpose is not to advance individual freedom as classic neoliberalism proposes. More likely, it aims to achieve economic development and national cohesiveness.

The e-traders' narrative of nationalistic considerations behind the Chinese central government's withdrawal from market control and regulation also revealed their adoption of economic reasoning for understanding the operating logic of the Chinese central state. They imagined that by paying the costs of loosening control over the market, such as violating copyrights and consumers' rights and taking on domestic and international critics, the state maintained economic growth and its citizens' confidence in the country's future development. Having this understanding in mind, the nearly laissez-faire grassroots e-commerce market seemed to the e-traders an intentional choice of the central state. An example they often employed in support of this observation was Li Keqiang's conversation with Ma Yun in a high-level meeting in 2013, which was widely reported by Chinese media. Li told Ma that e-shops on Ma's Taobao e-platform were illegal enterprises because they had not registered with the government. However, to promote entrepreneurship among young people the government decided to recognize them unconditionally as legal subjects (Feng, 2013). In telling this story, my informants were not particularly interested in the legality of their status but rather on the government's conscious toleration of unregistered e-businesses. As Mr. Ye summarized, "I don't think holding legal status is important for small e-traders because we don't have many legal disputes. I am more concerned with the government's attitude toward us. I hope it will keep winking at us so that we can stay untaxed and unregulated."

Conclusion

E-trader Ye's resistance to state intervention was explicit in his summarizing remark. He appreciated the central state's lack of regulation of unregistered e-businesses and depreciated its aggressive yet unproductive MEI initiative. As regards the actions of the

²⁴ On how e-platforms control and regulate small e-traders, see Chapter 3. Political scientists Lizhi Liu and Barry Weingast also find that the Chinese government has off-loaded a substantial part of the development and enforcement of commercial law to private e-platform giants like the Alibaba Group. They argue that the e-platforms are assuming from the state the authority to enforce law within their domain, as well as helping the state to create formal law by experimenting with new legal rules for e-commerce industry (Liu and Weingast, 2017: 4-5).

local state in Yiwu, Ye's assessment was particularly negative as he not only criticized its "misleading" developmental approach siding with large enterprises but also disdained its "shameless" appropriation of the booming local e-commerce economy to promote its own reputation.²⁵ Like other e-traders, Ye's opinion grew out of his entrepreneurial experience, in which the central and local states were either unsupportive or absent even though they might be helpful to larger enterprises and developmental vis-à-vis the local and national economies. Considering that small- and medium-sized e-businesses like Ye's made up the vast majority of e-commerce enterprises in Yiwu, his narrative was typical in showing how the Chinese hybrid state entities, which integrated developmentalism and neoliberalism, were experienced and perceived locally.

This chapter has examined the interactions between the rising grassroots e-commerce sector and the Chinese state apparatus from the perspective of involved e-traders. It finds that in fostering the e-commerce industry as a new engine driving the country's economic growth, Chinese states at different levels have made a variety of developmental efforts combined with some neoliberal measures. However, because the states aim too high and expect quick success, when combined with the state officials' bureaucratic management of developmental projects, their efforts and measures largely fail to satisfy the basic needs of grassroots e-traders and are thus regarded as "empty talk," "useless," "misleading," or "ineffective." Left to fend for themselves by the state apparatus and witnessing its failures, the e-traders address themselves as self-reliant entrepreneurs who laid the real cornerstone of the local e-commerce economy in Yiwu. They engage in the uncertain yet profitable e-commerce market by taking advantage of the less regulated business environment created by the central state's toleration and the local state's ignorance. Their entrepreneurial experiences not only lead to their full embrace of the market, but also shape their indifferent or resistant attitude to state intervention in the economy. The e-traders' pro-market perceptions and their resulting business activities, along with the central state's existing statecraft of governing e-commerce at a distance and the local state's developmental agenda that pays little attention to small- and medium-sized enterprises, make a prospering neoliberal economy at the grassroots possible.

The next chapter will focus on the interactions between e-commerce platforms and

²⁵ The developmental state's preference for larger enterprises is also observable in Japan and Korea (Amsden, 1989; Johnson, 1982). However, the economic growth in Taiwan was largely built on small and medium family business (Wade, 1990). This indicates that state developmentalism does not necessarily exclude favoring small and medium businesses that are very market-based.

the above small- and medium-sized e-business in Yiwu. E-platform giants, such as the Alibaba Group, are crucial components in the Chinese grassroots neoliberal e-commerce economy. They are major players in the market, through which the government governs the new sector at a distance, and through which the grassroots e-traders operate e-business. As the business intermediary bridging online sellers and buyers, these e-platforms have a huge impact on the business and daily life of the e-traders. This impact, as well as the experiences of learning to do e-business on the e-platforms and interacting with e-platform administrators, have shaped the e-traders' perceptions of the e-platform giants as capitalist and bureaucratic empires. Now, let us move to e-traders' cultural imaginations of Alibaba.

Chapter 3: Living under the Empire: Alibaba's Hegemony in the Chinese E-Commerce World and The Making of In(dependent) Subjectivity among Yiwu E-Traders

Introduction

One day in December 2015, an event struck the media in the Chinese e-commerce world. An e-trader selling travelling luggage quarreled with a customer service provider (*xiao'er* 小二, in Alibaba's term) in the chat room of Juhuasuan (聚划算) e-platform when he applied for a business promotion opportunity on this group-buying website owned by the Alibaba Group. The cause of this dispute was that the *xiao'er* warned all applicants not to fake transactions during the promotional campaign, because if they got caught by Alibaba's monitoring system they would be disqualified from the campaign.²⁶ That e-trader made a dig at the *xiao'er*, asking that if e-traders did not fake transactions how they could reach the target sales volume set by the e-platform. The *xiao'er* was unhappy, responding that "You can choose not to join [the campaign], no one force you to do that." The e-trader also became angry. He shouted at the *xiao'er*, "I respected you because I was doing business on Alibaba's e-platforms; if I stop, who the hell are you?" The *xiao'er* replied, "Fine, just wait and see. You will be sorry." She kicked the e-trader out of the chat room. Someone in the room copied the dialogue and posted it online, and it became a heated topic in the Chinese e-commerce world.

Both online and offline audiences had different opinions regarding this quarrel. A small minority took the side with the *xiao'er*, suggesting that the e-trader was rude and aggressive. Many more people backed the e-trader, including most of my informants. They criticized the *xiao'er*'s authoritarianism and bureaucratic opponents, especially her sentence "fine, just wait and see, you will be sorry" which was widely seen as threatening the e-traders. Mr. Huang, one of my informants, commented that the *xiao'er* acted not as a customer service provider but a bureaucratic officer who always oppressed common people. In response, he supported the e-trader fighting against the *xiao'er* by exposing the event to more people so as to discredit Alibaba authorities. However, some observers stood in the middle, criticizing both sides. They believed that the *xiao'er* controlled too many resources which built her superiority over e-traders. For the resisting e-trader, they thought he was just stupid. Another informant Mr. Zheng commented as follows: "I think the guy can hardly maintain his e-shop after arguing

²⁶ I will explain the practice of faking transactions/sales in details in Chapter 5.

with the xiao'er. We e-traders come to Alibaba for business, and to make money in other people's sites we have to follow their rules and respect the rule makers. If we don't, they can destroy our businesses within a minute." Zheng suggested that I checked the e-shop of the resisting e-trader and I found it had indeed been closed.

This event exposed the conflicts between e-traders and Alibaba's e-platforms and forced the former to reflect on their relationship with the latter. My informants became more aware of their inferior position in Alibaba's power structure. In the latter's propaganda, e-traders are its godly customers. Ma Yun, Alibaba's founder, declared that his corporate values were "customers first, employees second, and shareholders third." However, the reality was exactly the opposite in the eyes of the e-traders. Mr. Huang argued that "In Alibaba's territory, Ma Yun is the God, xiao'ers are the representatives of the God, and we e-traders are their money-making machines. We are in a relationship of the exploited and the exploiters." Claiming to be neutral, Mr. Zheng proposed that a more objective description should be "Alibaba is a pyramid-shaped empire with Ma Yun at the top. He is the emperor. Xiao'ers are in the middle. They are the bureaucracy of this empire. E-traders are at the bottom. We look like self-employed businesspeople, but in fact all work for Ma."

Although differing in words, Huang, Zheng and many other informants of mine tend to see Alibaba e-platforms as a hierarchical power system in which they are located at the bottom and become the powerless that are often suppressed by the authorities. While this narrative has much to do with the e-traders' defense of their self-interests, I argue that it has roots in the current model of e-commerce development in China and Chinese political culture. By collecting the e-traders' viewpoints and observing their interactions with administrators of Alibaba e-platforms (in particular Taobao, Tmall, 1688 wholesale platform and Juhuasuan group buying platform), in this Chapter I will show that this China's largest e-commerce corporation has manifested many characteristics of an empire and these characteristics have been taken by its subjects as imposing its sovereignty. Living under this empire, individual e-traders can easily sense Alibaba's omnipresent power which penetrates into almost all realms of their everyday life, and certainly with the greatest impact on their livelihood. Through illustrating how these e-traders think about and react to the giant's domination, this chapter aims to deepen the understanding of the social and cultural consequences of e-commerce development and the rise of e-platform monopolies in the Chinese e-commerce world. And by providing a thick description of how the e-platform monopolies control and regulate small e-businesses, it also illuminates the neoliberal mode of governance in the

e-commerce world through which the Chinese state is able to govern grassroots e-traders at a distance.

So far as I know, this is the first research that systematically examines the relationship between e-trading businesspeople and e-commerce platforms in a sociological and anthropological sense. For this reason, this chapter will adopt in a more ethnographic form. I start with the e-traders' imaginations of the Alibaba Group as both a modern capitalist as well as a Chinese bureaucratic empire. How these imaginations are shaped and how they affect the e-traders' subjectivity are the major concerns of this section. It follows up by exploring the lived experiences of e-traders in adapting to, negotiating with and resisting the domination of Alibaba in the e-commerce world. It concludes by discussing the social and cultural implications of the imperial metaphor between Alibaba and ordinary e-traders.

The imperial metaphor

Imagining Alibaba as a capitalist empire

I met Mr. Weng in an e-commerce training institution in June 2015. This 21-year old young man came to Yiwu with a dream of having his own business after graduating from a vocational college in Jiangxi province. Many of his alumni had settled down here, and quite a few had made much money with e-business. He found some and asked them for advice. They suggested that he open a Taobao e-shop selling their products, or finding his own from Yiwu wholesale marketplace or Alibaba's 1688 wholesale e-platform. The reasons for choosing Taobao rather than other e-platforms are that, first it is the most popular form of start-up in Yiwu, and second its entry requirements are the lowest. Almost all my informants started their e-trader careers with Taobao and the majority are still running at least one shop on this e-platform. To register a Taobao e-shop, it only requires an identity card and does not require a business license. This means Taobao e-traders do not need to pay taxes to the government. Also, in principle it does not charge any fees. By contrast, other e-platforms not only ask for various kinds of licenses but also charge fees and require profit-sharing. Thus, Taobao has been considered the most suitable for beginners and the average person who does not have a lot of capital to gain online business experience. Apart from his alumni, Weng also visited several e-commerce training institutions where he found that foundational courses for start-ups all targeted the Taobao e-platform, and the reasoning of the teachers there was similar. More importantly, they mentioned that since Taobao was the e-platform with the largest number of customers in the world, new e-traders might still

have a share even though the market had become competitive—a chance they could hardly have if they went to smaller e-platforms. Weng finally decided to join one of his alumni's Taobao business team.

Although the intensive fieldwork for this research started in 2015, I have been in a position to trace Yiwu's e-commerce development since 2008. More and more people I knew in the city joined the e-commerce wave. Today running a Taobao e-shop has become the most popular form of young entrepreneurship in local society. Mature e-traders may move elsewhere, but most of them still choose Alibaba e-platforms: Tmall for the domestic high-end retail market, 1688.com for the domestic wholesale market, AliExpress for the overseas retail market, and Alibaba.com for the overseas wholesale market. I was told that all these e-platforms were the leaders in terms of market share in China. According to my informants, they could certainly choose others if they didn't want to do business on Alibaba e-platforms; but as rational businesspeople, how could they abandon the biggest market with the lowest entry requirements? The fact is that the number of e-traders on Alibaba e-platforms are still increasing rapidly. The large concentration of e-traders further produces a bandwagon effect, leading more newcomers to settle on Alibaba.

When an Alibaba e-trader finds many people surrounding him/her also running Alibaba e-shops, it is easy for him/her to form an imagination of the corporation as an empire encompassing vast territory and a large population. All e-traders know e-commerce is the core territory of this empire, and they are the people living within its boundaries. Internet finance (e.g., Alipay 支付宝, Yu'e bao 余额宝, and Ant Check Later 蚂蚁花呗) is another field on which Alibaba has a firm footing. Apart from these two, e-traders familiar with Alibaba's setups know that it is involved in quite a few industries, such as logistics (e.g., Cainiao Logistics 菜鸟物流, and investments on big express companies), entertainment (e.g., Alibaba Pictures 阿里影业, Alibaba Music 阿里音乐, AliSports 阿里体育), media (e.g., investments on Youku 优酷 and Tudou 土豆 online video platforms, Sina Weibo 新浪微博 and South China Morning Post), O2O (online to offline business, e.g., investments on Meituan 美团 and Eleme 饿了么 online and on-demand delivery platforms), big data and cloud computing (e.g., Alibaba Cloud 阿里云), health care (e.g., Alihealth 阿里健康), tourism (e.g., Alitrip 阿里旅游), computer games (e.g., Aligames 阿里游戏), education (e.g., Taobao online college 淘宝大学 and Hupan college 湖畔大学), transportation (e.g., Didi ride-sharing 滴滴打车 and AutoNavi map

高德地图), and even real estate recently. All the above fields are regarded as the major sectors of modern life in urban China, and have created extensive job opportunities. To showcase this huge territory, Ma Yun described Alibaba's expansion as an endeavor to build "a large internet ecosystem" (互联网的大生态系统) (Ma, 2014). What is important in this self-positioning is not only the adjective "large", but also the noun "ecosystem" which reveals the ambition of the Alibaba empire. It is not content with being a medium for exchanges between sellers and buyers; it wants to become the living environment that people are dependent on. Once people get attached to the ecosystem, the imperial power of Alibaba will have an all-pervasive influence on their thoughts and behavior. The current online shopping fever in China has provided some clue of this trend in future.

Similar to the tremendous effects of printed media in constructing ordinary people's perception of nation states as Benedict Anderson (2006) has illuminated, Chinese media (especially online media) and publishing industries have contributed much to e-traders' imagination of Alibaba's empirehood. During my fieldwork I found many informants have a habit of reading online news on major e-commerce websites (such as www.ebrun.com and <http://www.imaijia.com/>) and WeChat public accounts. Media reports from these sources often portrayed Alibaba as "Alibaba empire" or "Ma Yun's empire". Some specific pieces had discussed the "territory" of this empire, referring to the various industries it had engaged. I doubt that the e-traders who told me about Alibaba's business setups acquired their information from these reports. For instance, once my informant Mr. Chen posted a news report on his WeChat Moments about Alibaba's takeover of Youku and Tudou online video platforms, and it was shared by several of our common friends. The title of that report was "Ma Yun's empire annexes a new territory."

The publications of Ma Yun's biographies and the history of the Alibaba Group further contribute to e-traders' knowledge of Ma and his company. On Mr. Zheng's bookshelf I found a dozen books about Alibaba or how to do business on Alibaba e-platforms, among which at least four items related Ma Yun or the company directly to the concept of empire. Their titles are as follows: "No.1 in the World: Ma Yun and His Alibaba Empire" (Liu and Peng, 2014), "The Inside Story of Ma Yun' Empire" (Wei and Shi, 2013), "The Corporate Culture of Alibaba: Ma Yun's Talks on the Cultural Rules That Help Establish the Alibaba Empire" (Wang, 2010) and "The Sect of Ma Yun: The Keys to Understand Ma Yun's Business Empire" (Sun, 2008). All these books tell how Ma's entrepreneurship has enabled the Alibaba Group to become the No.1 e-commerce

giant in China. Mr. Zheng thought this literature was written in a standardized way and its main thesis consistently espoused “Ma Yun is brilliant, Alibaba is great,” but he indeed respected Ma’s entrepreneurial qualities, including his creativity, passion, confidence and determination.

His entrepreneurial qualities were most visible in the case that Ma created Taobao and defeated eBay in the Chinese market. It was such a stirring story that I gained very deep impression of it. When all people thought he had gone mad for overrating his own ability, Ma believed he would win. He used Chairman Mao’s military strategies to fight with his adversary. For example, on the frontline battlefield he counterattacked eBay’s onslaught by bushwhacking (游击战); at the back he undermined eBay’s foundation by practicing “ants moving homes” (蚂蚁搬家) and attracting its sellers to Taobao. I think only people like Ma with such wisdom can build a large business empire.

While the experience of reading Ma’s biographies obviously contributed to Zheng’s imagination of the making of the Alibaba empire, it also implies his own identity in relation to the imperial polity (publications of Ma’s biographies, see Figure 3.1). When recapitulating Ma’s battle with eBay, he borrowed the phrase “ants moving homes” from the books in which ants were the analogy for the e-traders who moved from eBay to Taobao. Zheng’s appropriation implied his acceptance of the metaphor between ants/e-traders and empire/Alibaba. This resembled his portrayal of Alibaba as a pyramidal empire in which e-traders were placed at the bottom. But there was a paradox in Zheng’s narrative. Despite on some occasions e-traders like Zheng positioned themselves as the subalterns and complained about the exploitation and oppression from the imperial power, on other occasions they were dazzled by the power and accepted its domination. An example is Zheng’s use of the term “empire”. Sometimes it sounded negative and stressed its oppressiveness. But at other times it seemed to celebrate the greatness of the Alibaba regime and to express the honor felt in being one of its subjects. In Chapter 4 I refer to the several e-traders I have met who possess a strong professional identity. They believed that the Internet and e-commerce were part of an inevitable trend in the modern world, and considered themselves as pioneers of this trend. In our daily conversations, some e-traders often mentioned to me that in their eyes the biggest winners in this age were internet entrepreneurs, such as Ma Yun and Ma Huateng in

China, and Bill Gates and Steve Jobs in the United States. To them, these miracles of wealth signified the promising prospect of Internet economy. As participants of this economy, they thought they also shared the honors.



Figure 3.1: Ma Yun's biographies sold in a Chinese bookstore.

What made them even prouder was that they were e-traders on Alibaba's e-platforms, the only one focusing on e-commerce among the big three internet corporations in China (the other two are Tencent and Baidu, abbreviated as BAT). Their pride was most visible when they talked about the big gap in market share between Alibaba e-platforms and others. While the figures my informants gave were not accurate, some statistics showed that in 2013 Taobao held 96.5 percent of Chinese Customer to Customer (C2C) online market; Tmall held 50.1 percent of Business to Customer (B2C) online market, almost 28 percent more than the second biggest player Jingdong, not to mention the smaller ones; in Business to Business (B2B) online market, 1688 wholesale e-platform held 44.5 percent, 34 percent more than the second one (Zhongguo dianzishangwu yanjiu zhongxin, 2014). For all these figures, we could say Alibaba e-platforms had almost monopolized the online market in China. The result was that to certain extent people who wanted to open e-shops had to choose Alibaba, but many of them did not see this monopoly as a problem. Instead, they sided with the business

empire and dismissed its challengers. For instance, many e-traders often laughed at Jingdong's costly logistic infrastructure and its CEO's romantic affair.

The e-traders' recognition of Alibaba is not just expressed through words but actions. I have followed a group of Taobao e-traders to visit the 2015 China International Electronic Commerce Exposition held in Yiwu (see Figure 3.2). There were hundreds of exhibition stands there, but my informants searched for Alibaba's once they arrived at the exhibition center. When they found the stand, it was full of visitors and much more crowded than others. The main content of Alibaba's stand was its big data technologies and their applications on the e-platforms. The deep impression the audience took from this display was that Alibaba was able to monitor every step of every deal, either domestic or overseas, made on its e-platforms with this surveillance system. For instance, it could calculate the speed of delivery by hours among various express companies in Beijing. Similarly, it could research consumer preferences in different countries when overseas customers bought from Alibaba e-platforms, and displayed the information in a world map by which audience might gain an impression that the company's influence had reached the most far-flung corners of the globe. I found many visitors were amazed by Alibaba's high technology and global influence. Mr. Chen praised Alibaba for its technological advancement and suggested it was definitely the No.1 among Chinese internet companies. My informants stayed at that stand for more than half an hour until we moved to others. I saw some new e-platforms but my friends said they had never heard of the names. Salesmen of an e-platform called "Yilian Mobile Mall" came up and tried to promote their business to us, but Mr. Chen asked them "Are you sure I will have customers if I open an e-shop on your platform? I am an old hand at online shopping, but I have never heard of your platform." Chen called on us to leave, saying that "The e-commerce industry only recognizes the first. Even the second is not respected, not to mention these new ones. Never try them."



Figure 3.2: Alibaba's exhibition stand at the 2015 Yiwu China International Electronic Commerce Exposition.

The personality cult of Ma Yun also enforces e-traders' identification with the Alibaba empire. I have mentioned Mr. Zheng's positive evaluation of Ma's entrepreneurship and that in fact represents the general attitude among my informants. Ma's positive image first comes from his entrepreneurial experience. From an English teacher to one of the richest businessmen in China, his legend has been written into more than twenty biographies and sold in bookstores throughout China. His public lectures have also been recorded and used as teaching materials for start-up training. Many of my informants have read Ma's biographies or watched videos of his lectures, and thus knew his stories well. They knew Ma was a graduate of a less prestigious university, and that he undertook the university entrance examination three times. Since few of them had undergraduate or higher degrees, in the e-traders' eyes Ma Yun's background was much closer to them when compared with Ma Huateng whose success had much to do with his high education level and technological knowledge. But Ma Yun also succeeded, and that provided the less educated e-traders with hope and an exemplar. I know some informants regard Ma as their idol of entrepreneurship, and hang his pictures or quotations in their offices.

However, the e-traders recognize Ma not only for his own success but the massive start-up opportunities Alibaba creates. At least hundreds of thousands of e-traders have

benefited from his e-platforms, even though their profits have become smaller in recent years. During the fieldwork I met some informants complained about the harsh market competition and criticized Ma Yun for wheedling them into doing business on his e-platforms, but they still looked to him for inspiration. These e-traders believed that there must be some unexploited or new realms in the empire in which they could make big money, and to find out these realms they should follow the development trends of Alibaba e-platforms and the online market. And Ma Yun's comments were taken as to indicate where these opportunities lay. I frequently saw Mr. Zheng, Chen and other e-traders post Ma's new speeches and Alibaba's new policies on their WeChat Moments and Qzones. In 2015 the posts were often about mobile e-commerce and e-commerce in the countryside; in 2016 more posts were about social network-based e-commerce: all directions Ma had advocated.

When asked why they thought Ma Yun's remarks were important, Mr. Chen suggested it was because he could predict the development trends since he was the most advanced pioneer of Chinese internet economy. Chen said, "Ma Yun is the one standing at the peak, he can see the next peak; we e-traders are the ones climbing the mountain following Ma's footsteps, we can only see his back." Mr. Zheng thought Chen's analogy was good. But he proposed that even if Ma had not seen the next peak, he had gotten the capacity to stack a mountain. Zheng believed Ma Yun had acquired omnipotent power in the e-commerce world. Probably influenced by the books and the news he read and also the political ideology in the Maoist era, this 1950s-born e-trader often likened Ma Yun to Chairman Mao. He saw Ma's strategies for business expansion transplant Mao's military strategies, and his business management style copy Mao's statecraft. Based on these similarities, Zheng held that Ma had absolute power in the Alibaba empire just like Chairman Mao did in his day, and he could determine every person's fate under his rule. As the next section demonstrates, this imagining of Ma's emperorship has become a crucial component in the making of the Alibaba empire.

Imagining Alibaba as a bureaucratic empire

For the e-traders, Alibaba's penetration in various industries and its domination in fields such as e-commerce and internet finance built up its territorial foundations to forge an empire. At the same time, their projection of imperial order onto the Alibaba's business world provides its administrative foundation.

Ma Yun is imagined to be the emperor of Alibaba. Although many e-traders knew that SoftBank Group and Yahoo hold more stock than Ma, they believed that as the

founder and the chairperson of the board, Ma possessed supreme power and status in the company. Some e-traders even addressed him as the God of the e-commerce world. Although this godly emperor has a face of cruelty (when the e-traders emphasized the exploitation of Alibaba, they would highlight this face), most of time he was considered as a benevolent ruler. E-traders assumed Ma could understand their difficulties and give them support because he started his own career from scratch. However, from what I heard and observed, this expectation was built largely on Alibaba's vision to put the "customer first," and Ma Yun's occasional visits to grassroots e-traders. In fact, most of Ma's public appearances were at Alibaba's commercial functions or high-end meetings with other business elites or government officials which were far from most e-traders' everyday lives. Yet some informants were willing to trust Ma. They held that his policies were designated to benefit e-traders. If the consequences were disappointing, the problems must lie with the bureaucrats, and Ma's punishment of them indicated his closeness to the grassroots. For example, it was reported that Ma Yun got angry after he knew the quarrel between his xiao'er and the e-trader mentioned in the beginning of this chapter and formulated a new policy urging all his employees to respect e-traders. Many of my informants shared the news on their WeChat Moments and Qzones with some repeating a commentary "Thank you, Lord Ma (*Ma Qingtian*, 马青天), for punishing the corrupt officials and redressing our civilians' grievances." Recognizing the supreme authorities while distrusting lower-level bureaucrats, this attitude duplicates the Chinese people's hierarchical trust in government leaders at different levels from the imperial times to the present day (Li, 2004, 2013; Shi, 2001, 2014).

Media coverage and details in biographies about Ma Yun's business management strengthened e-traders' imagination of the hierarchy inside the Alibaba empire. For instance, these sources informed my informants' view that Ma's management style followed Chairman Mao's statecraft characterizing "Unified Thought, Unified Mind, Unified Goal and Unified Direction" (Liu and Peng, 2014: 103). To achieve the four unifications, Ma launched two institutions. The first was unscheduled rectification campaigns (*zhengfeng yundong*, 整风运动) borrowed from Mao's Yan'an Rectification Movement in the 1940s (Gao, 2000; Selden, 1995). The campaigns aimed to reform his employees' mindsets and inculcate Alibaba's corporate values; those who refused or failed to be reformed would be dismissed (Liu and Peng, 2014: 102-104; Wang, 2010: 148-151). The other was the institution of the "political commissar" (*zhengwei*, 政委). In the People's Liberation Army (and its predecessor the Red Army), political

commissars are in charge of the political direction of military activities and the political education of soldiers. Ma integrated this institution into Alibaba's human resources management by sending "commissars" who not only had special expertise but also internalized the corporate values to different departments. In doing so, Ma expected these agents would help spread and instill his views in all employees (Wang, 2010: 157-159). When I discussed Ma's management style with my informants, some knew of the so-called "Mao-styled management" but did not have special opinions about it. Some joked that Ma had become a micro-manager who even wanted to control his employees' minds. They held that as long as employees did good jobs and made profits for companies, it did not matter what they thought. But some informants had experience of managing medium-sized or larger companies and suggested Ma's management was surpassing because it could have employees work for him wholeheartedly through exercising a kind of mind control. Having run a factory for ten years before moving online, Mr. Zheng considered Ma's management strategies ambitious. "We can only motivate our employees by performance bonuses, but Ma Yun can mobilize the youth by brainwashing them and making them feel they work for their ideals just like what Chairman Mao did. Chairman Mao's ideal was to build a communist society in China, Chairman Ma's is to make his empire last for 102 years and cross three centuries (Alibaba was established in 1999)!"

Apart from the "Mao-styled management", Alibaba is most widely known as an ultra-large corporation with a huge bureaucracy. I had several informants tell me that this business empire had more than thirty thousand officials, and later I found this figure was confirmed by news reports (Chen, 2015). However, when asked about the distribution of power and ranks among these officials, my informants hesitated to answer. Some finally replied that they did not know, but some claimed the bureaucracy in Alibaba should be similar to that in the Chinese government. Mr. Chen suggested that bureaucrats in a hierarchical system could always be classified by their administrative rankings (*xingzheng jibie*, 行政级别). In his eyes, those working in the city of Hangzhou, where Alibaba's headquarters were located, might be considered as central government officials; those in regional offices were provincial officials and those at lower levels were local ones. In addition to this vertical structure, Chen also noticed the numerous departments in Alibaba focusing on different e-platforms and industries. It was said that these departments were independent units (administratively and financially) but often cooperated with each other. To Chen, this horizontal structure looked like the relations among central ministries/local bureaus in the Chinese

government. Although Chen did not know the idea of “*tiao-kuai*” (条块), I found his imagination that Alibaba’s bureaucracy had the same characteristic of the administrative system in the Chinese government insightful (Mertha, 2005).

Among all the officials, titles such as Alibaba’s Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Chief Financial Officer (CFO), and Chief Operating Officer (COO), Taobao’s General Manager, Tmall’s President and Alipay’s CEO were the ones most often heard. E-traders knew people in these positions were all powerful, but they were not sure about who held more power. Once I encountered several informants discussing some new posts in Alibaba as reported by the media. Originally written in English abbreviations, they asked me what the terms CTO (Chief Technology Officer), CRO (Chief Risk Officer) and CSO (Chief Strategy Officer) meant. I explained to them after consulting the internet. These e-traders then satirized the company’s appointments of so many high-ranking officials. Mr. Huang commented that, “No wonder Alibaba tries to exploit e-traders by every means, it needs to feed so many officials!”

Alibaba employees were widely perceived as arrogant and corrupt bureaucrats among my informants, even though there were in fact few direct interactions between the two groups. Mr. Huang’s friends had once contacted Alibaba xiao’ers for business promotion, but found some look down upon them as small sellers while others just ignored their requests. These made Huang and his friends resentful, “Those xiao’ers are just like government officials riding roughshod over common people.” More e-traders acquired the image of Alibaba employees from the internet and media reports. Mr Chen said he had no connection with and did not even know how to contact Alibaba employees. He believed even the lowest-ranking xiao’ers were far away from him. But then he recommended to me a magazine article about how some big sellers bribed xiao’ers to win favors, which was said to have once caused a public relations crisis in the Alibaba Group. Although the company denounced the magazine for fabricating rumors, Chen stressed that most e-traders he knew believed it to be true. This was because not only the company itself had revealed to the public numerous cases of corrupt xiao’ers and senior executives, but also the stories of offering and accepting bribes in the article matched their daily experiences. As Chen elaborated,

The article writes that to please the xiao’ers the big sellers often invited them to consume in luxury restaurants and clubhouses. This reminds me of the days I accompanied my relative to see government officials in my hometown. In order to have them approve our projects, we did exactly the same things. Some

shameless officials even asked for commissions or company shares, and it is the same case for the xiao'ers in the article. China has a culture of corruption; everywhere in the country is the same.

It was widely believed that business success in China relied much on *guanxi* practice which was performed through endless ritualized entertaining (Zhang, 2001; Zheng, 2006; Osburg, 2013). Chen mentioned a popular fiction series he had read called “Director of the Beijing Representative Office” (*zhujingban zhuren*, 驻京办主任). The author of this series had been a government official and the stories he wrote told how local government leaders built representative offices in Beijing to serve their superiors through banqueting. Chen was surprised to find the same practice in the article, “In order to establish relations with xiao'ers, the sellers built ‘Hangzhou representative offices’ (驻杭办) in the capital of the Alibaba empire. You see, the culture of corruption has strong vitality in China. The government has abandoned the representative office system, but it then reemerges in the e-commerce world!”

By analyzing media information and personal experiences, my informants constructed a bureaucratic image for the Alibaba Group: its organizational structure copied the Chinese government, its employees behaved like government officials, and its leader's status and power in the e-commerce world resembled head of state. Although most of the time the e-traders used the contemporary Chinese government for comparison, they had also described Ma Yun as an ancient emperor and the xiao'ers in charge of Alibaba's surveillance system as “Embroidered Uniform Guards” (*jinyiwei*, 锦衣卫), the imperial secret police in the Ming dynasty. While my informants might not be conscious of using Alibaba as the medium to compare the People's Republic with imperial courts, but their representations revealed similarities among these three in terms of political imagination. In fact, scholars have argued that the communist party state inherited many institutional and cultural legacies from imperial polities, and the ruling style of communist leaders equates to that of ancient monarchs (e.g., Andrew and Rapp, 2000; Chung, 2016; Pines, 2012; Pye, 1988, 1992; Solomon, 1971). If we consider the e-traders' imagination of Alibaba from this angle, we may sense the significant influence of political and cultural authoritarianism in China, as it not just affects institutional continuities in state formation but also citizens' understanding of how society and economic organizations in the market are organized.

The previous paragraphs reveal how e-traders understand their relationship with

the Alibaba empire through secular experiences, but sometimes they may also approach it from the angle of a religious experience. During the fieldwork I have encountered some activities which include elements of Chinese popular religion. One example is the worship of Ma Yun. In recent years pictures of followers worshipping Ma often hit the headlines during the Double Eleven Online Shopping Festivals. Many online commenters and offline audiences see e-traders engaging in this ritual just to make fun. I think that is true, but there is still some space for further interpretation. My informant Mr. Li found the ritual interesting after he saw pictures online and held a similar function the day before the 2015 e-shopping festival. The setting of this ritual combined elements from several pictures in addition to three futons put in front of the altar. Li led two team members to kowtow to Ma Yun's portrait for the first round, praying for a big sale. Other members surrounded them laughing and taking photos. The following prayers made different requests and spoke in a humorous tone, such as earning money for buying a wife, or buying diapers for unborn children. These made the ritual a lively affair. Li used party poppers to further enliven the atmosphere. After the worship the business team had a banquet dinner together, during which Li again mobilized his employees to strive for the coming festival.

Experiencing the ritual, I and many participants found the hosting activity create a joyous and festive mood which not only warmed us up for the forthcoming business, but also promoted social solidarity among the team members. From hosting to the ritual procedure and further to the psychosocial effect on the participants, this worshipping activity is clearly a socially and ritually produced event that possesses the characteristics of Chinese popular religion in the light of the anthropologist Adam Chau's theory of "doing religion" (2006). Its presentation of offerings and the practices of kowtowing and feasting copy the forms and procedures of folk rituals of worshipping deities. The fun and excitement it produces resembles the "red-hot sociality" that Chau has found in temple festivals, which is considered as the most desirable state in Chinese popular religion. Through this kind of ritual practicing and event production, Ma Yun is symbolically established as a deity (Mr. Li particularly honored him as "Ma Caishen" 马财神, the god of wealth surnamed Ma).

But his apotheosis did not end here. When I observed the ritual, I was especially impressed by Ma's portrait on display. In that portrait, Ma dressed in a Qing dynasty official costume sitting in an imperial court-styled chair. When I asked Mr. Li why he chose this portrait, Li explained that he felt a god dressing ancient clothing looked more traditional and therefore more authentic (see Figure 3.3). From what I understand by

Li's response, it is because most religions (Buddhism, Daoism and popular religions) that he and other people in Yiwu encounter in their everyday life worshipping idols dressed in traditional Chinese costumes. In particular, male deities in Buddhist and Daoist temples are dressed in imperial official costume. This clothing style reminded me of the insightful observation made by the anthropologists Arthur Wolf (1974), Stephan Feuchtwang (2001) and some others that Chinese religions have an imperial metaphor, which means that the religious practitioners imagine the supernatural world by the form of state bureaucracy. In Mr. Li's case, kowtowing and praying to Ma Yun for his blessing was only second to clothing him as an imperial officer thereby building his divinity as a popular god. Through this metaphor, Ma Yun and his Alibaba empire was religiously established and the rituals confirmed the e-traders' position as subjects of the bureaucratic empire.



Figure 3.3: Ma Yun's portrait Mr. Li used in the ritual.

Chinese popular culture also contributes to some e-traders' imagination of the Alibaba group. One example is the *jianghu* (江湖 literally, rivers and lakes) culture. *Jianghu* in the Chinese-speaking world encompasses the nongovernmental space in which underclass people live apart from the state power. The term often appears in

Chinese martial arts fictions and movies, and is depicted as a realm where “swordsmen travel around, compete in martial arts, and go beyond the political control of the court to help the poor and the oppressed” (Zhang, 2014: 24). The core of *jianghu* culture is *yiqi* (义气), or the spirit of honor. Embedding this spirit, the swordsmen should live by and for loyalty, trust and fellowship (Boretz, 2010: 35-36). Alibaba leaders consider this part of their corporate culture. It is well known among Chinese e-traders that Ma Yun is a fan of the famous martial arts writer Jin Yong (Louis Cha) and adopts many so-called “martial arts elements” (*wuxia yuansu*, 武侠元素) in his business strategy and management. It is said that every employee in Alibaba has a nickname from martial arts fictions, including Ma who names himself “Feng Qingyang” (风清扬).²⁷ Every office in Alibaba also has a name the same as martial arts shrines in the fictions, such as Ma’s “Bright Summit” (*guangming ding*, 光明顶).²⁸ The corporate value in Alibaba is first summarized as “Nine Swords of Dugu” (*dugu jiujian*, 独孤九剑) and then “Six Meridians Divine Sword” (*liumai shenjian*, 六脉神剑), both powerful martial art skills mentioned in Jin Yong’s works. By promoting this naming system, some scholars believe that Ma is using *jianghu* culture to build social solidarity and an unified cultural identity within the corporation (Li, 2015). But his ambition may be even bigger. An Alibaba leader stated in an interview that the use of martial arts rhetoric in the corporation had three objectives. First, it aimed to create an atmosphere of equality (as everyone could address others by their nicknames) that would make employees feel well treated. Second, it indicated the corporation’s expectation that employees become special experts in their fields, because every swordsman in the *jianghu* realm must be expert to survive. Third, it publicized Alibaba’s corporate culture which emphasized honor (Li, 2014). A widely quoted example of Alibaba’s expression of the swordsman’s honor is that its platform has provided many ordinary people with start-up opportunities (Li, 2015).

This tells that *jianghu* is not (just) about selfless generosity. Like what Jin Yong writes in his stories, it is about the pursuit and the display of power. Ma Yun’s more apparent instrumental use of *jianghu* culture is his holding of an economic and cultural summit called “Sword Competition besides West Lake” (*xihu lunjian*, 西湖论剑). The idea of this event is borrowed from Jin Yong’s “Sword Competition at Mount Hua”

²⁷ Feng is a character in Jin Yong’s novel *The Smiling, Proud Wanderer* (笑傲江湖). He leads a reclusive life in Mountain Hua but is a formidable swordsman with the skill “Nine Swords of Dugu”.

²⁸ Bright Summit is the shrine for Ming Cult in Jin Yong’s novel *The Heaven Sword and Dragon Saber* (倚天屠龙记).

(*huashan lunjian*, 华山论剑), an assembly of martial arts masters through which they compete for the top in the martial artists' community (*wulin*, 武林). When the first summit was held in 2000, Ma and Alibaba were still small potatoes. But by appropriating Jin Yong's cultural influence, Ma succeeded in inviting many prominent figures in the Chinese internet economy at that time, including the CEOs of Sina, Sohu, and NetEase. It was said that this event first established Ma's position in Chinese IT industry and made Alibaba one of the most influential sects in the *jianghu* of Chinese internet economy (Wang and Li, 2014: 86-88). The presences of foreign politicians and entrepreneurs from other industries in the following summits, such as Bill Clinton, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jerry Chih-Yuan Yang (co-founder and former CEO of Yahoo), further enhanced Ma and Alibaba's status in the global political economy. To some observers, after the last summit in 2010 Alibaba had become the top sect in its *jianghu* (Wang and Li, 2014: 94).

Some of my informants also regarded Ma Yun's life experience as a story about how a youngster adventured in the *jianghu* world and eventually became a master of martial arts. I learned of Alibaba's use of Jin Yong's works first from Mr. Deng, who is a fan of Jin's television adaptations. He accepted Ma's role as a capable marital artist for his brilliant business talent, but suggested that he was not as transcendental as his role model Feng Qingyang.

I think Ma Yun is a worldly person who likes power and money. You see, he names his office Bright Summit. That is the power center of the *jianghu* world in the book "The Heaven Sword and Dragon Saber". Why does he organize "Sword Competition besides West Lake"? Because he wants to become the No.1, the chief of the martial artists' community and the king of the *jianghu* world. His actions show his strong desire for hegemonic power.

While scholars stress the nongovernmental nature of *jianghu* in opposition to the (imperial) state (Chen, 2016; Liu, 2005; Lu, 2005; Wang, 2014; Zhang, 2014), Mr. Deng's narrative points to the similarity between the two realms. Both of them are arenas in which ambitious individuals struggle for power and accompanying benefits, and the structure of *jianghu* mirrors the (imperial) bureaucratic hierarchy. The world of *jianghu* has its own leadership, subordinates and resisters. The following section will explain how the subordinates and resisters live their everyday life under/in the Alibaba's empire/*jianghu*.

Lived experiences with the Alibaba empire

As noted, in the process of imagining Alibaba as a modern capitalist as well as a Chinese bureaucratic empire, mass media, Chinese political culture and e-traders' social experiences all play a role. However, the foundation for adopting the imperial understanding has its roots in Alibaba's concentration of power and resources in the e-commerce world, and this makes it comparable with the Chinese government in mode of resources allocation, organizational form and formation of authority. Within the e-traders' circle, Alibaba e-platforms (and Jingdong's as well) are called "centralized e-platforms" (*zhongxinhua pingtai*, 中心化平台), and "centralization" is seen as the core of the current model of e-commerce development in China. Like other concepts, insiders in the e-commerce world have not defined "centralization" clearly. Generally speaking, it refers to the situation that e-traders are dependent on e-platforms' provision of resources while subject to their administrative control. Because of this dependency, some e-traders try their best to seek patronages from power holders on the e-platforms through formal (e.g., buying paid services) and informal channels (e.g., building personal relations). The terms and practices indicate the important roles of e-platforms in building and managing China's online market. But we should not ignore the fact that they are also market players just like individual e-traders. Mr. Hong is a sophisticated businessman knowing rules of the game very well. He pointed out to me the similarities in the roles that the Chinese government played in the "socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics" and that which Alibaba played in China's e-commerce economy: they were both rule-makers, regulators as well as players. On the role of market player, Hong elaborated, while the Chinese government used state-owned and state-holding enterprises to monopolize the socialist market economy, Alibaba used Tmall Supermarket (*Tianmao chaoshi*, 天猫超市) and large e-shops in which its leaders had shares to dominate the online market. For instance, it was widely believed that Ma Yun had invested on Hstyle (*Handu yishe*, 韩都衣舍), the most popular women's dress e-shop on Alibaba e-platforms. Hong attributed Ma's success much to his learning of the tricks of the Chinese government, "When he became both judge and athlete, who else will be able to surpass him in the e-commerce market?"

What influence does Alibaba's centralized authoritarianism have on e-traders' mentality and behavior? As I have outlined above, my informants showed an ambivalent attitude towards Alibaba's imperial power. They hated its exploitation and oppression,

but at the same time admired its greatness. Since I started my research I always heard my informants complain about the difficulties of doing e-business, but until the end few of them dropped out. My finding is that their paradoxical view of Alibaba reflects the specific condition of doing e-business on centralized e-platforms. On the one hand, the imperial power does exploit e-traders and takes away a large part of their profits; but on the other hand, it also brings them many material benefits and cultural capital. In between the pull and the push, e-traders struggle to maintain a balance. However, as the following stories demonstrate, there is a strong sense of uncertainty in their minds which forces them to develop corresponding strategies.

Anxiety and sense of uncertainty

E-platforms' concentration of resources determines that e-traders have to rely on them for distributing customer traffic. This dependence often makes my informants nervous. There are two types of traffic on Alibaba e-platforms, one is free and the other is for sale. If e-traders want to obtain free traffic, they have to increase the visibility of their e-shops in the search results. Factors affecting the results are said to include an e-shop's grading, sales volume, concreteness of product description, customer rating and so on. Above all, sales volume is considered as the predominant factor. Some informants claimed it weighed 60 percent, but some believed it was 80 percent. Considering its importance, many e-traders chose to fake transactions in order to increase their sales (the details see Chapter 5). Other factors were also properly addressed. The final ranking of search results, however, was decided by e-platforms.

In my observation, while e-shops with more sales were generally ranked higher, an e-shop with ten thousand sales might not necessarily be placed in front of another with five thousand sales. My informants explained this might be because the latter performed better in other aspects. But when I asked them to analyze the former's faults, they were unable to explain the reason. Among ten informants I interviewed for one specific case, six e-traders responded that they did not know the exact reason and also did not mind it. If it was their e-shops, as long as it appeared on the first page, they would be satisfied. They would not target a specific place because it was too difficult to handle so many different factors. The other four respondents said they had thought about this issue but finally gave up with the reason that they found they could not grasp all the factors. They complained about the low transparency in Alibaba which made the online market corrupt and risky. As Mr. Chen told me,

I have not seen any information about the factors affecting ranking on Alibaba's websites. I learn these all from my friends and e-commerce news websites. I don't know if they are correct. Even if they are correct, there must be many other factors I don't know.....I guess only Alibaba employees know all the factors, but they won't tell you.....Why? If it becomes transparent, how do they help those bribing them?

Although his e-business had matured with an annual sale of four million yuan (US\$ 600,000), Mr. Huang described his past experience as “crossing a river by feeling his way over the stones” (*mozhe shitou guohe*, 摸着石头过河). “We have never been provided with accurate information. All what I did was just to try and find if one option was workable. Sometimes the cost was huge. You think I am successful now, but maybe one day in the future I will lose. The e-business world is never certain.” Huang attributed the risk to Alibaba's monopoly and authoritarianism. “No competing force can check and balance Alibaba. It can do whatever it wants, including keeping that information secret. Neither does the government intervene. It treats Alibaba as its ally for promoting economic development and doesn't care about e-traders' interests.” This sense of powerlessness increased Huang's anxiety.

Purchase is the other way to obtain traffic from Alibaba e-platforms. Taking Taobao as an example, in every page of search results there are some shop windows for auction. Buying these windows are called “taking express” (*kai zhitongche*, 开直通车), meaning that buyers can achieve advertising effectiveness quickly. Some e-traders interpreted their purchases of traffic from Alibaba e-platforms as an act of paying tribute to the empire and its bureaucrats with the hope of winning support. However, not everyone can get rewards because paying tribute is itself understood as a skillful job. What (the product an e-trader sells), how (the selling points of the product), when (the time the e-trader purchases the service), and how much (the amount of money he/she pays) to offer all matter. A seasonal product with attractive features may have more chance of winning the bureaucrats' hearts, especially if the bid is also appealing. But if the empire/bureaucrats are unhappy with the products or the ways e-traders make offerings, the latter will get nothing. Business risk also rests on consumers. If the customers brought in by Taobao express do not make orders, e-traders will lose money quickly regardless of how much they pay to the e-platform. For this reason, those with little capital seldom tried to do so in the past. But nowadays because the online market has become extremely competitive for small e-traders to obtain free traffic, they start to

take note. I had a good few informants lose money after they risked taking express. Still, some succeeded after taking months or even years to research the game and develop skills.

Miss Zhu was considered as an expert of Taobao express among my informants. But in fact she failed many times before making a big sale. Zhu described her past experience as depressing.

I joined Taobao quite late. Everybody said that it became impossible to obtain free traffic, so I decided to take express at the beginning of my e-business. I spent quite a lot of money but found no significant increase in sales. In those days I indeed felt nervous. I felt I had two personalities. One said “Give up, you will never succeed!” But the other said “Don’t give up, your success will come soon!” Every day I was moving between these two personalities. I thought I would go crazy. The big sale came unexpectedly. My friends now regard me as an example of “success belongs to the persevering.” I only agree partially. Persistence is necessary, but success demands luck.

I asked Zhu to elaborate the role of luck in the online market. “The market changes over time. This has much to do with objective factors, such as seasonal changes and policy changes. But subjective factors, like xiao’ers’ tastes and hobbies, also matter. If your product meets market needs and happens to enter a xiao’er sight, and then the xiao’er happens to like it, you win a big lottery!” After the successful sale, Zhu realized the uncertainties embedded in e-business which made her even more nervous. “Doing e-business on Taobao is just like gambling. People think I am an expert, but this time my luck is in just because I have tried so many times.”

But fortune does not always come after failures and setbacks. Even if it comes, it may leave later on. Mr. Kong’s case impressed me most during the fieldwork. He had worked in an e-shop before starting his own business selling camping equipment in March 2015. With the experience of moving up his e-shop in search results and taking express, Kong’s business grew gradually. In July, he earned more than ten thousand yuan. As a previous migrant laborer who previously had a monthly salary of two thousand yuan, this had been a great success. Kong was so self-motivated that he worked even harder. His computer was online 24 hours for 7 days. Even at midnight, he would wake up whenever customers appeared. But his sales and traffic suddenly decreased in mid-August. Kong was deeply worried. Whenever he met friends in the e-

commerce circle, he requested them to analyze the problems in his e-shop. But none of these people sold products as his and thus were unable to make a worthwhile diagnosis. Hearing his traffic had decreased, one asked Kong if his e-shop had been punished by Taobao for violating rules. Kong responded he had not received any notice from the e-platform. Another one asked whether Kong had stopped taking express because he heard doing that might have negative effect on e-shops. Kong replied no. This friend then recalled that Kong had advertised his Taobao e-shop in QQ and WeChat. It was said that Alibaba banned e-traders from attracting customers from social media and other channels because it wanted them to buy its traffic. Kong guessed that was possible, but he had not advertised on social media since early July. The conversations ended with no result. Kong became more frustrated. He told me that he often felt deeply depressed after waiting for customers all day in front of the computer, “But nobody come!” To relieve the stress, Kong might even go for a run at midnight. Until I finished my fieldwork in March 2016, his e-shop had not recovered. Neither did he know the exact reason for its sudden decline.

Kong’s case was unusual among all my informants, but e-traders did confront different kinds of uncertainties frequently. For instance, they might get caught by Alibaba’s surveillance system for faking just one deal, but sometimes they remained safe after thousands of deals. Once caught, the e-platforms would notify e-traders of punishment measures, which usually would cause traffic decline. Nevertheless, in some cases e-traders received no notification but found their businesses worse. One explanation for this was that the e-platforms suspected that the e-traders had broken the rules but did not have solid evidence, or they had adopted certain business strategies the e-platforms did not like (such as the ban on bringing in customers from social media, this has never been specified in Alibaba’s regulations), the e-platforms would take a measure called “invisible downgrading” (*yinxing jiangquan*, 隱形降權, meaning reducing an e-shop’s traffic without informing its owner). Although Alibaba did not admit it, my informants firmly believed the existence of this measure because they needed an answer to settle their uncertainties. But this also generated new puzzles about how to avoid or respond to the invisible measure. Mr. Huang often criticized Alibaba severely for its bureaucracy and authoritarianism, which he thought led e-traders to live a precarious life.

Doing e-business on Taobao is really tiring because the authorities keep making troubles to us. We did something, they punished us. We did nothing,

they again punished us. Sometimes they punished us and informed us about the reasons; but sometimes not. Sometimes they punished us because they changed the rule and we had not caught up with it. I think they just want to punish us and make fun! We are toys! If they see us as stakeholders, they should consult us for changing the rules. But they never did. A group of dictators!

Becoming worldly social actors

It was common for my informants to curse Alibaba while running e-shops on its e-platforms. For several times when they complained to me about the company, I asked them why they stayed on if Alibaba was so bad. They then started to poke fun at themselves for becoming worldly social actors (*lao jianghu*, 老江湖) who did not mind that their behavior contradicted their words. Like Mr. Huang, Mr. Zheng often criticized the corruption of Alibaba bureaucrats. But he judged the resisting e-trader stupid in the opening story of this chapter. He commented as follows:

Initially the xiao'er had not targeted him; he came out on his own. All people in the chat room knew they should not talk about fake transactions openly, but he made it public. So the xiao'er fired at him. In the chat room I have joined, our xiao'er also asked us not to fake transactions. We all responded "we don't". But in fact everyone did. We knew the xiao'er was just giving a performance, so we catered for her. What she actually meant was that we should not do it during the promotional campaign, but at other times we should keep the practice so as to meet the needs of both sides. That rebellious e-trader's action broke the consensus. As a result, nobody could carry on their performances.

To Zheng, interactions in the chat rooms used to be a social performance in which e-traders and xiao'ers conspired together to maintain a silent convention. It was through this performative ritual that the two parties negotiated interests with each other. But the "rebellious" e-trader destroyed the harmony, and he paid the price. Zheng reminded me of the similarities in dealing with Alibaba bureaucrats and government officials, "To do business with the authorities, you must flatter them and let them know they will benefit from your cooperation. But back to your home, you can think of them in whatever ways you want." The rationale underlying this worldly attitude was that Zheng believed the best way to make one's e-business profitable was to cooperate with the e-platforms. In doing so, an e-trader would enjoy unlimited traffic, priority in joining promotional

campaigns, as well as advice of business operation from xiao'ers.

But most e-traders did not have that kind of opportunity. The next-best choice, according to Zheng, was to take advantage of the flaws on the e-platforms. Zheng identified three types of e-businesses. The first included those that complied with the law and the e-platform regulations. The second was the opposite. The third was in between the above two. It belonged to a realm into which the state and e-platforms had not intervened or had not sought to regulate closely. Zheng suggested that most e-traders did and could only think about the first type of compliance, and thus the market had been saturated with low profitability. For the second type, only few people tried because of its high risk. The third type was said to be an excellent way to earn quick and big money at low risk and high profitability, but few people knew it. Zheng described his peers doing this type of business as “very smart,” as having a “rich knowledge of the rules of the e-commerce game,” and as “capable of finding the flaws in the rules and seizing the opportunities.” Helping other e-traders to fake transactions was once such a profitable business until it was crushed down by e-platforms and the state recently. Zheng mentioned he had read news reports that by doing this some business-owners had become rich enough to buy apartments and luxury cars in Chinese first-tier cities.

I also met some e-traders who knew how to take advantage of the flaws on the e-platforms. Mr. Li was one of them. He owned one Tmall and several Taobao e-shops, but during my fieldwork I found he did not put much effort into them but relied on his twelve employees for daily operation. He paid more attention to another project. Since 2014 Alibaba's control over fake transactions became severer, but on the other hand its search results still heavily weighed sales volume. Therefore, e-traders' needs for fake sales had not been effectively stopped. If the previous methods did not work anymore, were there any alternatives? This was the question Li pondered over when I first knew him. Until the second half of 2015 he finally found a way. At that time Alibaba was promoting a new marketing program called “Taobao Spreader” (*Taobao ke*, 淘宝客). Under this program, an e-trader could employ third-party sales agents to help him do advertising on the internet or in social media. When customers made orders, the e-trader needed to pay commission to the sales agents; and Alimama (阿里妈妈), a subsidiary of Alibaba responsible for managing Taobao Spreader, would also levy service fees from the exchanges. As I noted before, many e-traders believed that Alibaba tried to prevent them from bringing in customers from social media because it then could not make money by selling traffic. The emergence of Taobao Spreader reinforced their view, since it now started to channel customers from social media to its e-platforms and then again

sell to the e-traders. Realizing the ultimate purpose of Alibaba was to make money by every means available, Li thought he might use Taobao Spreader to fake transactions. As he explained,

I think Alibaba will not examine the traffic brought in by the sales agents carefully. First, it is technologically challenging. Second, even if it finds some customers problematic, I guess it will let them go because it can make money through the fake exchanges. After all, what violates the regulations and what does not are decided by Alibaba. Its will is the law of the empire.

Because I have promised Mr. Li that I will not expose his business secret to the public, here I will not go into the details about how he faked transactions through an officially recognized channel. But the result was that by adopting this method he successfully produced several bestsellers for himself and his friends. Thereafter he even started to make money by faking transactions for other e-traders.

Mr. Qin's business presented another way to take advantage of the flaws on the e-platforms. In Yiwu there was a group of businesspeople who claimed they had personal networks in Alibaba, and Qin was one of them. He had worked in a big Tmall e-shop which was said to have connections with several xiao'ers. Now his business was to provide service to e-traders who wanted to establish relations with those xiao'ers. Besides bridging the two groups, Qin organized an e-trader club. A paid member would enjoy not only fresh e-commerce information sent by the organizer but social capital cultivated through club activities. In the Chapter 4 I will return to the point that in doing their e-businesses most e-traders I know do not or seldom rely on social relations. This is because almost all their customers are strangers, and there are huge sources of products available in Yiwu's wholesale marketplace so that they do not need personal contact to find suppliers. Earlier in this chapter I have also reported that most e-traders had no access to Alibaba employees even if they were willing to gain that access. In general, except for a few bigger e-traders who had both economic resources and direct access to xiao'ers, I do not think the small- and medium-sized e-businesses in Yiwu fit into the model of "network economy" as the anthropologist John Osburg (2013) suggests. But the Chinese *guanxi* culture does matter. Small e-traders certainly wanted protection from the authorities if they could have it, and Mr. Qin provided them with such opportunities. While I heard some members of his club called Qin a "cheater" because he did not have actual connections in Alibaba, he earned a lot by making use of

the information asymmetry between the e-traders and the e-platforms.

Departure and resistance

While most of the e-traders I knew still tried hard to make a living on Alibaba e-platforms (and that was because they still made money by doing e-businesses), a few were planning to leave or had left. Mr. Zhao is a Yiwu local resident. He took the examination for civil service recruitment after his one-year old e-shop was shut down by Taobao for fake transactions. But he admitted that even if the e-platform did not do that, he had planned to stop in any case.

My business was quite unstable. When it was good, I had to work for 16 hours a day and my computer was online 24 hours. But when it was bad, I became nervous and kept asking myself what I had done wrong. Because I could not find out the causes, I felt more upset. At the same time, even if the business was bad I could not leave the computer because I didn't know when customers would come. Some people said that e-traders had a lot of spare time because we didn't need to sit in the office. That is totally wrong. I sat at home and my room was my office. I had to work for the whole day without any spare time, and almost 365 days for a year! My parents worried about me. They said I would not have a chance to find a girlfriend because I did not go out to socialize with anybody. I think so. To be an e-trader, one will only have business but no private life (*zhiyou shengyi, meiyou shenghuo*, 只有生意没有生活). I want to live a normal life, which means a stable job with sufficient income and weekends! So I have taken the examination for civil service recruitment.

It was clear that Zhao considered the e-trader occupation as an abnormal lifestyle because of its uncertainty and self-exploitation. All my informants (including those still running e-business and those leaving or who had left) shared the consensus that doing e-business was a laborious job which often brought about anxiety and exhaustion to its practitioners. But the more important reason for most leaving e-traders' departures was that the business appeared no longer profitable to them. However, when explaining why the business became unprofitable, their answers varied. While all my respondents agreed that it had much to do with the harsh competition of the online market, they had different views about the root of this competition. Some thought it was a natural

outcome after the market became saturated. But a good proportion of them suggested it was an “evil” consequence of Ma Yun and Alibaba’s deception. They argued that by inducing them to do business on Alibaba e-platforms, Ma and his bureaucrats built an empire and amassed huge wealth. “But they don’t care about us at all, they just want to make use of us.” The Jin couple accused the authorities of cheating and exploitation (I will return to the Jins’ story below). More specifically, Taobao e-traders criticized Alibaba for distributing most traffic to Tmall e-shops and leaving little to them, because the authorities could earn more money from profit-sharing in the latter (in every deal Tmall charges a technological service fee from Tmall e-traders, normally 2 percent to 5 percent of the price of a given product). Tmall e-traders complained that most of their profits had been siphoned by Alibaba. Some commented that Ma Yun was the biggest shareholder in their companies even though he had not made any investment. Mr. Zheng asserted that e-traders looked like self-employed businesspeople but in fact all worked for Ma. This was widely accepted among his friends. Some even added that, “We are not workers but slaves!”

From my observation, the longer an e-shop operated, the more discontented its owner had become when he/she quit. Many retiring e-traders told me that they had devoted their youth to Alibaba, but the company disappointed them bitterly. In particular, they resented its injustice and heavy exploitation. An extreme manifestation of this resentment was that they were negative about everything related to Alibaba. At the beginning of my fieldwork, I met some previous Taobao e-traders who kept telling me negative things about the Taobao e-platform once they knew I was conducting research on topics related to Alibaba. They asked me to reveal these injustices to the public so that everyone would know it was a morally corrupt company. Furthermore, these people were themselves fans of online shopping. When they still ran their businesses on Alibaba e-platforms, they also consumed there. But they discontinued after their e-shops were closed down, because that meant giving money to their enemy. Very often they became supporters of the Jingdong e-platform, Alibaba’s major competitor, and claimed the quality of goods on Jingdong was much better than Taobao, Tmall and other Alibaba e-platforms. I have several informants who often post news on their WeChat Moments and Qzones about counterfeits on Taobao with accompanying comments criticizing the irresponsibility and cynical minds of Alibaba authorities.

The case of the Jins is illustrative. This couple have run a Taobao e-shop for three years and had achieved the reputation of “gold crown seller,” which meant that more than five-hundred thousand customers had rated their products as “good.” But this e-

shop was shut down by Taobao for faking hundreds of deals during the period of my fieldwork. The couple tried to solve the problem by every possible means, including going to Hangzhou to find contacts inside Alibaba. But they eventually failed. In my interview they blamed Alibaba for making a big deal out of everything. In their view, faking transactions was just a common practice for e-traders doing business on Alibaba e-platforms and it had also contributed much to the company's income and prosperity.

Alibaba usually turns a blind eye to fake transactions because it not only creates an image of prosperity and attracts more customers to shop at Taobao and Tmall, but also produces tremendous profits for its e-platforms. Nevertheless, because of the public opinion pressure it undertakes campaigns at times and picks out some e-shops for punishment. I can understand that it needs to maintain its public image, but why does it adopt such a severe measure as shutting down my e-shop expeditiously? This is not in accordance with Taobao's regulations which only stipulate that an e-shop will be punished but never say it will be closed down for faking transactions. You see the news reporting that Ma Yun got angry at fake transactions and ordered his bureaucrats to shut down hundreds of e-shops. Shameless performance! He is such a dictator who treats his own law as a dead letter.

Later on the Jin couple started to accuse Alibaba and Ma Yun in online forums and social media. Once I saw them post three pictures (see Figures 3.4, 3.5 and 3.6) on their WeChat Moments with a title "Ma Yun will not have a good death", criticizing Ma for cheating and exploiting e-traders, and their friends helped spread the denunciation. Among all the pictures, I think Figure 3.6 is the most interesting one. It presents a typical setting of a Chinese funeral rite in which the Jins are cursing Ma to receive heavenly retribution. This shows that while e-traders can legitimize Ma through religious ritual practice, they can also de-legitimize him in the same way.



Figure 3.4: “He just cannot stop cheating”. This picture portrays a scene that Ma Yun is giving a speech besides a cliff. He is mobilizing e-traders to open e-shops on the Taobao e-platform, saying that “Starting your business on Taobao, you can make 10 million yuan in a month; you will regret it if you don’t do it.”



Figure 3.5: “Taobao Association for Extracting Oil”. In the title of this picture, the term “Taobao” is using different Chinese characters with the same pronunciations. It presents a scene that a man looking like Ma Yun is extracting e-traders’ blood and sweat.



Figure 3.6: “Heavenly Retribution”. This picture presents a Chinese funeral rite in which the deceased looks like Ma Yun. The banner and couplets are cursing the deceased so that he will receive heavenly retribution.

More individuals were engaged in producing a critical discourse against the entire internet industry. Regarding the virtual economy as a kind of bubble economy, they claimed that the internet industry was doing harm to China’s national economy by destroying the so-called “real economy” (*shiti jingji*, 实体经济, mainly referring to the manufacturing industry). By juxtaposing the two industries and defining the second as “real,” these former e-traders intentionally played down the advantages and contributions of the “unreal” one. This derogation was also obvious in their employment of the metaphor “Bad money drives out good”. Originally known as “Gresham’s law” in economics, this phrase now was used to criticize the internet industry (the bad) and praise the manufacturing industry (the good). As the major representative of the internet industry in China, Alibaba was judged to take the primary responsibility for the depression of the “real” market.

Mr. Sun was the one I found most radical in his opinions. Since we added contacts on WeChat, I found he flood the screen everyday by posting news and commentaries about how Alibaba and other e-commerce companies damaged offline businesses, causing the bankruptcies of small- and medium-sized factories, layoffs of workers, and closures of shops in downtown areas. Sometimes he might even add his personal

experiences to certify the authority of the news posts. Sun left Taobao after running an e-shop selling stockings for three years and the reason for his departure was that his income could no longer sustain his family. In commenting on a piece of news reporting how online businesses defeated their offline counterparts through low prices, Sun recalled his own experience. “I am also a victim of the price war. My competitors priced their stockings much lower than the production costs. Their slogans were ‘making profits after occupying the market’. How could I compete with these well-capitalized sellers? The economic logic of e-commerce (meaning the price war) will destroy the world!” Many of our common WeChat friends “liked” his commentary.

Since early 2016 there has been another wave of criticizing the virtual economy and upholding the “real” economy in Chinese social media. The critics compared Huawei, the world’s largest telecommunications equipment manufacturer, with China’s big three internet companies in terms of their operating incomes, annual profits, tax revenues, numbers of employees, and employees’ salaries and benefits. Because Huawei surpassed BAT in all aspects, the critics praised it as China’s greatest enterprise and played down the other three. Mr. Sun joined this wave too. To contrast with Huawei’s treatment of employees, he posted an open letter to Ma Yun which was said to be written by an Alibaba employee who had resigned. In the letter, the author described the company as a sweatshop in which employees were heavily exploited. To prevent them from resisting, the authorities tried hard to brainwash them with corporate values, but the employees could not be effectively brainwashed. The result, as the author found, was that the company became an officialdom in which the authorities acted like bureaucrats and the subordinates became flatterers. Those who openly resisted would be criticized and penalized for not upholding corporate values. Sun concluded his comments on the letter by writing the following paragraph.

I used to think e-traders were exploited and oppressed because we lived at the bottom of the e-commerce world; now I know xiao’ers are also exploited and oppressed by their superiors. There is a hierarchy there in which people at upper level eat those at lower level. My friends who run Alibaba e-shops believe they are following a modern and progressive business leader. But in reality he is an old-fashioned power seeker who wants to build an empire in the modern world by reproducing the Chinese imperial polity. Compatriots, will you still place your hopes on this man for bringing a bright future to China?

Conclusion

In contrast to most e-traders on Alibaba e-platforms, Mr. Sun believed that he had seen through the company's true face and did not want to place his hopes on its founder any more. But the imperial metaphor in his remarks resembled what others had said. This metaphor covered the characteristics of Alibaba as a modern capitalist corporation as well as its organizational futures as a bureaucratic empire. As I have demonstrated in this chapter, although this imperial understanding had its roots in Alibaba's concentration of power and resources, it was also relevant to ordinary Chinese people's social experiences and Chinese political culture. By comparing their experiences with Alibaba e-platforms and the Chinese state, as well as absorbing media information, my informants projected the relationship between individuals and the state onto their relationship with Alibaba, understood their interactions with Alibaba employees in the light of the interactions between commoners and government officials, and drew an analogy between Ma Yun and the head of state with regard of their power and status. Chinese political culture helped strengthen this kind of understanding. Authoritarian politics, hierarchical bureaucracy and its officialism, *guanxi* practice and corruption, citizens' hierarchical trust in public authorities, and the imperial metaphor in religious sphere and folk culture, all these have been seen by the e-traders to be replicated in the Alibaba empire. Living under this empire, the non-transparency of and the omnipresent surveillance from the bureaucracy made the e-traders nervous. In response, many of them had to develop various kinds of strategies. There were also some who felt too tired to leave as well as those who were forced to leave the e-platforms. They formed a group in the cyberspace criticizing Alibaba or even the entire Chinese internet industry at the margin of the empire.

E-commerce is generally seen by Chinese e-traders and the public as a product of the development of information technology in the recent two decades. Social science studies on information technology in China and abroad often focus on the impacts the technology has had on economic development (Leong, Pan and Cui, 2016; Lin, Xie and Lv, 2016; Zhang and Jiang, 2015), social stratification (Qiu, 2009; Wallis, 2013) and consumer culture (Wang, 2014), but they seldom touch upon how the economic, social and cultural factors affect the innovation and application of the technology. A recent study shows that though e-commerce development in China advances mass consumption by both genders, women are identified in mass media as becoming "mad" consumers and are labeled as "spendthrift chicks" (*baijia niangmen*, 败家娘们). Doubtlessly, this representation intensifies the existing patriarchal ideology in Chinese

society (Meng and Huang, 2017). This chapter also reveals that despite being a modern invention, information technology (especially e-commerce technology) is constrained by the social and cultural contexts when it gets rooted in a given society; moreover, a modern capitalist information technology company may carry a local cultural legacy when it grows up in a locality rich in tradition. Considering that the current model of e-commerce development in China is characterized by the concentration of power and resources in certain e-platforms, in particular Alibaba's, many e-traders then perceive the company as a centralized empire in their sociocultural context. Their attitude towards the empire is two-fold. On the one hand, they admire the imperial power for its greatness and feel honored to be one of its subjects; but on the other hand, they feel anxious and angry for being exploited and oppressed by the same power, which leads them to develop strategies for adapting to, negotiating with and resisting its domination. Among them, one strategy is to expand the critical use of the imperial metaphor, as the critics of Alibaba in this chapter have done. To this end, the metaphor becomes an important issue for scholarly inquiry not just because it is a culturally embedded perception of understanding politics in the e-commerce world, but also a conscious action taken by the powerless to counterattack the powerful.

E-commerce is both a virtual and real-world business practice that is embedded in and is reproducing the existing political economic, social and cultural structures. To live on e-commerce, e-traders need to deal with not only those super-structural but powerful players, such as the state and e-platform giants, but also ordinary people they encounter in daily life and business exchanges. This is because e-business itself is largely localized, if we consider its supply chain and its practitioners' offline life. The next chapter will turn to the interactions between migrant e-traders and Yiwu local residents. To live and conduct business in Yiwu, the migrant e-traders have to communicate with local people to rent their houses, buy their wholesale products, receive their services and so forth. This social relationship therefore constitutes an important part of their everyday life. Shifts in this relationship may also reflect changes in the traders' social status and identity. As the previous two chapters have established the macro background of e-trading in Yiwu, we will explore the micro world of e-trading in the subsequent three chapters.

Chapter 4: The “Inferior” Talk Back: *Suzhi* (Human Quality), Social Mobility, and E-Commerce Economy

Introduction

Two days before the Double Eleven Online Shopping Festival of 2015, I witnessed a quarrel downstairs from my apartment. My neighbor, the e-trader Mr. Wu was busy preparing goods for the coming festival on that day. He had just unloaded his goods when a BMW arrived. Honking incessantly, the driver, who was a local, shouted at Mr. Wu whom he identified as not a local. “The *suzhi* (素质) of you non-locals is so low, how can you unload your goods on the street?” Hearing this slight made Mr. Wu angry. He responded that he had come to remove the goods as soon as he heard the horn, and asked why the driver was persisting in scolding him. The driver shouted louder, “I scold you for your benefit, you should raise your own *suzhi*.” Wu became even angrier, blaming the car owner for his own lack of *suzhi* as evidenced by his insolence. The two had almost come to blows when my landlord and other neighbors arrived to stop the quarrel. The driver left with menace in his voice. Wu, in turn, growled at the leaving car and then spoke to us, “does owning a BMW mean that he has *suzhi*?”

Mr. Wu is one of my key informants. He was originally from a rural county of Jiangxi province and arrived at Yiwu in 2004. With a high-school diploma, Wu began his career by working as a factory worker and then started his own small business. In 2008 he found a business opportunity in e-commerce and soon opened a Taobao e-shop selling daily necessities and then plasticine. His business grew rapidly in the subsequent years and the total transaction volume in 2014 exceeded two million yuan (US\$ 309,400). In 2012, the twenty-seven-year-old man married a girl from his hometown and settled in Yiwu, where he bought an apartment and a car. Wu said that he viewed Yiwu as his second hometown, but he remained ambivalent in his feelings toward the local people. “I have many local friends and business partners. Generally speaking, Yiwu people are quite business-oriented. They treat all visitors as guests and do not usually discriminate against outsiders.” Wu then added, “But this does not mean they have no prejudice. For example, they often address people from Jiangxi as ‘*laobiao*’ (老表) with negative meanings.” Wu elaborated that he often called his Jiangxi fellows ‘*laobiao*’ at home and upon his arrival at Yiwu, because he thought the term signified friendliness. But gradually he found his fellows in Yiwu dislike the term, since local people used it to label migrants from Jiangxi as a group of peasants who were culturally and economically backward and lacking in *suzhi*. When he was still working in the

factory, he rented a house in a nearby village and lived together with his Jiangxi friends. He complained that,

The landlord was also a peasant, but he too looked down upon our Jiangxi migrants and often criticized us for lacking in *suzhi* and cleanliness. We were even blamed for breaking the door lock whenever it had problems. In his opinion, we were simply a group of paupers who had no *suzhi* and who were morally suspect. Even after I started my own business, local people treated me as a *laobiao* migrant worker if they knew of my Jiangxi origin.

However, the bigger Wu's business grew, the less he was regarded as a *laobiao*. Instead, he was viewed as a *laoban* (老板, boss). "Besides my customers, nowadays my landlord also called me *laoban*. *Laoban* is an honorable identity with higher social status in Yiwu." From *laobiao* to *laoban*, it took Wu ten years to transform his identity and the attached social standing. In his own words, it was a process that turned him from a migrant worker assumed to be "poor in money, *suzhi* and morality" to a boss "with money and (higher) social standing".²⁹ "I never think I am a low-*suzhi* person, and I believe I have proved myself through my business success." Wu whined after the quarrel, "but the BMW owner still underestimated my *suzhi*, I lost my temper."

Mr. Wu's narrative demonstrates the crucial role of *suzhi* in shaping and negotiating the social identity of a rural migrant in the city. Defined as "the innate and nurtured physical, psychological, intellectual, moral, and ideological qualities of human bodies and their conduct" (Jacka, 2009: 524), *suzhi* holds a critical position in the Chinese people's understanding of biological and social differences between individuals, communities, and populations.³⁰ Place of origin, family, class backgrounds, and education attainment can all be taken as factors affecting one's *suzhi*. Those who are thought to have low *suzhi* are regarded as inferior and further marginalized in the social hierarchy (Anagnost, 2004; Jacka, 2006; Sun, 2009a; Yan, 2003a, 2003b). In particular, Hairong Yan has argued that *suzhi* discourse has facilitated the exploitation of the labor of rural migrants in a neoliberalized market economy as it works as a technology of the

²⁹ The differences between migrant workers and bosses in terms of social status in China, see Jacka (2006: 216).

³⁰ Political scientist Haifeng Huang (2016) has made an important critique of existing studies on *suzhi* by just treating the idea as a discursive reality. He proposes a new approach which regards it as a descriptive reality from the perspective of the agents. This study takes a middle way. It is concerned about the agents' view but explore their discursive uses of *suzhi* both as cultural capital to define their professional identity and as a linguistic weapon to talk back to urbanites.

self for the migrants to discipline themselves to better serve the needs of the market economy (Yan, 2003b). In the interest of modernization and national prosperity, the state also initiated *suzhi* education programs to raise more competent and better prepared children; these initiatives are directed towards urban, middle-class children as well as those of rural peasants and migrants (Kipnis, 2011; Kuan, 2015; Lin, 2011; Murphy, 2004; Woronov, 2009).

The existing literature has focused on the popular representation and treatment of those supposedly lacking in *suzhi*. It generates a broad image that Chinese urbanites discriminate against rural counterparts for their low *suzhi*. In Yiwu, this prejudice does exist as evidenced by Mr. Wu and other rural migrant-turned e-traders' experiences that I will discuss below. But now many urbanites begin to show respect to these people and address them as "high-*suzhi*" entrepreneurs. This study demonstrates that what underlies the changing attitudes is these rural migrants' recent acquisitions of financial, social and cultural capital through doing online business. How do the migrant new rich respond to the urbanites' admiration? What do they think about the urbanites' contrasting attitudes when they are getting rid of their inferior position in the urban social hierarchy?

Previous studies show that while many rural migrants are eager to improve themselves by embracing urban lifestyles (Pun, 2003; Yan, 2008), some are resistant to the urbanites' critique of their low-*suzhi*. Tamara Jacka (2006) notes that some of her informants have reacted by throwing the "low-*suzhi*" epithet back at the urban middle class. Urbanites have been described as "cold" and "arrogant" (214), as "exploitative capitalist bosses" (217), as "unrefined and morally inferior" due to their being "connected with the world of money and commerce" (233), and as "low *suzhi* and lack of *wenming* (civility)" due to the contempt they display towards rural migrants (235). These ethnographic details are evidence of linguistic resistance displayed by rural "inferiors" towards the *suzhi* hegemony of urban "superiors." This kind of everyday resistance is meaningful and worth noting. However, it may not change the social hierarchy nor improve the status of rural population. In Mr. Wu's case, however, long-term experience with the stigma of low *suzhi* has motivated him to achieve upward social mobility and prove himself as a person with high *suzhi*.³¹ The process, in his own

³¹ In her informative ethnography, Hairong Yan (2008: Chapter 5) has also provided a few cases in which rural migrants became entrepreneurs after working as maids for many years and accumulating enough capital to start their own business. These entrepreneurs embraced the discourse of self-development and tried hard to improve their own *suzhi* to achieve success. However, most of my informants, including Mr. Wu, rejected the biased assumption that the rural population was lacking in *suzhi* at the outset. In other words, their endeavors to succeed were motivated by a desire to prove themselves against unfair representations rather than reconfirm the prejudice of the urbanites.

words, was his transition “from a rural migrant worker to an urban boss.” This chapter highlights the significance of this transition and its impact on individual identity as well as on the social interaction between rural and urban populations in Yiwu.

Apart from *suzhi* studies, this chapter strives to engage with Chinese domestic-migrant studies more broadly by focusing on rural migrant worker-turned-entrepreneurs. In China and abroad, there is growing interest in research on rural-to-urban migrants among left-wing scholars. A large proportion of this literature targets factory workers (e.g., Pun, 2005), maids (e.g., Sun, 2009b; Yan, 2008), service workers (e.g., Otis, 2011), and, most recently, construction workers (e.g., Pun, Lu and Zhang, 2012; Swider, 2015). Importantly, this scholarship has demonstrated the sharp inequalities between rural migrants and urbanites (such as employers and customers). It has also highlighted the bitter experiences of rural migrants as exploited underclass/subalterns under the harsh labor regime.³² With a deep sense of unfairness and frustration, some migrants have developed a new working-class consciousness and are ready to initiate collective actions in support of their own interests. This is a process of proletarianization that has been defined by Ngai Pun and her colleagues (Chan and Pun, 2009; Pun and Lu, 2010).³³ But this over-pessimistic representation of rural migrants’ life courses and the subsequent calling for a new formation of the working class may overlook the (ever) existing and newly emerging channels of upward social mobility for rural migrants in cities along with China’s industrial transformation. I will show in this chapter that in Yiwu the e-commerce industry has provided a way for the rural population to climb the social ladder and cross over the urban-rural divide. Moreover, e-business has also enabled these migrants to acquire sufficient social and cultural capital to have their own voice and to have others hear their voices.

This chapter also contributes to the scholarship on the social and economic consequences of e-commerce development in China. As noted in Chapter 1, the existing literature on this issue largely focuses on the rural areas. It discusses how e-commerce

³² Li Zhang (2002) and Biao Xiang (2004) have studied Wenzhou migrant businessmen in Beijing. Compared to other rural populations, this group already had economic capital prior to their arrival and some of them accumulated considerable wealth during their stay in the metropolis. Despite this economic distinction, they still faced the same discrimination from Beijing natives. Unlike these Wenzhou businessmen, my informants did not possess much money upon arrival and had to accumulate capital by as migrant workers or by selling cheap products.

³³ However, in her recent article the sociologist Ching Kwan Lee (2016) criticizes the self-empowerment thesis of Pun and other New Left scholars as “voluntarist and subjectivist” (319). She contends that, rather than the true class consciousness of the migrant workers, it is the political correctness and emotional appeal of these scholars that produce the scholarly image of labor activism in China. With ethnographic data and survey findings, she argues that “not only has there been little mitigation in the institutional and political-economic subordination of Chinese workers, available data did not show any significant change in their mobilization pattern, collective capacity, and subjectivities” (319).

development in impoverished rural areas, mostly in Central and Western China, has increased local villagers' income and improved their quality of life. It also addresses how the improvements in economic life have helped marginalized individuals and households to win more social respect in their local communities (Alibaba Group, 2015; Leong, Pan, and Cui, 2016; Lin, Xie, and Lv, 2016; Zhang and Jiang, 2015). Despite this, the effects of the new industry on the lives of rural migrants living in cities are still understudied. In the case of Yiwu, I found that many rural migrants have benefited from the e-commerce development in the city. Almost all my informants who came from rural areas believed e-commerce had changed their lives. They said it helped them escape poverty and move beyond the cultural stigma of being born as "backward countrymen," and to shake the pain and trauma of working as migrant workers and the discrimination of being non-locals. It also gave them more self-esteem and self-respect, which were crucial for living a happy life. Although they internalized the urban-rural distinction, these rural migrant entrepreneurs believed that e-business had allowed them to cross physical and symbolic boundaries between the two categories. In this regard, e-business has not only built wealth for the rural migrants but also reshaped their subjectivity and self-understanding. How and why does this happen? What are the implications for understanding social interactions between rural and urban populations? In what ways is the e-business success of rural migrants reconfiguring social stratification in Yiwu? The subsequent sections will address these questions.

Popularization of e-business among rural migrants in Yiwu

E-commerce industry in Yiwu started to boom around 2005. Before 2003, large B2C (business-to-customer) sellers, such as eBay and Amazon, dominated the Chinese e-market. To compete with these foreign companies, Ma Yun and his colleagues initiated their C2C (customer-to-customer) e-platform Taobao in May 2003 and mobilized small businesses to join the marketplace by providing free admissions and services. Well-known for low prices and the dependable quality of its goods, Taobao soon caught up and then surpassed all its rivals in the next year (Erisman, 2015; Liu and Peng, 2014). Yiwu's small businesses contributed much to this success. They arrived at the new platform when it was first launched. In fact, when Ma Yun founded his B2B (business-to-business) wholesale e-platform 1688.com in 1999, the first place he sent promotion teams was to Yiwu, where a large number of businesspeople and consumer products had concentrated (Chen, 2013). Until recently, compared to all other Chinese cities, this county-level city has supplied the largest number of e-traders and created the largest

annual transaction volume for the Alibaba wholesale e-platform (Xu, 2016). It is widely believed that most Yiwu-based e-traders in this first wave (1999-2005) have generated wealth.

Yet, by speaking of the “Yiwu-based” e-traders does not mean these traders are local residents. While it was difficult for them to give a concrete figure, my informants, both local and nonlocal, suggested that *most* people doing e-businesses in Yiwu in the past decade were migrants, among whom the majority were born in the countryside. According to these informants, this was because many local residents had established their wholesale businesses and become wealthy long before the emergence of e-commerce. And by investing their profits on real estates in Yiwu and the larger cities such as Shanghai, Beijing and Hangzhou, they earned even more money. Therefore, except for some working-class people, it was said that most local residents did not pay attention to e-commerce, which was a lesser-known industry in the mid-2000s. By contrast, migrants, especially those came from impoverished rural families, were more willing to venture into the new industry because most of them did not have established careers and the fact that start-ups in e-businesses required little capital investment. It was not until 2008 and 2009 that more local businesspeople began to join the industry, due to the effects of the global financial crisis that had significantly reduced export trades in the wholesale marketplace. But migrant e-traders were still the majority. The years of 2008 and 2009 were later seen as representing the second wave of the e-commerce gold rush. At this time, increasing numbers of consumers became accustomed with shopping online and this considerably expanded the Chinese e-commerce market. It was also the time when the first generation of migrant e-traders started to inspire and teach their relatives, friends and fellow villagers to join the market. The creation of the Double Eleven Online Shopping Festival in 2009 further heated up the game.³⁴

Mr. Wu joined the second wave. At that time he had already left his factory job and had saved enough money to start a small business. After hearing some success stories, he moved online by selling cheap daily necessities (e.g., towels). He said that he set up his e-shops purely on his own by following learning materials available on the Internet and soon started to make money.

In those days, opening a Taobao e-shop was a very easy thing. You didn't need

³⁴ Chinese authors have discussed the cultural invention and commercialization of Double Eleven Online Shopping Festival, see Wang (2014) and Yang et al. (2015).

a business license, nor did you need much capital input. You didn't even have to store goods. For a newcomer, you could simply go to the wholesale marketplace and take some photos; then you could just put them online and wait for your customers. I received my first deal within just two days. Once you had sales, other customers would follow. Knowing how to run an e-shop, you could then open a second and then a third.

Once connected to the e-commerce world, Wu befriended quite a few fellow traders and often discussed business strategies with them. It was in this process that he realized that, though he could make some money by keeping a simple e-shop and waiting for customers, to earn bigger money demanded more investment. What he needed to invest in included: the capital for purchasing software for e-shop management and for procuring the services of business promotion; the energy to receive customers and the patience to bargain with each of them for more than half an hour; the emotional work to act as a caring friend. That was, before sales were placed he had to guide customers in placing orders; thereafter, he needed to solve any problems in order to reduce any losses due to a poor assessment. Wu paid proper attention to all these challenges and his sales improved. Despite this, he said that his profits were quite small due to the cheap prices of daily necessities available on Taobao. For this reason, the next year Wu turned to plasticine. He chose this product because the market competition was not as intense as it was for daily necessities. By cooperating with a Yiwu local factory, Wu maintained the cost of his plasticine within one yuan but its selling price exceeded 20 yuan. With this tactic, Wu generated sufficient wealth to purchase real estate and a car in Yiwu.

Wu's business experience is not uncommon among migrant e-traders in Yiwu. Opening an e-shop is not as difficult as many may imagine. Wu mostly drew on online information to learn how to set up and run his e-shops. During the time he was working in the factory, he often spent his holidays surfing the Internet and chatting with friends through QQ (a Chinese instant messaging software) in Internet bars. He had no difficulty in either finding online information for opening and operating an e-shop or in chatting with customers. Similar to Wu, many of the migrant workers-turned e-traders I had met opened their e-shops by studying online. The popularization of computers and the Internet in China had already equipped the younger generation with these basic

skills (Clark, 2012; Liu, 2010; McDonald, 2016; Wang, 2016).³⁵ I was told that it was easy to find information about the necessary documents required for registering an e-shop, the procedures for publishing links to goods, how to market items, and so forth written on blogs and business forums. Furthermore, e-commerce platforms provided clear guidelines once a potential seller had registered. Some e-traders opened their shops with assistance from their relatives and friends who had experience in e-commerce; nevertheless, each of them still needed to learn how the industry worked in the course of doing business.

The popularization of e-commerce in Yiwu also led to the rapid emergence of e-commerce training centers. Visitors to the city could easily find advertisements for such institutions displayed in the street (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2). Some of my informants learned the foundations for opening e-shops from these training courses. Others attended the courses to improve their operational skills. In catering for the various needs of e-traders, the training centers offered courses at different levels (ranging from foundational to advanced and professional levels) and focusing on special subjects (e.g., business promotion, e-shop design, management, etc.) and for specific e-platforms (e.g., Taobao, Tmall, Aliexpress, Jingdong etc.). At several of the largest training centers that I have visited, tuition for foundational courses on Taobao e-business (usually consisting of about ten classes) was around 1,200 yuan (US\$ 185). In 2014, the median monthly salary for migrant workers in Yiwu ranged between 2500 and 3000 yuan (US\$ 386~464), according to information I was given at the local bureau of human resources and social security. Although the price of foundational courses was not an insignificant figure for many young migrants that I met in the training centers, they thought it was affordable and felt it was worth the investment for a big return in the future. Besides attending the local centers, these e-traders often watched online courses offered by training institutions sponsored by big e-platforms (e.g., Taobao College). Many of these courses were free. In addition to courses, a great number of books on opening an e-shop and its subsequent operation were available in bookstores. All of these have made e-commercial techniques more accessible and have expedited the development of the new industry.

³⁵ Jack Linchuan Qiu (2009) has also written about the wide use of information technologies among young rural migrants (and other unprivileged groups) in China; however, Qiu argues that this contributes to the construction of a new working class. Similarly, in her case study, Cara Wallis (2013) contends that, rather than empowering rural migrants, computer training and IT worker recruitment maintains or even reinforces their marginality in urban society. There may be some truth in Wallis's assertions. However, I believe that if migrants extend their use beyond everyday communication and employment and if they find business opportunities in and by those technological skills, that computer skills may provide migrants with a means to advance upward socially and economically.



Figure 4.1: An advertisement for the Jufeng e-commerce training center.



Figure 4.2: The exterior of the Jufeng e-commerce training center.

Among all e-platforms, Taobao is the most popular, especially among migrant e-traders. As I have mentioned in previous chapters, Taobao only requires an identity card and does not require a business license to open an e-shop. This means e-traders on this

e-platform do not need to register at the government and pay taxes. Also, in principle Taobao does not charge any fees. Thus, this e-platform is considered the most suitable for people such as rural migrants who usually do not have much capital.

The wide availability of information on e-commercial techniques and the low entry requirements of the Taobao e-platform make it easy for e-traders to open an e-shop, but to make a profit is rather difficult. There was a general consensus among my informants that it was easier to make money prior to 2008 because the market was not as competitive as it is today. Prior to 2008, it was even unnecessary for e-traders to make their e-shops attractive or to do promotions. But these practices became absolutely necessary during the period of my field research. E-shop decorations usually include a general art design, a series of taking, processing, and editing of photos of goods for sale, and a customer-friendly description introducing goods. Believing in the importance of visual marketing, many e-traders engaged people with expertise in art design who either joined their teams or were sourced from professional agencies. Costs resulting from such website enhancements form a significant part of the total expenditure of running an e-shop. Business promotions are also a significant expense. Promotions at different levels and through different channels will incur varying costs. Therefore, e-traders need to be familiar with the rules of the games so as to effectively increase sales while maintaining low promotion costs. Some traders at my field site were experts on these subjects and were consequently considered “big shots” (*daka*, 大咖) among fellow members and newbies were keen to learn from them. In an effort to acquire valuable experience, some newbies even provided free labor with packaging and customer service in the experts’ e-shops. Once they opened their own e-shops, none of the newbies wanted to ever be an employee again. However, some still chose to partner with other bigger sellers as a way to improve their operational skills. Mature e-traders with ample resources might move to Tmall or other e-platforms where they could sell goods at higher prices, but they might keep one or several Taobao e-shops as a way to reach out to more customers.

Doing e-commerce with entrepreneurial qualities

The achievement of being bestowed with a majority status resulted in many migrant e-traders believing that they had contributed more to Yiwu’s e-commerce development and general prosperity than locals. In Qingyanliu, the urban village which is honored as “the first e-commercial village in China” by Li Keqiang, there is a general perception that a labor division separates the two groups: the vast

majority of e-traders are non-local migrants while locals act mainly as renters. Many migrant e-traders and some local residents explained this labor division by the different *suzhi* levels of the two parties. Some informants particularly emphasized their different possessions of “*chuangye suzhi*” (创业素质), which I translate as entrepreneurial qualities. According to these people, individuals with entrepreneurial qualities had strong motivations, commitment, initiative, execution capability, communication skills, and an honest attitude. In some specific cases, my informants also regarded a sense of responsibility and cultural sophistication as components of entrepreneurial qualities. When evaluating whether a person possessed these qualities, observers might consider their particular personal characteristics. But once this was confirmed, the scrutinized person was believed to have possessed all these qualities. In the village as well as elsewhere in Yiwu, migrant e-traders were widely believed to have entrepreneurial qualities; by contrast, their local counterparts were not. For instance, a local cadre told me that,

Most e-traders in our village are migrants. Our old villagers now live off rents, and younger villagers either work outside or stay at home doing nothing. The older generation spent most of their lives as peasants. After their lands were requisitioned, they used the compensation to build houses and rented them to migrant businessmen. Many of them could earn more than 100,000 yuan (US\$ 15240) per year. That is quite a good income, so they have no incentive to work now. They also don't want their children to suffer by doing risky business, so encourage them to find an easy job or to just stay at home. Old villagers are aging, so they should take a rest. But I worry that the longer the young villagers stay at home, the lazier they will become. They don't have entrepreneurial qualities at all, but only know how to play day and night. If they intend to do business, I think most of them would do better than the migrants because they have more financial resources. Our village committee has organized a business-starting forum to encourage young people to do e-business, but local youths rarely come. Migrants are more enthusiastic and hardworking, especially those from poor families in the countryside.

Miss Zhu was one of the few local attendees in the village business-starting forum. She had also expressed her belief that migrants generally possessed more entrepreneurial qualities than locals. She said that some of her friends who were born into wealthy local families had laughed at her when they learned about her attendance in

the business-starting forum. To them, the forum was only meant as a way for the poor to earn some money and survive in the city, “they thought it didn’t match my status. I told them many well-off migrant e-traders went to that forum, but they said these people were nothing but nouveau riche who succeeded by luck.” During my fieldwork, I also encountered a few children of the rich (*fu er dai*, 富二代) who held a prepossessed sense of superiority towards migrants. In their view Yiwu was one of the most developed cities in China and its residents were the richest; thus, the migrants would never be able to catch up with the locals despite their growing e-businesses. With a sense of pride, they often looked down on migrant e-traders and labeled the latter as poor “countrymen” (*xiangxia ren*, 乡下人).³⁶ Miss Zhu criticized her friends for their arrogance. “Old Yiwuers may despise migrant e-traders at first, but when they find out that the latter really make a lot of money, they will change their minds. As long as a person can make money, they will see him or her as capable.” Zhu followed up with the following observation: “But some young locals are strange. They have no entrepreneurial quality and rely on their families for financial support, but they scorn those who are self-reliant and enterprising. I think they should learn from the latter.”

The idea that migrants had more entrepreneurial qualities than the locals was most popular among my migrant informants. Originating from rural Henan province, Mr. Ye had been a casual laborer and an unlicensed motorcycle-taxi driver after his arrival in 2006. He started a Taobao e-shop in 2009 and experimented with several products. Eventually, he decided to sell baby products and had achieved an annual income of about 200,000 yuan (US\$ 30,860). Compared with the mere three hundred yuan he had in his pocket when he came to the city, Ye was quite satisfied with his current economic condition and saw himself as a middle-class person. However, to distinguish himself from the local middle-class, he emphasized that he earned his money through hard work. After living in Yiwu for a few years, he discovered that many Yiwuers lived on rental income rather than by doing business. This surprised him since the city was always promoted as an enterprising city. In a village next to Qingyanliu where Ye rented a warehouse, almost all of the villagers relied on rental income for a living and spent their days playing cards or mahjong. It was only migrants who were doing business.

I often heard that Yiwuers were hardworking and good at doing business before I came here, but now I have found that many of them are very lazy and

³⁶ Among established entrepreneurs in Chengdu in southwestern China, John Osburg (2013) has found a similar sense of superiority over the newly rich.

lacking in entrepreneurial qualities. My landlord was a peasant and had done some small business. He started to live off rents after building a house with the compensation for his land expropriation. All he did nowadays was walking around the village, chatting and playing cards with his fellows. When I asked him why he did not find a job or continue his business since he was still young, he said, “I earn more money from rents than doing a job or business, why work so hard?”³⁷ I told many local friends this story with an intention to satirize Yiwu people, but they responded, “Yes, Yiwuers are becoming lazy. Migrants are more entrepreneurial and hardworking.”

More critical comments came from the son-in-law of a Yiwu family. Mr. Liu was born in a mountainous district of Chongqing city and migrated to the coastal provinces after graduation from high school. He had worked in several cities before moving to Yiwu, where he met his wife at an e-commerce training center. Common hobbies drew the two together, but Liu’s parents-in-law preferred locals or people from nearby metropolises such as Shanghai and Hangzhou. In the first two years after their marriage, Liu often heard his in-laws describe migrants from inland provinces as poor and low-*suzhi* people, especially those from the countryside. He believed these remarks were aimed at him, but he swallowed his pride and said nothing. However, after his e-business prospered he started to talk back.

One night at dinner, my mother-in-law again told a story about how a migrant scavenger cheated her out of money by lowering the price of discarded products. She spoke loudly, “It should be 8.6 yuan, but he just gave me 6 yuan. These dishonest migrants are really poor in *suzhi*!” I could not help retorting, “It is only 2.6 yuan, not even enough for buying a breakfast. Why is it worth mentioning?” My wife and in-laws stared at me with surprise because I had never talked back before. I grasped at the chance to express my discontent. I said, “You are so wealthy considering that you have a rental income of a hundred thousand yuan every year. Why do you quibble over such a small sum?” Afterwards I started to criticize them for their lack of *suzhi*, especially their lack of entrepreneurial qualities. I said migrants might be poor in *suzhi*, but Yiwuers could be too. Nowadays the most popular topic in the lives of Yiwuers was urban reconstruction and village reconstruction. Everyone

³⁷ Andrew Kipnis (2016: 174) reports a similar mentality among renters at his field site.

wanted their houses or lands to be requisitioned by the government. If not, they might even write letters to the mayor. They did everything to make money this way. Young people tried to find a partner who had houses or lands to be requisitioned. New couples tried to have one more child so as to gain one more piece of land. Old couples had sham divorces to gain more compensation. The younger generation paid more attention to the elderly to avoid monetary loss caused by the latter's death. No one wanted to work or start a business if they could achieve overnight success. Even school-aged children believed that how they performed in school no longer mattered. Rather, as long as their families' houses and lands were requisitioned and compensated, or they had new houses for rent, they felt their lives would be secure. Would children growing up in this environment have entrepreneurial spirit? It would only cultivate a generation of social parasites living on the fruits of migrants! My in-laws were shocked by my criticism, but they dared not to respond to me because it was exactly the case in their extended family.

Liu was happy to find his counteraction take effect. He felt his in-laws respected him more after the event. For this study, it is important to note that Liu's remarks not only targeted the Yiwuers' lack of entrepreneurial qualities but also their lifestyle as "parasites", and the hosts that they lived on were laboring migrants.³⁸ That is, locals and migrants did not act simply as references to each other; rather, they were positioned in a class relation in which locals exploited migrants to survive. In Liu's opinion, the exploiters were morally corrupt because they consumed the fruits of others' labor while they did not work and produce anything on their own. Situating Liu's remarks in the context of post-reform Chinese society has interesting implications. On the one hand, his critique of Yiwu house-owners resembles the socialist tradition, which attacks

³⁸ Like Kipnis (2016) and Anita Chan et al. (2009), Liu's interesting remarks may also offer an alternative case to the decade-long discussion on land expropriation in China that regards peasants as victims of state-led urbanization (Gao, 2001; Chuang, 2014; He and Xue, 2014; Ho, 2005; Sargeson, 2013). It is widely believed among Yiwuers that the wealthiest in the city are suburban villagers and previous urban residents who had properties in the downtown area; it is this group that has earned the most from village and urban reconstruction projects. For this reason, those suburban villages whose lands have not yet been requisitioned often look forwards to state's developmental projects. But once the state intervenes, conflicts will emerge as the villagers will be sure to complain that the compensation is inadequate. Local residents are always interested in getting information about the state's new developmental projects, because they are eager to know the latest record of local land compensation. Those whose lands have not yet been requisitioned will anticipate an even higher compensation if a new record is established. Those who have already gained benefits often suggest that, though the villagers' complaints are understandable because human beings are self-interested, they are unruly people (*diaomin*, 刁民) asking for a preposterous price.

unproductive but extravagant landlords and capitalists as immoral parasites.³⁹ On the other hand, Liu and his migrant e-trader fellows are all active participants in the market economy, and their commitment to the market is in line with the mainstream ideology since the reform. But the market economy actually allows property owners to profit from land ownership by lease, sale, or other means. By combining socialist tradition with capitalist ideology, Liu (and also many other migrant e-traders) had a paradoxical understanding of economic conditions. He linked the different livelihoods of locals and migrants with the different modes of exchanging means of production in the market and conferred moral value on various choices. He dismissed the locals' use of lands and houses for capital accumulation as opportunistic behavior and thus considered it morally inferior. In particular, Liu was disdainful of the locals' appropriation of family and romantic relations for economic interests. In contrast, he admired migrants' use of labor for the same material gain and thus regarded it as respectable. With the ethical values invested in his discourse of entrepreneurial qualities, Liu's classification reminds us that migrant e-traders in Yiwu are important not only because of their economic contribution but because of their role in reshaping local moral understanding and other sociocultural norms.

E-business, entrepreneurship and the yearning for modernity

In response to Mr. Liu's criticism of Yiwuers' lack of entrepreneurial qualities and opportunism, I asked if the concept of "entrepreneurship" (*chuangye*, 创业) might have been too narrowly defined; that is, might it be too limiting to have entrepreneurship include only operating (online and offline) shops and factories and setting up companies. Was it not the case that some locals had found business opportunities in the state's projects of urban and village reconstruction and had tried their best to maximize their benefits through various means? Might these efforts represent another kind of entrepreneurship in a broader sense? Thinking over my questions, Liu responded that indeed the government and society did not have a clear definition of entrepreneurship, and people usually understood the term as e-business in the local context. In a broader sense, running offline shops, factories and companies, and even the profit-seeking activities of the locals, could all be included. But Liu still believed that the locals were morally deficient opportunists, as they would resort to every possible means when it came to making a profit. Even for the older generation who started out in business from

³⁹ People in other post-socialist societies have had a similar doubtful attitude to unearned money in their transition to capitalist economy. See, for example, see Verdery (1996: 184-186).

scratch (including his parents-in-law) by their own labor, Liu labeled them as “traditional businessmen.” He elaborated on what he meant. On the one hand these locals were easily satisfied with a small amount of wealth (*xiao fu ji an*, 小富即安), they would soon lose their entrepreneurial spirit once they earned some money by working hard. On the other hand, since they had experienced the difficult economic period of the Maoist era and had generated their wealth through counting every cent from wholesale business, they were unusually calculating and selfish. Having stayed in Yiwu for many years, Liu said that he had witnessed quite a few cases where rich families fought over property or friends were involved in financial disputes which ended up in court. This, in Liu’s opinion, exposed the low *suzhi* and cultural and moral weakness of these “traditional businessmen.”

By contrast, Liu believed that entrepreneurs of the new age, especially the migrant e-traders, could remain socially responsible while creating their wealth. “Being less selfish and more socially responsible is a component of entrepreneurial qualities in the new age.” He offered an example. He and his e-trader friends had joined a charity that had a Taobao e-shop selling agricultural products. The charity members were responsible for all costs, while the products were grown by several rural households in Yiwu. By participating in this charity, they aimed to help the poor move out of poverty. They had also founded another organization to provide e-commerce training to the disabled and had successfully nurtured several groups (see Figure 4.3). Liu appeared quite excited when he told me the meaningful things they had done, which he viewed as important as his own success in business.

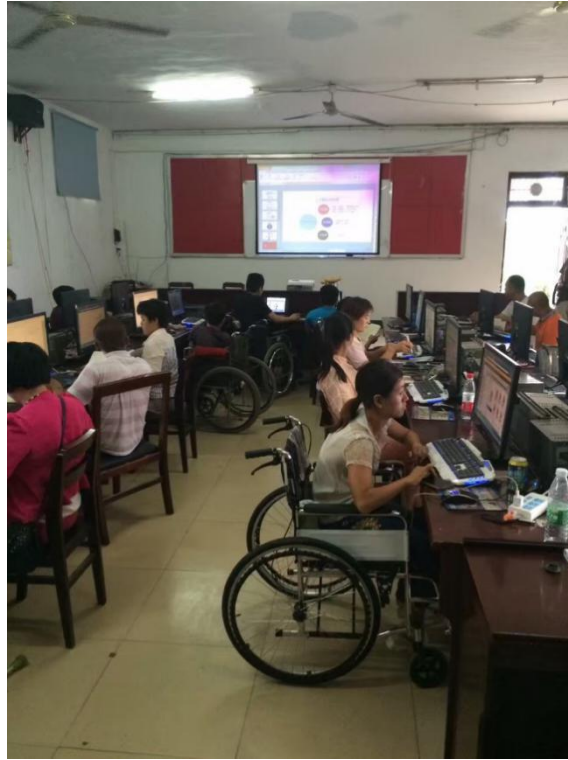


Figure 4.3: An e-commerce training course for disabled people.

In Liu's eyes, another socially responsible action he had taken was to offer jobs to those who needed them. Separate from ordinary employment, Liu suggested that he was providing e-commerce training to potential e-traders. During my fieldwork I found high turnover rates among workers in e-shops. Some might stay only for a few months, and some might leave within several days. Both employers and employees knew that most employees just came to learn e-commerce skills. The remainder might not have this idea in the beginning, but would soon realize that they could make more money if they worked for themselves. Being fully aware that his employees would eventually leave, Liu claimed that he still taught them how to use all kinds of business software. If the employees wanted to become his sales agents, he would teach them more management and promotion skills. If they wanted to set up their own businesses, he might also offer some help. Liu presented his acts as mentoring behaviors, which provided his employees with a means to gain wealth, and which implied "the spirit of sharing and helping among entrepreneurs in the new age." "I am not afraid of competition because the online market is so big. It is only when we guide more people to join in that the market will prosper and our businesses will grow. Traditional businessmen will never dare to do this." Liu stressed that his actions were, in fact, in sync with the progressive thoughts of the new age, because "the essential spirit of the Internet age is cooperation and sharing, and we are the representatives of this entrepreneurial spirit."

It is common among the e-traders who I met to have a modernist and progressive perception of e-commerce. Social responsibility constituted only part of their imagination of the modern professions in the industry.⁴⁰ They believed the Internet and e-commerce were part of an inevitable trend in the world, and they were thankful to be living in this age. Keeping up with this trend, they believed their passion and endeavors would lead them to success. During conversations, they often mentioned to me that the bigger winners of this age, such as Ma Yun, Ma Huateng, and Li Yanhong, the three wealthiest men in mainland China in 2014, were all founders of Internet companies. The richest Chinese man in 2015, Wang Jianlin, had also expanded his business into e-commerce. Furthermore, the current world's richest man Bill Gates was said to expect Ma Yun to succeed him.⁴¹ To these e-traders, such miracles of wealth reconfirmed the promising prospect of e-commerce and Internet economics. In contrast, the “traditional businessmen” who held to “backward” business models and rejected e-commerce would eventually die out. Some migrant e-traders in Yiwu explained the relatively slower growth in the transaction volume of the wholesale marketplace as a result of the attack from the emerging modern Internet economy. While many of them actually relied on the cheap products supplied by the wholesale marketplace, they tended to understand the two business models (online vs. offline) in an antagonistic rather than a complementary framework so as to highlight the modernity and progressiveness of e-commerce, thereby affirming their good fortune as e-traders. During my fieldwork I observed that the emphasis on, as well as the self-representation of, the modern identity had embedded into the e-traders' everyday life and become important part of their construction of the “entrepreneurial qualities in the new age.”

When I first contacted the e-traders, I tried to interview them about how they did e-

⁴⁰ Existing studies show that professional work and its broader social context may shape practitioners' social and cultural values, and to develop Bourdieusian dispositions that will guide their daily practices. For instance, the anthropologist Karen Ho (2009) has investigated a web of beliefs and practices among Wall Street investment bankers that emphasize “most smartness.” This self-perception not only leads established bankers to become obsessed with an elite lifestyle, but also creates a radical atmosphere in which newcomers have to reinvent themselves and adapt to a prejudicial and hierarchical system. In the case of China, Lisa Hoffman (2010) has found a combination of neoliberal ethos and socialist mentalities in professional talents. Albeit self-interested and calculative, these educated youths have a strong sense of social responsibility towards society and the nation. Hoffman and some other scholars (Friederike, 2011; Chong, 2011) attribute this loyalty to collective interests to the governmentality of the reformist state. Luigi Tomba (2009) further argues that the making of a responsible middle class is part of the state's agenda to maintain social stability and economic development. While I agree with this explanation to a certain extent, I want to add that we should also not neglect the agency of the youths who see the display of social responsibility as a path to acquire modern citizenship. For the migrant e-traders at my field site, I suggest that their “socially responsible” acts and self-motivated presentations have more to do with their self-understanding of their position in the urban social hierarchy and within the business world.

⁴¹ Bill Gates' alleged statement has been widely reported by Chinese media and read by my informants, but I have not found any English sources. An example of Chinese media report, see Keji Xiawucha (2017).

business and what impact this activity had on their everyday lives. But soon I faced a major obstacle as I did not understand what they were talking about when they explained the detailed procedures of running e-shops. To overcome this problem, as it was noted earlier, I enrolled in e-commerce training courses and opened my own Taobao e-shop, which helped me learn many e-business regulations and skills. After this experience, it became easier for me to communicate with e-traders, but sometimes I still found some terminologies incomprehensible, and many were English abbreviations, such as UV, PV, SEO and PPC.⁴² I asked them what the terms meant and they laughed at me, saying that as a researcher of e-commerce how I could even not know these basic concepts. They claimed that a full grasp of these concepts was the requisite quality for an e-trader. Some joked at my PhD degree and said I should learn e-commerce ideas and techniques from them, despite their being less educated, in order to adapt to the new social and economic environment. I happily followed their advice. During my fieldwork, I often attended their lectures and exchange activities. In the process, I learned new concepts including Internet Thinking (*hulianwang siwei*, 互联网思维), Big Data, Cloud Computing, Crowdfunding, and so on. I found that many e-trader audiences were familiar with these terms and often nodded when speakers mentioned them. After I established close relationships with them, some e-traders recommended that I look at several websites and WeChat public accounts (*weixin gongzhong hao*, 微信公众号). They found these sources of information indispensable as they depended on them for news on innovations in e-commerce and e-business skills.

Here I argue that grasping e-commerce language and information is a process of acculturation. Through this process, e-traders learn the knowledge they need to better seize business opportunities, to run e-shops, as well as to accumulate the necessary cultural capital to produce and reproduce their identity as “modern e-traders.”⁴³ I was especially impressed by a response from Mr. Ye, who I have mentioned above. When I presented this idea to him, Ye laughed and explained in a joking tone.

To do e-business you have to be sensitive to new things and be innovative. But you also need to know how to show off your ideas and knowledge. Just now

⁴² To specify the uses of the terms on Taobao platform, UV (Unique Visitor) refers to the number of visitors to one’s e-shop; PV (Page View) counts the number of all visitors’ who look at different web pages in an e-shop; SEO (Search Engine Optimization) means the ranking of e-shops in the search engine; and PPC (Pay Per Click) is an online advertising payment model in which money is charged when customers click the link of an e-shop.

⁴³ More discussions on the relationship between e-commerce knowledge and e-traders’ cultural capital, see Chapter 6.

you mentioned Internet Thinking. I was also puzzled about this term and read many books about it, but then I became even more confused. The authors used this big term but never clearly said what it meant. In some exchange activities, I too found many audiences nod and smile when they heard the term. Did they really know its meaning? My guess is that they did not. Even the speakers may not know exactly what it means. But you have to pretend as if you know, otherwise you are not a qualified e-trader. If you are a big shot (*daka*, 大咖), then you should know how to toss around big words or even invent new words. You need to package (*baozhuang*, 包装) yourself and speak like a big shot. The art of packaging is very important today. I read some good comments online. Nowadays beggars do crowdfunding. Tabloid papers name themselves “we/self-media” (*zi meiti*, 自媒体). What is big data analytics? Precisely, it is statistics, as we used to call it. To express yourself as an e-trader, you should call rented offices “business incubators” and a built environment for e-traders an “e-commerce industrial park.” You need to call lending money to reliable friends “angel investment”; if it is to unreliable friends, you call it “risk investment.” You must know the setups of BAT (Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent), and be able to recount the bets between Ma Yun and Wang Jianlin, and between Lei Jun and Dong Mingzhu.⁴⁴ You must be familiar with various kinds of business models and tell how they create “disruptive innovations.” If you don’t know these things, how can you survive in the e-commerce business circle? How can you represent the world’s development trend?

Regarding e-commerce as the development trend and highlighting innovation (regardless of whether it is true or not), e-traders not only keep pace with but also try to lead the trend. Mr. Ye chose high-end baby products because he noticed the growing concern of Chinese parents over the quality of the products their children consumed.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the Chinese government’s relaxation of the birth control policy had extended the market. The problem traditional retail businesses faced was how to transport the high-end baby products to the third- and fourth-tier cities as well as to the countryside. By contrast, e-commerce had no such difficulty thanks to the rapid expansion of the express transport industry. In this respect, the

⁴⁴ Both bets are about the competition between online and offline retailing. For details see Zhu (2013) and Horwitz (2013).

⁴⁵ For a discussion on parental concern of baby products, see Gong and Jackson (2012).

development of e-commerce (and the subsequent booming express industry) has resolved the contradiction between the growing consumption demands at the grassroots level and insufficient local market supply. Thus, what Mr. Ye did conformed to the trends of social and economic developments in China. On the other hand, Ye also designed some featured baby products to exploit the new market. For instance, ordinary feeding bottles in the market usually do not indicate the temperature of the liquids they contain. But there is an optimum temperature range (40°C ~ 60°C) for reconstituted milk powder. This inspired Ye to produce a sort of bottle where parents could identify the temperature of the bottled liquid, and it was well received by customers. Meeting market demands through e-commerce and leading a market trend through innovation, Ye and his fellows not only generated wealth, but also reshaped their self-perception and collective identity as modern e-traders.

Increasing social recognition for migrant entrepreneurs

While migrant e-traders tried to establish their superiority over the locals by representing themselves as modern entrepreneurs who possessed more entrepreneurial qualities, how were they perceived in local society? How were they treated when the locals knew their criticisms of Yiwuers?

In answer to the first question, this long-term ethnographic study found that, with the exception of some rich people, Yiwuers held a positive attitude toward migrant e-traders in general. During conversations I held with local people in daily encounters, I asked their opinions about e-commerce development and e-traders in the city after informing them that I was doing research on these topics. Almost all respondents spoke positively about the industry and its practitioners, though some might complain that the e-traders next to their houses produced lots of noise and caused traffic jams. Many respondents believed e-commerce was the current development trend in the business world. They suggested that Yiwu was on a course of economic restructuring and industrial upgrading. To push this process forward, the city was in need of a steady supply of e-commerce talents, regardless of whether this came from locals or migrants. In fact, quite a few locals had pointed out to me that most e-traders in the city were non-local migrants, and that they thought these people capable. In light of this view, the Yiwu city government had launched a new program to foster the growth of e-commerce expertise by sourcing experts both locally and externally. Migrant e-traders were appreciated for creating

wealth, honor and job opportunities for the city, and were encouraged to make further contributions. Such a policy might have been important in influencing local public opinion to look favorably on migrant e-traders. Furthermore, several elderly local respondents informed me that while they knew little about the e-commerce industry, they nevertheless supported it because their families benefited from renting their houses to migrant e-traders. The importance of rental income for ordinary Yiwuers is illustrated in the following story.

While travelling on a bus one afternoon during the Spring Festival of 2015, I overheard a conversation between two locals, namely, the bus driver and an elderly female passenger. The lady complained that on non-festival days this road would be blocked with traffic every afternoon with numerous express-company trucks and the goods of e-traders. The driver agreed and added that he felt nervous when hearing too many honks and the noise of packaged goods being moved around. He wished the road would be empty every day like it was that day. The lady interrupted him, saying that the economy of Yiwu would get into trouble if the roads were still empty after the festival. She reasoned that if migrants did not come, the market would get worse, and that would affect life in Yiwu. In particular, she feared that she would not be able to find a tenant for her house. Last year she rented it to a migrant e-trader whose business looked good, and the two parties were planning to renew the contract this year. She complained that it was “.....really noisy when they do their shipments and the road next to our door was often blocked, too. My husband has thought about not to renting the house to the e-trader anymore, but I asked him who else would be willing and able to pay this large sum in the city while the location was not that good. I feel stable and happy as long as I can rent the house out.” The lady’s remarks are evidence that e-commerce in the city may not only represents the hope migrants have for starting a business and generating wealth; it also speaks for the locals’ confidence in maintaining an independent lifestyle in a healthy local economy.

The publication of the first Taobao village list by the Alibaba Group in 2013 and Prime Minister Li Keqiang’s visit to Qingyanliu village in 2014 further increased local people’s recognition of the e-commerce economy and e-trading professionals because these helped the Yiwu model of industrial clustering win more national and international attention. This publicity generated interest from other local urban and suburban villages who followed Qingyanliu’s path. In some villages, especially those near the wholesale marketplace, the industry grew mainly

because of their geographic advantages. But in those that were marginal, local cadres played an important role. They led villagers to improve the infrastructure and provide better services while maintaining cheaper rents. In some places, it was said that serving the migrant e-traders had become the most important task for the village party committee and the administrative committee, which are the basic governmental units at the grassroots in China. Some cadres and villagers joked to me that in the old days it was the migrants that served the locals in the service industry, but now that relationship had reversed. One cadre told me that “they have become our ‘parents’ who give us food and clothes (*yi shi fumu*, 衣食父母). We try to improve the infrastructure and business environment in our village. Only when the ‘golden phoenixes’ feel satisfied will they stay on.” He added, “By keeping these talents, we also hope that they will provide good examples and motivate young villagers to start their own businesses.”

The cadre’s remarks provided a clue to answer the second question. Here I should note that in general the migrant e-traders I knew stuck to the Chinese business principle of “making money while maintaining harmony” (*zuo shengyi yi he wei gui*, 做生意以和为贵). This rational choice aimed at reducing risks for both their businesses and their personal security. Thus, when the e-traders talked back, it was more often the cases that they were reacting to discrimination. Even Mr. Ye, an outspoken man, chose to make his criticism of Yiwuers in a soft and joking tone. However, although I had witnessed some locals who displayed displeasure when criticized, most agreed that they respected the entrepreneurial spirit of the migrants. Behind the agreements I saw the rising status of migrant e-traders: either they had held the power to influence the locals’ minds; or the locals might not actually accept the criticisms in their hearts, but to establish and maintain good relations with migrant e-traders they had to pretend to be so.

In Yiwu, successful e-traders, therefore, have become valuable human resources in the eyes of the public. Local cadres wanted them to settle in their jurisdictions. Landlords wanted them to rent their houses. Offline businesspeople wanted their help to go online. And newbies wanted to learn their e-commerce ideas and skills. Being useful to society won them respect and admiration. However, the more respect the migrant e-traders gained, the more sensitive they were to disrespect. That disrespect may arouse their strong resistance.

Miss Zhou provides an example of such resentment. She migrated from rural Henan province to Yiwu in 2007 where she had worked in a factory and for an e-

shop before starting her own e-business. She said many people had taught her e-commerce skills, and she wanted to pay it back by helping others. Her admirers came from all over the country, but only Yiwuers left her with a bad impression. In her opinion, some local youths were extraordinarily calculating. They often tried to please her by speaking highly of her as a high-*suzhi* e-commerce talent and inviting her to dinner or to recreational activities. However, during the activities they only talked with her about e-business and inquired about operational skills. After several of these experiences, she realized that these people were just making use of her. Thereafter, she always declined their invitations. An even worse impression was made by a factory owner. Zhou had established a cooperative relationship with this local man for several years. When his son graduated from university he wanted him to do e-business together with Zhou. The man proposed opening a company and stated that he would contribute 75 percent of the needed funding. In return, Zhou would be responsible for all business management. Zhou was fine with this. However, when it came to profit distribution, Zhou felt unhappy because the larger shareholder wanted 75 percent of the profits also. She questioned why she would earn so little since she would be the one managing everything. After the negotiation failed, the local man told Zhou that his purpose was to have her teach his son e-commerce skills. Zhou understood that he would sack her once his son had learned all the skills. Zhou claimed that she would never trust Yiwuers after this experience, because they had no business ethics. As she put it, “I think it is also due to their lack of ethics and personal *suzhi* that they can hardly make their companies grow bigger and become national brand names.”

Conclusion

Although Miss Zhou may have been too dismissive of existing Yiwu brand names, her comment points to a common sentiment among migrant e-traders. To justify their presence and value in the city, migrant e-traders represent themselves as the better qualified economic and social actors: they assert that they are more self-enterprising, more adaptable to the market economy, more advanced in industrial development, more socially responsible, more morally respectable, and more trustworthy—in sum, as having a higher *suzhi* than locals. These practices distinguish these people from other migrant populations described in existing scholarly accounts in the ways that they not only reject the preconception which underestimates the value and capacity of rural migrants, but also constantly

reproduce and celebrate their identity as modern and progressive entrepreneurs. Furthermore, because their growing wealth has raised their social status, these migrant entrepreneurs' appropriation of the *suzhi* discourse in their own favor is not simply as a linguistic weapon to resist discrimination by biased locals. Rather, it has an actual effect on their social recognition in general. Except for some rich people, most of the locals I met held that migrant e-traders were promising entrepreneurs. Their capacity and value were recognized, and their contributions to the local economy were also appreciated, even though this appreciation sometimes might build on a pragmatic logic.⁴⁶

This chapter is based on single-site fieldwork. It tells how the emerging e-commerce industry has changed the lives and subjectivity of a large group of migrant worker-turned-entrepreneurs in the city of Yiwu. The cases described here further mirror the larger process through which economic restructuring and industrial transformation have been reshaping social relations (especially between rural and urban populations) and reconfiguring social structures (between working class and middle class) in this city. But the structural changes brought about by e-commerce development are not restricted to the urban setting, such as in Yiwu. Research also reveals that many migrant entrepreneurs have returned to their hometowns and set up new e-businesses (Alibaba Group, 2015; Leong, Pan and Cui, 2016; Lin, Xie and Lv, 2016; Zhang and Jiang, 2015). More than ten years ago the sociologist Rachel Murphy (2002) told us that migrant labor had changed rural China. Probably, we may expect another change when the migrant entrepreneurs return.

This chapter has also shown that issues of morality are regarded by some e-traders as an important component of their professional identity. But not all people think in this way. This moral position also largely contradicts the public image of

⁴⁶ Mr. Ye's joke about the use of e-commerce slang may point to the anxiety that some e-traders have with respect to the accumulation of cultural capital and social recognition. This anxiety is the focus of John Osburg's study (2013) on Chinese entrepreneurs. In my view, not all e-traders are burdened with this problem. At least one reason is that this "anxiety" is relational and socially constructed. The newly rich become anxious mostly when they socialize and compare themselves with those with old money; how those with old money treat them is a factor. For the e-traders in my study, though they may befriend or do business with the local rich (import their products or rent their houses, etc.), their businesses are not so much based on a *guanxi* network like the ones in Osburg's study; this is because they are selling goods to unknown customers throughout the country or across the globe through the internet. Even when the e-traders hang out or socialize with their local friends or business partners, they are not the ones courting others but the ones being courted. In other words, they are treated like the bigger bosses and officials in Osburg's study; that is they are the very one the locals want get in the good graces of whom they want to ask for favors. If the locals disrespect them, e-traders like Miss Zhou will not give them a good face. The fact is that migrant e-traders are praised by locals who speak highly of their higher *suzhi* and repeatedly express the desire to learn their entrepreneurial talents, spirit, ideas, and skills.

Chinese e-traders in the domestic and international media, who are often portrayed as immoralists that sell low-quality and counterfeit goods online. To rebuild their own reputations, e-platform giants launched anti-counterfeit campaigns on their platforms constantly. Yiwu-based e-traders are certainly aware of their bad public image and the pressure from e-platforms. How do they respond to such external pressure? How do they think about business ethics? I will try to answer these questions in the next chapter. Now, let us enter the e-traders' moral world.

Chapter 5: Moral Diversification and Moral Agency: Contesting Business

Ethics among Yiwu E-Traders

Introduction

One day in August 2015 I attended a small start-up forum in which Mr. Liu, one of my key informants, was invited to give a keynote speech. With a title of “Entrepreneurial ethics in the new age,” Liu opened his speech by criticizing immoral behaviors, singling out self-interested offline wholesalers and retailers in Yiwu. He claimed that the Yiwu wholesale marketplace had become infamous for its rubbish goods, and the pragmatic local business tradition had rendered old businessmen in the city careless about morality (*daode*, 道德) and ethics (*lunli*, 伦理).⁴⁷ The state was also said to bear responsibility for the immoral business practices in operation. “The local government is blind to the market chaos. It tolerates or even promotes the transactions of counterfeit and shoddy products so as to develop the marketplace, increase transaction volume and generate more taxes. All these are included in its track records.” By contrast, he commended young e-traders as ethical entrepreneurs. “They are self-motivated and self-reliant. They receive no support from the government in their paths to success. They make it based on their industriousness and business integrity.” Liu gave some examples. To further illustrate the ethics of the young generation, he also discussed some charitable activities these e-traders had initiated, such as volunteer work in a local orphanage, e-commerce training for the disabled to start their own e-businesses, as well as donations to poor students in southwestern China. Taking these as evidence of their fulfillment of their social responsibility, Liu created a binary opposition between the old/offline businessmen and the young/online entrepreneurs in terms of their moral standards and ethical practices.

Liu’s words drew some disagreement from the audiences. One attendee suggested that Liu’s classification was over simplistic. He contended that though the marketplace

⁴⁷ Throughout the fieldwork I found my Chinese informants always conflate the two concepts and use them together or interchangeably. The same case was found in Chinese anthropological and sociological studies on local moral worlds (Chen 2016; Tan 2010). This is quite different from the situation in current anthropological discussions on morality and ethics in the West which struggle to distinguish the two. Siding with Clifford Geertz’s call for representing the native’s point of view, in this chapter I take my informants’ view and use the concepts interchangeably. Answering why the Chinese do not make distinctions between the two like Western academics do is also beyond the scope of this chapter. I have benefited much from two representative scholars on morality and ethics in the West, James Laidlaw (2014) and Jarrett Zigon (2008). Nevertheless, I noticed that although Zigon presented his research as inspired by Laidlaw’s scholarship, the latter criticized the former heavily for his misunderstanding of the distinctions between morality and ethics (Laidlaw 2014: 116-119). This reveals Western anthropologists are still far from reaching a consensus on the definitions of the two concepts.

indeed had some shoddy products, most were of at least average quality; otherwise it would not have become so influential inside and outside China. The same view was also expressed in response to Liu's stereotyping of old/offline businessmen. Some of them might be morally dubious, but others were trustworthy. The critic argued that Liu's portrait of young e-traders was too general as well: "Human beings are very complex. Each person may have his own moral values. I believe many e-traders are morally good, but how about those who sell fakes online?" Liu defended his position by asserting that e-traders with "black hearts" (read, immorality) were only a tiny minority, "These black sheep ruin the reputation of the good majority!" "Probably, this is also true in the case of offline businessmen!" the attendee responded.

On several occasions, I have heard Mr. Liu portray young e-traders as ethical entrepreneurs. In our private conversation, Liu admitted that his aim was to build a good public image of the group that he belonged to. But this image sometimes contradicts how the media represents them. Although it would be fair to say that many products on Chinese e-commerce platforms such as Taobao, Tmall and Jingdong are of average quality and that services offered by many e-traders are attentive and reliable, there are certainly exceptions. As reported by mass media and experienced by consumers, the exceptions have a substantial impact in shaping negative images of the e-trading industry, of individual e-platforms, and of the e-trader profession. I have met numerous customers who had had awful online shopping experiences and, as a result, believed Chinese e-platforms were full of inferior goods and were run by evil-minded sellers. Outside China, the controversies over counterfeits and fake transactions have blemished reputations of publicly listed Chinese e-commerce companies (Chu, 2015; Wong and Chu, 2015). But there are still some, such as the attendee mentioned above, who tend to see the situation in a more sophisticated way and try to avoid making totalizing judgments on the moral states of different individuals. Their opinions shed new light on the Chinese public discourse about a moral crisis as well as on the scholarly writings on Chinese morality. By looking at the moral discourses and ethical practices of the e-traders whom I have observed in their business encounters, this chapter suggests that the understandings and practices of morality in Chinese society are far more complicated than the picture found in existing literature.

Moral diversification and the micro politics of moral agency

Anthropologists studying China have shown a growing interest in ordinary people's morality and ethics. Some scholars have observed varying degrees of moral decline in

local areas. In rural Shaanxi, Xin Liu found immoral acts on the increase since the early 1980s. He noted that cheating inside a local community had generated broad distrust among lineage members and fellow villagers. Within families, the younger generation paid little respect to deceased elders and ancestors (Liu, 2000). In a village in China's northeast, Yunxiang Yan noticed that filial piety was in crisis and that the young generation often mistreated their parents. Given that the youths tend to emphasize individual rights and interests while downplaying their obligations to the community and other individuals, Yan portrayed them as "uncivil individuals" (Yan, 2003: 16). In urban areas, Liu and Yan also observed immoral behavior, including business bribery, exploitation of those of good faith (*peng ci*, 碰瓷), and the production and distribution of poisonous food (Liu, 2002; Yan, 2009b, 2012).

Some other scholars, however, have contended that there has been a continuity or revival of morality in Chinese society (Ku, 2003; Roberts, 2013; Santos, 2013; Zhang J, 2017). For instance, Ellen Oxfeld (2010) noted that the idea of "*liangxin*" (良心, conscience) occupied a central place in her informants' sense of themselves. No matter whether migrating to urban areas or staying behind in their village, people attached great importance to family relations and the mutual responsibilities between family members as well as between village members.⁴⁸ In particular, the persistence or resurgence of familial intimacy has recently become a sign of the reconfiguration of the contemporary Chinese moral landscape, as even Yunxiang Yan (2016) admitted the return of family ethics in his latest research. Outside family and the local community, numerous scholars have looked at the rise of philanthropy and volunteerism, in which they found universalistic moral values that contribute to the making of a Chinese civil society (Laliberté, Palmer and Wu, 2011; Shieh and Deng, 2011; Xu, 2013; Xu and Ngai, 2011). While other anthropologists may dispute this claim (Chong, 2011; Fleischer, 2011; Hoffman, 2013; Rolandsen, 2010), Yunxiang Yan (2009b: 19-20) asserts that the post-80s generation holds a less particularistic morality compared to the older generations.⁴⁹

The puzzle, then, is whether China is undergoing moral decay or the opposite? In my research, I found evidence that could be used to support both arguments.

Nevertheless, the coexistence of the evidence seemed to reveal that neither of the

⁴⁸ Oxfeld is moderate in emphasizing on the moral continuity among the rural villagers and migrants without confronting Yunxiang Yan's thesis of moral decay directly. However, for readers who have read their works, their arguments are still viewed in opposite to each other, see, for instance, Noellert (2011).

⁴⁹ This sounds inconsistent when considering Yan's earlier portrait of Chinese youths as "uncivil" individuals. However, in a book chapter published later, Yan made a more balanced assessment of morality of Chinese individuals and recognized moral complexities in Chinese society (Yan, 2011b).

arguments provided an adequate explanation of the morality employed by Chinese individuals. Some informants, such as Mr. Liu, adhere strictly to the institutional and public moralities (Zigon, 2008) and highlight business integrity as advocated by the state and the mass media. But there are also cases showing how some others choose to behave in ways that even they themselves consider immoral. In between these two positions, more e-traders struggle to live a moral life but sometimes consciously retreat from their moral ideals, and this results in a kind of morally “divided self” (Kleinman, 2011: 5). These people engage with moral challenges reflectively in their everyday life and business encounters. Some may form a “community of complicity” in which they can keep a low profile and adopt immoral tactics to achieve their goals (Steinmüller, 2010; 2013: 217). When exposed, they justify their actions by emphasizing the difficult situations they face. Some may also negotiate and manipulate the meanings of specific moral values so as to legitimize their actions.

The moral diversities and complexities among Chinese e-traders therefore may call any singular and totalizing description of a moral decay or revival in China into question. This is also implied by the current literature. While some may have the ambition to examine the moral landscape in Chinese society in general (Yan, 2009b, 2012), most China anthropologists conduct local case studies. Their findings about supposedly similar subjects, such as villagers or young people, often differ, sometimes radically.⁵⁰ Some of the literature reveals differences in moral perceptions between rural and urban residents (Avenarius and Zhao, 2012) and in moral imaginations of various occupational groups (Hsu, 2006; Jankowiak, 2004). Where Yunxiang Yan (2009b: 19-20) suggests Chinese youths bear more universalistic moral values in comparison to their parents and grandparents, other scholars find that they are unusually selfish (Jankowiak, 2004: 201). Recent ethnographic research further indicates that individuals with different class backgrounds may invoke different moral discourses to justify their moral choices (Osburg, 2013). Therefore, any claim to a unified pattern of Chinese morality is impossible to establish.

Why is it so? Previous scholarship may provide some clues. To explain the moral vacuum in rural Shaanxi, Xin Liu (2000: 155-156) argued that the Maoist revolution had removed any dominant local authority that could secure social and moral order at the grassroots level. With the withdrawal of state power and the entry of market forces

⁵⁰ On the moral values of villagers, Chinese anthropologist Tan Tongxue (2010) and sociologist Chen Hui (2016) have offered an opposing viewpoint to Yunxiang Yan (2003). When Yan (2003) criticizes young people for their impiety, other scholars find that they may have very different understandings of filial piety and practice the virtue in their own ways (Sun, 2017).

after the reform, villagers were left in an uncertain situation. While Liu expressed pessimism about the consequences of revolution and reform on their moral values, he noted that ordinary villagers had taken the initiative in (re)defining the meaning and significance of social and cultural activities, which used to be controlled by the gentry class in the pre-Communist era and by local cadres during the Maoist years, into their own hands (Liu, 2000: 155-156). To me, this makes it possible for people to exercise their own moral agency, which may not be consistent with the orthodoxies promoted by moral authorities (e.g., state, religion, family and community leaders). The ethical agents might behave immorally as Liu described, but they also have chances to act as moral subjects under different moral frameworks (e.g., Confucian, Socialist, and Neoliberal) or produce new moral explanations.

Yunxiang Yan has similarly written about dysfunctional familial and communal control and explained it as a result of the revolution promoted by the Party-state. In particular, he suggested that the state had empowered youths to gain autonomy from the patriarchal families through political campaigns, which gave rise to individualization in China. Yet Yan's conclusion was that the state was proactively constraining individuals, who could exercise their rights only in the private sphere, which he believed resulted in the lack of civic virtues among Chinese youths in the post-reform era along with the rise of consumerism (Yan Y, 2003: 232-235; 2009a: 175-176). The autonomy the youths have gained is of tremendous importance. Though varying in degree, both Liu's and Yan's accounts point to an emerging space for Chinese people to engage with morality reflectively in a way that is relatively free from state, family and communal pressures.⁵¹ I argue that the existence of this free space has enabled e-traders at my field site to make their own ethical choices and that this freedom has led to moral diversification.⁵²

Freedom and agency are key concepts in the new anthropology of morality, and I believe they are also crucial for understanding diversities in moral values and practices among Chinese e-traders as in other societies. Scholars have developed at least three perspectives regarding the relation between freedom and morality in Western

⁵¹ Other scholars may debate over the extent of remaining state pressure or whether the cultivation of moral citizens is a new form of state governance (Chong, 2011; Fleischer, 2011; Hoffman, 2013; Rolandsen, 2010). However, it appears they will admit more or less that there is departure of state power on individual life when compared to the Maoist years. Even during that period, historians have found that, overall, ordinary people did not submit to the state; rather, they appropriated its ideology in their daily lives while finding ways to express discontent and challenge its moral authority (Brown and Johnson, 2015).

⁵² By moral diversification I mean the dynamic process in which individuals choose to adopt different values from existing moral frameworks or initiate their own to guide and/or explain their social practices and interactions in a given society. I use "diversification" in its broadest sense which covers both differences in moral values and practices among Chinese e-traders as a group, and inside an individual e-trader.

intellectual tradition. The Kantians see freedom as the foundation for moral actions, and only free acts of rational agents are considered moral. In contrast, the Durkheimians view morality as rules of conduct that society uses to compel its members for collective well-being. Reducing the moral simply to a mechanism of social control, the freedom of individuals (except the sociologists who help the state to engineer the moral system) is disregarded in this school (Laidlaw, 2002; 2014: 16-23; see also Zigon, 2008: 27-37). To give credit to individual agency and autonomy and get rid of the Kantians' idealist yearning for a total absence of power constraint, the Foucaultians focus on how individuals do ethical work on themselves so as to become certain kinds of persons in specific circumstances. Situated in existing contexts, the ethical work of self-fashioning, which Foucault calls "the technique of self", presents a balanced dynamic between structure and agency (Laidlaw, 2002: 321-323; Zigon, 2008: 42-45). The latest perspective is especially useful if we take it to explain moral diversification in a given society, while it is almost impossible to examine Kantian morality empirically (and also that can hardly be the everyday moral conceptions held by people all over the globe) and the Durkheimian morality is just a synonym for the unified code of conduct of the state.

Following the Foucaultian approach, the anthropologist Jarrett Zigon (2010, 2011) has examined multiple moral frameworks held and practiced by Russian individuals, through which he argued against the totalizing claims of any unified Soviet or post-Soviet moralities. Particularly in the post-Soviet period, Zigon shows that, while state power is still present, various religions and also global capitalism have provided individuals with alternative moral resources for self-fashioning. Joel Robbins (2007) has also demonstrated that in facing radical cultural change the Urapmin people in Papua New Guinea negotiate different moral principles in different situations. In the moments of moral questioning, or what Zigon calls "moral breakdown", the agentic individuals work on themselves through conscious reflections and dialogues with their own moral dispositions and external moral discourses (Zigon, 2009a; 2010: 23-27). The resulting moral decisions are often diverse, because not only do individuals have unique personal experiences based on which they construct their moral worlds; so too the specific contexts in which they reason and work on the moral selfhood vary from person to person and group to group (Zigon, 2010: 31). When many members in a society embrace distinct moral values and behave in accordance with their wills crafted in a distinctive local sociocultural environment, that society will appear to be morally diverse.

In particular, the individual moral agency is manifested in the people's innovative readings of various social contexts and their personal experiences. Zigon (2009b) is right to present the two as the sources for building people's moral worlds. I will add that particular contexts are not simply given and understandings of life experiences are not rigid. When contexts and experiences have an effect on people's ethical subjectivity, they are first subject to individual interpretations.⁵³ If individuals want to act morally under the moral framework they choose, oftentimes they will emphasize aspects of the context and personal experiences that support their moral choices—even at the risk of the loss of immediate benefits the opposite choices may bring. If they choose the immoral options, they may select other parts of contexts and experiences that help them justify their choices in spite of moral censure from others. A third possibility is they will legitimize their actions by redefining right or wrong morality through reinterpreting particular contexts and their own experiences. The cases that I will describe cover the full spectrum of these possibilities. At the heart of all of these multiple possibilities is the freedom of the subjects to (re)compose narratives about contexts and individual experiences in ways that can serve their choices. Instead of focusing on the power dynamics between the governor and the governed with a purpose of measuring how much freedom (especially political freedom) Chinese citizens actually enjoy, as many political scientists and sociologists often do, this chapter looks at the subjective dimension of freedom in the citizens' minds. In particular, I suggest an approach that we shall not only think about freedom in terms of an objective condition in which individuals face no coercion (even though, in actuality they still live according to the constraints of their social world); rather, we should think about the subjective concern that they *feel* less or unconstrained to reason and behave according to their own will. With this consciousness individuals may appropriate different resources from available moral frameworks to construct their ethical selfhood; or, they might even initiate new moral frameworks.

In the case of Yiwu-based e-traders, I found issues about morality and ethics often appear in their daily conversations. State propaganda about promoting business integrity and the exposure of immoral acts by the media have created an atmosphere conducive to discussions and reflections. More specifically, media reports on the counterfeits, shoddy goods, and poor service in the online market have led some e-traders to think about their own ways of doing business. When they shopped online, some had also

⁵³ Tiantian Zheng's research (2008) on bar hostesses provides an excellent example of how individuals are able to utilize their past experiences to construct new moral visions.

encountered the same problems that their customers had experienced with them. During a time when Chinese society was said to be undergoing a moral crisis, as ordinary citizens they also faced moral challenges in their everyday lives. For instance, many e-traders originated from the rural areas and had been targeted for deception by unscrupulous urbanites when they had first arrived in a city. Some of them were wary about the trustworthiness of urban strangers, and they tended to socialize more with their relatives, friends and fellow villagers and relied on these people for mutual support and assistance. This migration pattern has been well documented in the existing scholarship (Jacka, 2006; Solinger, 1999; Zhang, 2001). However, their companionship sometimes ended prematurely when they started to do business together. Some of my informants recounted how their relatives, friends and fellow villagers became calculating and greedy in the course of doing business, and this eventually damaged their partnerships. A common conclusion they drew was that “money turned people bad.”

Despite their frequent discussions on everyday morality and ethics, this chapter narrows its focus on the understandings and practices of morality and ethics in business encounters. I will begin with Mr. Liu’s case, focusing on his experience of being a moral entrepreneur in an immoral business world. Next is Mr. Hong, who dismisses morality as nothing and stresses that to make money people can and should try every means. It is followed up by Mr. Huang, who describes himself as an absolute moralist but sometimes deviates in his daily practices. By looking at moral diversities among different Chinese e-traders, this chapter sheds light on the role of moral agency in negotiating individual narratives of moral experiences and constructing multiple ethical subjectivities.

“Being moral is important, especially when everyone else is not”

Although Mr. Liu described the e-trader group as a homogeneous moral community when publicly addressing entrants and outsiders, he was known for being a harsh critic of his peers inside the group. Liu was held as a model e-trader among his friends for his business integrity. Business morality/ethics (*shangye daode/lunli*, 商业道德/伦理) was always a key word in our interviews and daily conversations. Besides guaranteeing the quality of goods and providing satisfactory services, Liu stressed that he did not get involved in fake sales/transactions, or *Shua dan* (刷单), which, refers to the practice of e-traders enlisting others (e.g., relatives, friends, or professionals) to place orders at their e-shops and write positive reviews (an online advertisement for recruiting professionals of faking sales, see Figure 5.1). Usually e-traders will deliver parcels that

are empty or contain junk, but sometimes include low-cost gifts. While the fake shoppers may receive a bonus, other relatives and friends may not. The aim of *shua dan* is to increase sales volume and ratings, which will help the e-shops move up in search results and therefore generate more traffic. Positive reviews of fake goods also have the power to attract genuine new customers. For these reasons, *shua dan* was considered as a basic strategy, and some e-traders even suggested it lay at the core of doing e-business.

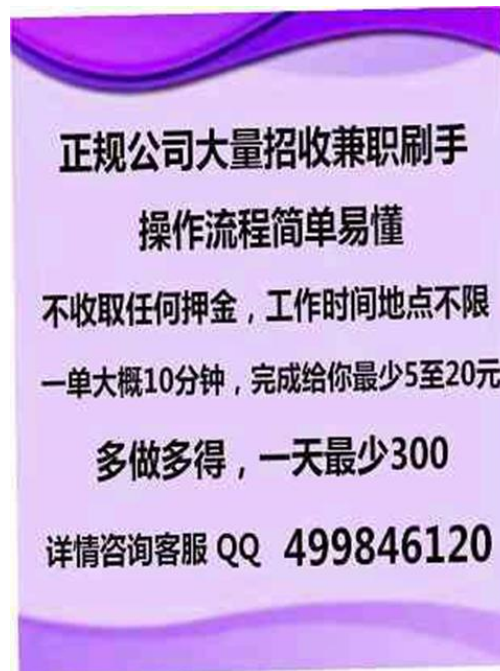


Figure 5.1: A typical online advertisement spread through QQ for recruiting professionals of faking sales.

When almost all other e-traders got involved in fake transactions to promote their businesses, Liu stood out as an unusual case. Even when his friends requested him to help, he would refuse. I asked him whether it would affect their friendships and Liu admitted that rejection was a difficult decision because it would make his friends feel that they had lost face (*diu mianzi*, 丢面子). But as long as he treated all of them equally and offered nobody help with *shua dan*, people would feel relieved. In addition, whenever they met problems he would give a hand, and afterwards people came to realize his true character and principles. Liu believed that *shua dan* violated business ethics, which not only harmed consumers' rights but also generated malignant competition among e-traders, and these ultimately would result in a disruption of the market. Liu's friends were sympathetic to his view. Nevertheless, they often highlighted the gap between moral ideal and social reality. For them, survival in a selfish society

ensured that personal interests were more important than any considerations of public morality (*gongde*, 公德). I heard one of Liu's friends defend himself by arguing that "all people are faking sales. If I don't, I will have no business. How can I speak about morality when I have nothing to eat?"

Facing this common response, Liu would give his second reason for abandoning *shua dan*: e-traders would be punished by the e-platforms or even penalized by the government if they were discovered, because the actions had been defined as illegal by the authorities. Liu's claim was supported by the campaigns initiated by the e-platforms to curb fake transactions as well as increasing news reports about imprisonment of e-traders and professionals involved in *shua dan*. These measures indeed frightened some e-traders. But most carried on, even though they might reduce the frequency and take extra care. They believed that when the campaigns came to an end, everything would return to normal. This was due to their different understanding of the rationale behind the e-platforms' and the state's measures. To them, these were more likely to be strategic responses to domestic and international critics rather than permanent bans. One e-trader estimated that 30 percent of Taobao's annual sales volume was the result of *shua dan*. This high figure not only created an image of prosperity and attracted more customers to shop at Taobao, but also produced tremendous profits for the e-platform. Similarly, they told me, the Chinese government would not completely prohibit *shua dan* because it needed impressive economic figures to maintain citizens' confidence in the national economy, especially in an era of economic slowdown.⁵⁴ This kind of understanding led them to believe that they shared common interests with the e-platforms and the government; and as long as they were careful not to go too far, *shua dan* would be tolerated. In this way, they imagined a relatively free space to adopt illegal methods for business promotion.

If it is true that *shua dan* has become a necessary component of running an e-shop, how can Mr. Liu maintain his e-business without faking transactions? This was a question that generated a lot of interest among Liu's friends. According to Liu, *shua dan* was a short-term method to inflate sales figures and collect good reviews, which supposedly would increase an e-shop's visibility in online marketplaces. But from a long-term perspective, whether a business could survive market competition depended essentially on the quality of goods and services they provided. Whenever Liu's friends

⁵⁴ Anthropologist Zhou Yongming has documented a similar narrative about Chinese government's reasoning of balancing economic growth and social control in his study of owners of private Internet cafes in Beijing, see Zhou (2008: 224).

asked him for the secret of his success, he spent hours explaining how to choose products for sale, how to design packages, how to design an e-shop's website, how to write customer-friendly descriptions of goods, how to improve customer services, how to do business promotions through channels provided by the e-platforms, and how to manage customer relations, drawing on his practical experience. Liu's friends always showed an appreciation for his wisdom in doing e-business after the lesson. But at the same time, they also found Liu's model difficult to follow because it demanded huge efforts and deep understanding of every step in running an e-business. They often backed off and returned to instituting fake transactions. Liu was disappointed. To him, the rejection of his moral model of e-business had another important moral implication. He complained that, "People are too restless today; they always expect quick success but never want to put in the effort." He anticipated that if his friends simply relied on *shua dan*, their e-businesses would not be sustainable.

From not faking sales to researching on the sustainable model of e-business, Mr. Liu understood what he did as building moral selfhood. The motivations behind his pursuit of morality included natural kindness for fellow human beings and the influence of the social environment. Liu often criticized current selfishness and moral decay among Chinese citizens and lamented that even relatives and friends fought each other for personal interests. As he put it, "Society is so polluted that people have no virtue at all, only personal interests. But I think a normal society and a normal people should not be like this. I want to be a normal person. Being moral is important, especially when all others are not." Liu continued, "Only by being moral can a person embrace his true self, which matches human's natural kindness. This self should be free from a polluted society. When I behave in accordance with my moral standard, I feel good about myself." Apart from his pursuit of goodness and discovering his "true self," Liu's moral actions also had a dimension of altruism: he hoped to spread his moral ideas to others, and to do so he might even reveal his business secrets. He certainly knew the potential risks. For instance, some of his friends sold similar goods to his and there was the risk that they might become strong competitors if they adopted Liu's model or developed new ones based on his ideas. But Liu believed it was worth a try. He noted:

First of all, I think people should not live just for their own interests. It's good if I can help others to make money and at the same time purify the moral atmosphere in the market and society. Second, if others succeed by applying my model, they help me prove its wide validity; and the competition they

create will also drive me to update and innovate my methods. If they really grasp the moral spirit in my model, they will share their ideas with me and other peers, and that will advance both my and the whole e-commerce industry's wellbeing.

Looking closely at Liu's narratives, one can easily find his appropriation of certain contexts and personal experiences to support his moral claim, such as the moral discourses of the state and the public against fake transactions on e-commerce platforms. Taking other people's immorality as a reference, he regarded being moral as a means to search for his "true self," which was the ultimate purpose of Confucian moral cultivation (Ivanhoe, 2000; Tu, 1985). His reflective evaluation of the negative moral situation in Chinese society and the subsequent reversed self-fashioning as a distinctive moral person differed significantly from that of the majority of e-traders I have met. Nevertheless, although Liu had told his friends many alternative methods through which he had made his e-business successful in a moral way, what he never relayed was the fact that there was no need at all to use fake sales to promote one's goods when he opened his first e-shop in 2008. My interviews with many other e-traders who started their careers prior to 2009 indicate that e-business operations were much simpler in those days when the online market was not as competitive as today. I was told that, at that time a new e-trader could just go to the wholesale marketplace and take some photos, and then put them online and wait for customers. He did not need to store goods, nor do any promotions. The first deal would usually come within two days. Once the e-shop had sales, other customers would follow. When asked about fake sales, my informants stressed that they only started hearing the term at the end of 2009. But by then, Liu's e-business had almost matured. His conscious or unconscious avoidance of mentioning this context contributed to his self-representation as a moral entrepreneur who was always decisive about not engaging with fake sales, despite the reality that six years ago he had no need and today faced much less pressure to do that in comparison to his friends just starting out.

“When others are all immoral, you will lose the game if you choose to be moral”

In Mr. Liu's account, we can easily capture the importance of the "immoral others" in shaping his pursuit of a moral true self. By contrast, Liu's friends often regarded the same "immoral others" as role models for how to survive in a corrupt society. Their conscious choice to act immorally challenges some assumptions in the anthropology of

morality drawn from other cultures and societies. For instance, Zigon remarks that most people in Moscow “consider others and themselves moral most of the time, and for this reason it is rarely considered or consciously thought about”; it is only in the moments of moral questioning that they will “consciously consider or reason about what one must do” (Zigon, 2007: 133). Quite a few Chinese e-traders I have met, however, are clearly aware that their thoughts and behavior are inappropriate under the orthodox moral framework that the state and the public approve, and may even violate the law.⁵⁵ But they simply do not care much about the consequences. By explaining why they think in this way, this chapter will advance Yunxiang Yan’s (2009b, 2011a) recent endeavor of approaching the anthropology of morality through people’s immorality rather than the traditional angle that focuses on how individuals work on themselves to become moral.

Mr. Hong is a typical case. Originating from Fujian province, he is known for his “smartness” in the e-traders’ circle. Many people admired his capacity for capturing business opportunities. However, in Mr. Liu’s eyes, Hong had used his brain in the wrong way and become a completely “immoral opportunist.” Hong was said to have sold fakes on Taobao and WeiChat, run a business team providing *shua dan* service, and served as a football betting broker since his arrival in Yiwu in 2011. “He tries to make money by every means.” Liu attributed Hong’s opportunism to his identity as a Fujianese, a group known for risky practices. “Fujianese are experts on smuggling and producing fakes, their private hospitals and sport shoes top the industry of counterfeit production in China. They are capable of making money through the underground economy. Hong also did these when he was in Fujian.” Liu commented with disdain.⁵⁶ But others found competence and efficiency in Hong. Hong knew people had different views about him, but he said, “I won’t get fatter when others praise me; neither will I lose weight when they criticize me. So why should I care?”

During my fieldwork, one of Hong’s e-shops was shut down by Taobao e-platform for selling fake Mentholatum products. When I visited his office, he jokingly asked me

⁵⁵ By “the orthodox moral framework that the state and the public approve,” I mean the moral standard promoted by the state and the public simultaneously. During the time of my fieldwork, the Chinese state was promoting “the core socialist values” (*shehuizhuyi hexin jiazhi guan*, 社会主义核心价值观) which called for individuals to become citizens with “virtues” such as patriotism, dedication, integrity and friendship. The idea of integrity was especially highlighted in the state propaganda in regard to e-commerce business. Customers who I have met also expressed great concern regarding e-traders’ business integrity, which I believe constituted an important element of the moral standard of the Chinese public. Since my research focuses on the understandings and practices of morality and ethics in business encounters, business integrity is what I mainly refer to when I speak of the orthodox business ethics.

⁵⁶ It may be true that many Fujianese are aggressive risk takers. Anthropologist Julie Chu (2010) has written about how some have tried to achieve upward mobility through human smuggling.

if I wanted some. When asked if the fakes had side effects, Hong responded that he dared not use them on himself. Afterwards I inquired about the financial loss caused by the incident, he said only a little because the costs of the fakes were quite low. Moreover, since having anticipated that the e-shop would be shut down sooner or later, he maintained a light stock. For these reasons, Hong had no regrets about the case: “after all I have already earned money from it”. Our conversation went well and I felt I might raise some sensitive questions.

Q: When you decided to sell fakes, did you worry that others would censure you for violating the law and business ethics?

A: (Laugh) Certainly I won't tell strangers what I am doing. Neither will they be allowed to enter my office. It's a business secret. I don't think it is not a matter of business ethics. To do business is just to make money, why shall we talk about morality?

Q: But some people will say selling fakes is immoral.....

A: So what? You see so many people are selling fakes online, are they all immoral? I tell you one market principle. When others are all immoral, you will lose the game if you choose to be moral.

Q: How about the law? Will you worry about being reported to authorities by other people?

A: Of course. My e-shop is closed because some customers reported it to the e-platform. But I think shutting down an e-shop is the severest penalty that is carried out. It is only in rare cases that people are actually sued and sentenced by the government. There are about five million e-shops on Taobao and many of them sell fakes. How can the e-platform keep an eye on so many e-shops? I reckon it only pays attention to those with high sales volumes that will have widespread negative effects when exposed. It also needs voluntary reports from customers, as the e-platform and the government do not have the energy to check e-shops one by one. Therefore, if you are able to handle the customers, you can minimize the risk of exposure. The worst situation is that you get caught and the government intervenes. In this case, you can only blame your bad luck. It's the risk of doing business.

Because he viewed state enforcement of the law as a business risk, Mr. Hong might hesitate to take the risk of selling fakes for a moment. But the orthodox business ethics

made no sense to him. Neither would it have any restrictive power. Once I asked Hong for about the general moral state in Chinese society. Upon hearing my question, Hong burst into laughter: “you scholars just read too much; don’t think about empty things.” He preferred discussing business, including urging me to become his purchasing agent for foreign luxury goods. How to reduce costs and avoid customs were the issues that concerned him most. When I asked if paying custom fees was an obligation of citizens, Hong laughed again. He claimed it was a tradition for Chinese merchants to evade taxes. As he put it, “It’s better to keep the money in my own pocket than give it to the government, where eventually it ends up in the pockets of corrupt officials.” Hong used this logic to explain a recent new tax on the resales of foreign products (*haiwai dai gou*, 海外代购). In his view, corrupt officials found out the potential for profits in the transnational business and thus they initiated a new tax. The same rationale applied to the e-platforms, as the big companies opened their own e-shops, such as Tmall.HK for Alibaba and JD Worldwide for Jingdong, which won more traffic and privileges than small individual e-shops. Hong added:

Powerful people are greedy. They use their powers to take most of the cake, leaving only a little to small e-traders. To cover up their shabby tricks, they often talk about morality. Corrupt officials say paying taxes is a social obligation of citizens. E-platforms say they aim to crack down on fakes and shoddy products, and provide customers with better foreign goods. But in the end, they are all seeking personal profits.

By portraying officials and e-platforms as self-interested profit seekers and himself as one of the suppressed small e-traders struggling for life, Hong seemed to borrow from the Maoist ideology to construct a moral foundation for his unethical business practices: when the rulers were immoral, repressive, and exploitative, the ruled had to try every means in order to survive. “When you become wealthy, you can *choose* to be a moral person.” Hong then reversed. “I have seen many successful businessmen who fill their mouths with moral words, but you never know how many dirty things they have done before. They talk about morality because first they want to settle their hearts, and second, they want to place obstacles for newcomers so that the latter will have a hard time catching up with them.” Hong stressed: “To be a moral person without money in an immoral society, you will starve to death.”

Understanding morality from an instrumentalist point of view, Mr. Hong's narrative negated Mr. Liu's naturalist position. To Hong, moral concepts were not born with a person but shaped by his economic condition: when he was poor, he could and should try every possible means to survive; only when he became rich, might he need to consider whether his way of making a living was consistent with the moral standard of his society. In his ethnography on Chinese officials and businessmen, Xin Liu (2002: 14, 27) has found a similar assumption in his interlocutors and has suggested it reflected Confucian moral philosophy, which believed that virtue and morality came after the provision of food and clothing. Hong's narrative resembled Liu's explanation to a large extent. But I want to highlight the term "choose" as he used it. By using this word, he indicated that a person might not necessarily be moral even after he became rich; and even if he *chose* to be moral, the motivations behind his choice might be deeply immoral: perhaps he just attempted to comfort himself rather than confess his sins, or simply found an excuse to make trouble for his competitors. In this regard, Hong seemed to imagine a free space for the rich in which they could make moral choices largely based on their own wills, while external forces, including the state, as well as the moral others, which once played a significant role in shaping one's moral concepts, all became less relevant.

With a self-reported annual income of 200,000 yuan (US\$ 30,000), Mr. Hong definitely should not be considered poor in Yiwu, even though he kept portraying himself as a pitiful small e-trader who was struggling to get by. By identifying with the poor, Hong granted himself the right to make money through every means without getting trapped in the moral constraints. This was the logic he often used to convince me and his friends of his "morality." But as mentioned above, in Hong's imagination there were no moral constraints on the rich too. The only possible structural constraints for his business practices were e-platforms' regulations and the law, whereas the law and its enforcers (officials) were believed to stand far away and intervened only when they found opportunities for rent-seeking. In other words, as long as he could avoid punishments from e-platforms, he could free himself from all constraints.

Being unconstrained by external forces and sticking to his own will was indeed what Hong desired. Once I happened to hear him discuss with his friend about a Chinese actress's romantic affairs with powerful men. That friend criticized the actress for being shameless and immoral, but Hong defended her by stressing

“What is morality? Doing whatever she wants without any constraints from others is the true morality!” From then on, I started to believe this egotistic moral framework was the actual one Hong initiated to guide his actions in real life.

So how did Mr. Hong expand his freedom for adopting those business practices which were immoral in the public eye but moral in his own perception? On the one hand, it had much to do with the e-platforms. Taking Taobao for example, although the e-platform may punish e-shops involved in dishonest businesses, such as faking sales, selling counterfeits and making exaggerated advertisements, the measures it adopts are flexible. With regard to fake sales, the first and second time that an e-shop is discovered by the e-platform to have engaged in fake transactions, if the total fake sales volumes are below 96 deals, the e-shop will receive no formal penalty, only a warning notice. Literally speaking, this means that the e-platform gives e-traders two chances to correct their wrongdoing. But people like Hong read the policy in an opposite direction, implying that e-traders can enjoy at least two chances of faking transactions without being punished, and each time they can fake up to 96 deals. This may be seen as an encouragement by the e-platform to fake sales. Furthermore, the minimum number of deals for punishment is also interpreted as an encouragement. Once when we discussed Taobao’s regulations, Hong suggested that “If Taobao does want to crack down on *shua dan*, it will punish an e-shop that has made only one fake deal. Why does it start from 96 deals? I think it is telling us ‘fake your sales, but not too many’.” The result was that reinterpretation of the regulation formed a belief in many e-traders that Taobao’s ban on fake sales was just a strategic response to domestic and international critics, and as long as they did not go too far they were granted some freedom to *shua dan*. At my field site, this belief was further reinforced by the fact that many e-shops that faked large amounts of sales were still alive and enjoying heavy traffic. Considering all these, the freedom to engage in immoral business practices was imagined, practiced, felt, and embedded in e-traders like Hong through an innovative reading of e-commerce ecology, e-platforms’ regulations, and their own business experiences.

On the other hand, Hong also actively expanded his freedom by developing various strategies and tactics in the course of doing business. As noted, to sell counterfeits online Hong only kept a light stock to reduce the cost, but his profits were high because he sold the fakes at the prices of the genuine article. He often noticed media exposure on e-platforms which would definitely generate responses.

For instance, whenever the mass media reported fake sales on e-platforms, Hong would reduce the frequency and amount of fake transactions in his e-shops in order to survive in the coming campaigns. This had become part of his risk management policy. When customers complained about the quality of his goods or reported counterfeits to the e-platforms, he always tried to solve the problems with bribes, and this tactic was largely successful. How much to bribe depended on the seriousness of the case. If customers just complained about quality, Hong would give them some money to make sure their feedback was positive. In most cases, he still earned a profit because of the low cost of the counterfeits. Hong explained his tactic:

Any problem that can be solved by money is not a real problem. One characteristic of Chinese customers is that they are keen on getting petty advantages. If you give them some money, they will write good reviews for you even if they're dissatisfied with your products. In this sense, the customers are immoral too. As long as they can get money, they won't care whether others will end up buying counterfeits because of their good reviews.

Despite this, there were customers who were still concerned with business ethics. Their reports to Taobao led to the closing of Hong's e-shop. But Hong soon reopened another e-shop selling the same products. By faking several hundred sales in one month with the help of fake shoppers who cooperated with his *shua dan* business, the new shop was again visible to customers.⁵⁷

“Being moral is an ideal lifestyle”

Between the two extremes, most of the e-traders I have met tended to identify with the moral business codes while performing their everyday practices in accordance with their own wills. If their wills match the codes, they comply with their moral dispositions. However, when it does not, they may adopt immoral tactics and justify their actions as a “choiceless choice” (*mei banfa de banfa*, 没办法的办法). They may also negotiate and manipulate the meanings of specific moral values to legitimize their actions.

Mr. Huang presents such a case. He is a teacher at a local e-commerce training

⁵⁷ During my field research in Yiwu, I noted that a typical fake sale made by fake shoppers usually cost sellers 10~13 yuan (including shipping fees). Because Hong was a leader of a *shua dan* team, he got a discount. For him, each deal cost only about 5 yuan. By running the team, Hong saved quite a lot of money.

institution. To teach students practical knowledge as well as to make more money, he started his own Taobao e-shop selling snacks in 2011. In 2015 his major e-shop achieved an annual sale of at least four million yuan (US\$ 600,000) and a reputation as a “gold crown seller,” which meant more than five-hundred thousand customers had rated his snacks as “good.” Since Huang’s was the only gold crown e-shop at the e-commerce training institution, he became the most famous start-up mentor (*chuangye daoshi*, 创业导师) there. Also because it was one of the few gold crown e-shops in the snack industry on Taobao, Huang enjoyed certain recognition inside the industry.

Huang always attributed this business success first to his entrepreneurial ethics and second to his e-commerce skills. To him, entrepreneurial ethics, such as integrity, industriousness, self-discipline, and social responsibility, are the *Dao* (道), or principles, of business and all other aspects of human life. By contrast, e-commerce skills are only the *Shu* (术), or techniques, of managing an e-business. An e-trader holding the *Dao* will eventually succeed because he has grasped the right way of being in the world and doing business, while the *Shu* can be learned afterwards. However, an e-trader familiar with the *Shu* but lacking in the *Dao* will end in failure, since he does not have the right guidance. At other times, Huang represented himself as a Confucian entrepreneur (*ru shang*, 儒商) who did business by following Confucian doctrines that emphasizes a balance between *Yi* (义, obligations to social interests) and *Li* (利, personal interests). He believed that practicing *Yi* was the foundation for gaining *Li* in the way that only well-reputed businesses would win customer loyalty, which was crucial to sustain development.

Huang tried to promote his ideas by every means. Every year in his first lectures to new students, he spent hours teaching entrepreneurial ethics. They were told “to do business one shall first learn how to be a moral person,” and “to become a successful entrepreneur you should have a desire to serve customers and society, not just to make money for your own greed.” In the classes for senior students, Huang often criticized the attendees for their eagerness for quick success. “A truly successful e-trader is always like a craftsman; he needs to get down to his work and spend time researching the market, finding quality goods, studying e-commerce skills, building a sufficient supply chain and serving the customers well.” He shouted, “How about you? You don’t use your brains to think and study, you don’t care about customers’ interests; you only want quick money.” Once Huang targeted a student whose e-shop had almost shut down because of repeated penalties from Taobao for his fake transactions, “Do you know why

you finally lose money? That is because you think too much about it but create no value for the market and customers. The root of your failure is that you place your interests prior to the customers'. It violates the principle of business (*shang dao*, 商道)!"

Many of Huang's students saw him as an "old angry youth" (*lao fenqing*, 老愤青) who was dissatisfied with everything in society. They (and I) could often find social critiques in his lectures or on his WeChat Moments, such as: "Many e-traders on Taobao, including our students, are just selling rubbish," "WeChat business (*wei shang*, 微商) is an epitome of China's cheating culture," "Chinese society is distorted. Chinese people are becoming more selfish and morally corrupt." To diagnose the above "social ills," Huang suggested people should not rely on the state's enforcement of the law and moral codes, but start with their personal selves by learning self-discipline and virtues. The reason for not depending on the state was two-sided, as he explained on his WeChat Moments. On the one hand, it was because "China is too big with too large a population for the government to manage. So it can only concentrate on issues with serious consequences, such as poisoned milk powders." On the other hand, "To purify society and build a healthy market economy, we cannot rely on the government. This is not only because it is oftentimes bureaucratic and corrupt, but also because it bears the risk of bringing back the interventionist state of the Maoist years. That's very dangerous."

While believing in Confucian morality, Huang sometimes claimed that he was a liberal Confucian. By "liberal," he referred to his critical position towards the Chinese government. This attitude was also reflected in his narrative of the negative effect of the state on the Chinese moral landscape. In Huang's view, the imagined distance between the state and individual life, as well as the intentional refusal of state intervention, prevented Chinese people from government-enforced morality (which was often wrong) and gave them freedom to learn and practice self-conscious (and right) ethics. Once learned, individuals who have an ethical consciousness should spread their moral ideas to other unenlightened social members by every means. He elaborated on these views during our conversation about how to build a moral society in China.

I think one way to do this is to highlight the importance of *pinde* (品德, virtue) in all kinds of social interactions. If you are an investor, give your money only to those with *pinde*. If you are an employer, hire people who have *pinde* and kick out those who do not. If you are a customer, buy from truly well-reputed shops. In this way, people will know that being moral is encouraged and

rewarded.

Huang applied these principles in the recruitment of his employees. During our conversation, he told me that he paid special attention to applicants' *pinde* in the interviews. Before offering a formal position, he took another month to observe the character of each of his employees. To ensure the quality of the business team, this kind of observation persisted even after that period, and people who were considered selfish, evil-minded, arrogant, pompous, hypocritical, or disloyal would be fired. Huang regarded this practice as a strategy of human resources management as well as a sign of his high moral standards, and he shared it on his WeChat Moments so that everyone who knew him would see it. Besides this, he often posted the vision of his business team (with references such as “we realize our self-values by first creating values for our customers through providing good products and services”), high sale records and recommendations from customers (one example boasted that “after five-hundred thousand transactions our rate of positive feedback is still as high as 99.88 percent; we do business based on our conscience”), and critiques of other e-shops. Similar posts also appeared in his Taobao e-shop in response to customers' comments, promoting itself as a socially responsible and trustful business.

Huang appeared to me an absolute moralist until I joined his team as an unpaid helper. From my observation, the routine of daily business operations appeared consistent with what Huang's projected image as a moral person. But incidents soon emerged which portrayed a different persona. Once a customer bought some snacks from Huang's major e-shop and afterwards wrote a negative review. Huang discovered that this person was also an e-trader selling similar snacks, and therefore saw the case as a tactic his peer used to belittle his reputation in the market. That night he asked ten friends living in different cities to buy snacks from that e-shop who afterwards all gave negative reviews. The e-trader was horrified. He called Huang to apologize and promised that he would delete his negative comment with a wish that Huang could do so as well. Huang rebuked his competitor for his immoral and unlawful act, but made no mention of his own. He told his team members that he intended to keep those bad reviews in order to teach the trader a lesson. When I asked Huang if he worried that his competitor would indict him to Taobao, he responded that “he had neither the courage nor the evidence, because I have never admitted what I did.” Neither did he think his

reaction immoral or unlawful. Instead, he justified his actions by defining it as a way of paying somebody back with his own coin. “It is reasonable and totally moral to fight back when others harm you. To be a successful entrepreneur, you should never intend to do harm to others, but should always guard against the harm others might do to you.”

Huang was quite defensive of his e-business, and frequently fought against his critics. Although he always claimed to provide good services to customers, I found that he reserved his kindness only to those who gave him positive feedback. Those who did not would be cursed and might even be scolded online or on the phone. When asked whether this was inconsistent with his philosophy of customer service, Huang responded by complaining about his difficulties in dealing with immoral customers.

I indeed had no other choices. Some customers were really disgusting. I encountered one person who wanted to return his snack because he thought it didn't taste good. I asked him “do you know packaged snacks are not subject to return service on Taobao once they are opened?” But he insisted and threatened me if I disagreed he would give me a negative review. Some customers asked for monetary rewards for positive reviews (*hao ping fan xian*, 好评返现); some might even demand a big reward, otherwise they would say bad words. There were also people who were simply stupid. For example, I had a customer who wrote a negative review because my ginger tea “tasted of too much ginger.” I said, “If you want ones with less taste, go to e-shops that sell cheap products. Those chemicals will fit your needs.” What can you do with these greedy and stupid customers? Their immorality harmed honest sellers. There were too many cases like this. Have you read the news that some frauds took advantage of e-platforms' return service by replacing luxury goods with counterfeits? Also, I know someone bought a suit and a shirt to attend a wedding, and returned them after use by creating some “quality problems” (*zhiliang wenti*, 质量问题), such as a hole on the clothes. In this way, the user used the clothes for free, while the sellers would have to pay for the round-way shipping fees and bear the loss of “faulty goods.” You will never know how vicious a person can be!

Highlighting these awful personal experiences and information from news reports, Huang felt no regret about scolding customers whom he judged as immoral. To him,

punishing immoral peers and customers per se was a moral act. Whenever he had solid evidence, he would also report the cases to e-platforms which might lead to penalties on the accused. Even so, customers rarely received harsh punishments. This, according to Huang, was because e-platforms took sides with them since, ultimately, customers were the source of income. “Only with a large number of customers will e-traders come to open shops on the e-platforms, so they (the e-platforms) would rather close a shop than offend a customer.” Annoying and ungrateful customers sometimes drove Huang to take extreme actions. During my fieldwork Huang once harassed a customer, whom he considered a trouble maker, for three days by making phone-calls from different phones with unregistered numbers sold in other cities, sometimes at midnight. As he explained angrily, “The e-platform does not punish him, but I will. He wants to make trouble for me, in turn I will be an even bigger trouble maker to him.” Some of his team members reminded him that his behavior might violate the law and public morality, but Huang held that he must give that customer a lesson, “Let’s put morality aside first. Being moral is an ideal lifestyle, we have to be realistic when things actually happen. We have to adopt special measures in unusual times. If I don’t teach him this time, he will never know right from wrong!”

Conclusion

Huang’s experiences with his customers and peers generated a number of moments of moral questioning. However, instead of returning to the original moral position befitting his standing as a self-regulated Confucian entrepreneur after self-reflection, as Zigon has found in his Russian informants, Huang chose to “put morality aside” and become an even bigger trouble maker for his adversaries. Like Mr. Hong, Huang knew of many tactics that might help him defeat his peers and solve problems with customers without confronting e-platforms’ regulations. He said he studied these for self-protection, but in reality this was not always the case. To retaliate by using social networks in other cities and unregistered phone numbers, Huang tried his best to lower his risk of being traced by e-platforms and the government and, therefore, avoided potential punishment. Being sure that his scolding and harassment of customers distanced himself from the “usual” morality he held, he still tried to legitimize his actions by initiating a new moral framework which defined teaching and punishing immoral people to distinguish right from wrong as a moral act. If the tactics and subsequent self-serving creations of new moral frameworks helped Huang and Hong to expand their freedom to perform immoral business practices, Mr. Liu’s full grasp of the rules of the game of e-platforms and his

industriousness contributed to his freedom to reject those practices. Besides these, e-traders like Huang and Hong also constructed a free space on e-platforms through their imaginative work, such as creating a feeling that they were being less or unregulated by the state and the e-platforms, or even forming a belief that they were collaborating with these regulators—both by selecting and reinterpreting certain contexts and personal experiences. The endeavors of the three e-traders to exercise free will in making different moral choices illustrate the power of individual agency in negotiating with the regulating structure.

This chapter presents three ethical trajectories taken by Chinese e-traders. By appropriating the contexts and interpreting personal experiences that support their moral choices, these individuals construct multiple ethical subjectivities in a relatively free space they imagine and obtain through different strategies. The coexistence of these three kinds of ethical personhoods reveals a moral diversification in this new professional group which emerges along with China's booming Internet economy. As ordinary citizens, their divergent moral concepts and ethical practices also mirror the moral diversities and complexities in Chinese society.

This chapter intends to contribute to both studies on morality in China and the anthropological literature on morality. The existing scholarship on the morality of Chinese individuals is polarized. While some studies have implied a trend to moral diversification in Chinese society, few scholars have addressed this issue directly. This chapter attempts to make it clear and break the dichotomy. It also offers an explanation for the diversification which may be comparable to other post-communist societies. Jarrett Zigon's research in Russia has demonstrated how individual ethical selfhood is shaped by post-Soviet transition and personal experience. But because his earlier study relies heavily on person-centered interviews, which means his data are mostly recollections of after-factual moral reasoning, it may be difficult for him to figure out if and how his interviewees have manipulated their narratives of personal experiences (Zigon, 2009a, 2010). By participating in their businesses and everyday life, and by observing their processes of moral reasoning closely, I find that Chinese e-traders often select and reinterpret certain contexts and personal experiences to fit the moral frameworks they choose or initiate in order to serve their ultimate moral decisions. This reveals the tremendous importance of individual agency at every stage of making moral choices and thus further illuminates the agentic side of the individual in the new anthropology of morality.

Being aware of the freedom of choosing different moral frameworks, together with

the senses of being independent from the state (Chapter 2), of being subordinate to e-platform giants (Chapter 3), and of being superior over local residents in terms of entrepreneurial qualities (Chapter 4), all contribute to the e-traders' construction of an entrepreneurial subjectivity in the Chinese grassroots neoliberal e-commerce economy. Yet, there is still one crucial aspect we need to pay attention to, which is the traders' *zhuangbi* performance, a sociocultural practice that is especially indicative of their subjectivity informed by neoliberal spirit. Now, let us see how the e-traders manufacture an image of themselves as enterprising subjects through adopting various visual and discursive techniques.

Chapter 6: The Art of Performing Affectation: Manufacturing an Enterprising Self among Yiwu E-Traders

Introduction

Mr. Dong, Mr. Ren and I joined the business promotion activity of an e-commerce training institution called “Crazy Taobao” in Yongkang, a city that neighbors Yiwu where a large number of e-traders assembled. The venue was located in a local luxury hotel in which the organizers rented a meeting room that could hold approximately 400 people, and there were indeed many attendees on this day. The activity started with an emcee’s brief introduction regarding the training institution. Next, he required all participants to stand and welcome with applause the speaker, Jin Tao, the general manager and chief trainer of this institution. Stirring music played, and a handsome man dressed in a suit stepped into the meeting room accompanied by two guards.

Jin Tao first introduced himself and then played a video in which a journalist from the Zhejiang Provincial TV Station Entertainment Channel interviewed him concerning his entrepreneurial experience. After the video, Jin repeated his motivation for initiating the e-commerce training institution. He told his audience “I have succeeded in doing e-business by making my product number one among all Taobao e-shops selling the same item. I want to share my experience with others, especially with youth born into poor families like me. I want to help them to achieve success!” It was said that with his help, some trainees had been able to achieve the reputation of “gold crown seller” within one month, which meant more than 500,000 customers had rated their products as “good.” Some trainees were able to earn a monthly profit of one million yuan. Jin attributed these successes to the high-quality courses at his institution. He showed us a list of instructors with backgrounds that ranged from owners of well-known e-shops to leaders of various e-commerce associations in Yiwu. Jin claimed that every e-trader in Yiwu knew his institution. “If one does not, it is like a person in China has never heard of Xi Jinping.”

To prove his credibility, Jin described some of the tricks of running Taobao e-shops. For instance, he emphasized the importance of marketing to consumers in unexpected ways. Jin gave an example of marketing through the provision of unusual free gifts. To impress customers regarding their services, it was common for Taobao e-traders to present free gifts in addition to the goods that customers purchased. Usually, the gifts were functionally related to the goods, for example, shoes were normally paired with socks. “If only one e-shop uses socks as a gift, it may impress customers; but when

everyone does it, there is no surprise.” Jin suggested choosing items that customers could never imagine. The first gift he chose was certificates of merit with the following text: “Dear (customer’s name), congratulations! You have been selected as the best customer at our e-shop!” Jin believed this choice succeeded in impressing his customers because many of them uploaded photos of the certificates and described their surprise when they wrote reviews for his e-shop. It also impressed other e-traders because they started to copy the practice. Afterward, Jin turned to cups and pennants. The pool of gifts also expanded. Once, he presented a pennant to a restaurant owner after dining there. The owner was so happy that he hung it on the wall behind the cashier. On this pennant, Jin wrote “The Special-Designated Restaurant for Yiwu Crazy Taobao Co. Ltd.” Jin suggested this created a win-win deal in which each party advertised for the other party for free. “Do you think that this is a good business idea?” he asked the audience. “Yes!” responded many of the attendees who applauded enthusiastically. “Do you also want to have such good ideas?” “Yes!” “Do you want to learn from me?” “Yes!” Jin smiled. “A smart choice! You should exchange more with successful people. Don’t stay with newbies, they won’t teach you anything. Always remember that who you befriend determines who you are.” He stepped down from the stage to distribute his business cards, but they were soon all gone. Jin displayed an expression of feigned helplessness.

The business card became the focus of the next speech. The attendees were surprised to find that it looked similar to a credit card. Jin told the audience that last month, he was invited by the mayor of Lu’an City in Anhui Province to give a public speech on e-commerce. When he presented his business card to the mayor, and after a careful examination, the mayor asked him, “Does the card have money inside?” All of the attendees laughed. Jin emphasized that this case again revealed the importance of marketing in unexpected ways.

In the last part of his speech, Jin claimed that all the above-mentioned ideas and strategies were just techniques of entrepreneurship (*chuangye zhi dao*, 创业之术). To achieve career success, one must grasp the principles (*chuangye zhi shu*, 创业之道) that involve one’s confidence, persistence and determination. Jin told us that he was born into a poor family that was despised by all the other households in a village in Anhui Province. Thus, when he was young, Jin swore to become a rich man who would ensure that his parents would enjoy a prosperous life. Throughout primary school and high school, he was the most diligent student in his classes. In college, Jin saw his classmates spend their time engaging in romantic relationships or playing computer games, and he asked himself if he should follow them and waste his youth or find a way to change his

destiny. Finally, he decided to quit college and start a Taobao e-shop. In describing the difficulties of conducting business, Jin choked with emotion. “But I succeeded at last!” His voice suddenly lightened. “If I can make it, you can make it too!” The audience applauded loudly.

The speech was followed by a sales promotion. “To study with me, you need to pay some tuition. But it’s not expensive. I don’t ask for 90,000, 80,000, or 70,000; 20,000 is too much. Only 6,480 yuan!” Simultaneously, Jin added that he only admitted 40 students based on the principle of quality over quantity. He set three criteria for admission. First, candidates should be willing to share the knowledge and skills that they learned with other e-traders. Second, they should be willing to accept punishment if they did not pass class tests, such as men doing push-ups and women singing songs (Jin showed some pictures of students receiving these punishments). Third, they should be willing to donate their unwanted clothes to poor children in mountainous areas. He gave the attendees five minutes to consider the criteria and make a decision whether they wanted to study with him. If they did, they could go up to the stage to register and pay at the counter that had been set up by the organizers. In these five minutes, Jin continued to motivate the audience. At the last minute, when he learned the number of registrations had not reached his expectation, Jin proposed that the registered attendees could send their children to him during summer holidays, and he would teach them public speaking skills. An advertisement appeared on the screen that read “6,480 yuan buys two fantastic courses: a 6,480-yuan Taobao course for you + a 9,800-yuan public speaking course for your children.” This seemed attractive to many attendees. In the last ten seconds, Jin started to count down loudly, and urged more people to join his group. When he had finished, approximately 50 people were on stage. “So many people! I said only 40! What can I do now?” Jin exclaimed with some embarrassment. After pausing for a moment, he decided. “Well, since you are so eager to learn, let me manage it.”

Looking at the rest of the audience, Jin proposed another program. “Today, I also want to recruit three disciples. I will teach them leadership, public speaking, business management and brand operation. I promise that they will make 10 million yuan within three years, and after that, they will pay me 100,000 as a reward. I will help them to do business step-by-step. At this moment, they only pay a 19,800-yuan tuition fee. I don’t really care about this little money. I can earn 160,000 through my e-business in one morning. But I want to help people to succeed.” Three women took this opportunity.

After we left the venue, Mr. Dong asked my opinion of Jin Tao’s speech. I responded that I thought Jin had excellent eloquence, but the speech sounded similar to

a dramatic performance. Both Dong and Ren laughed. “Exactly, it is a classic *zhuangbi* (装逼) performance!” Dong affirmed my judgment. “I was surprised to see such dramatic and absorbing acting. If I was a newbie, I would also buy his course as he demonstrated his knowledge of many important aspects in doing e-business and acting as a modern entrepreneur.” I asked what aspects entailed “acting as a modern entrepreneur”, and Dong identified Jin’s self-branding.

To be an entrepreneur does not merely mean that you conduct business. You must package (*baozhuang*, 包装) yourself with entrepreneurial qualities such as creativity, determination, persistence, integrity, and social responsibility. Currently, there are an increasing number of entrepreneurs who conduct business not by selling products, at least not material products, but by selling their knowledge, skills, eloquence, social relationships, and social status. They package and sell themselves as commodities. Jin is a good example. He showed the audience that he had many different types of entrepreneurial resources to sell, but packaged himself as a helpful mentor with a sense of social responsibility towards the poor.

I recounted Jin’s “entrepreneurial resources” that were for sale, including his e-commerce knowledge and skills and his public speaking skills. However, Dong and Ren said that there were many more skills than these. Ren elaborated as follows.

You need to read the subtexts of Jin’s performance. For instance, when he talked about his business card, he was telling us not just how to do marketing in unexpected ways, but that he was a capable person who had been recognized by a mayor and who had connections to political figures. He showed off the three kinds of entrepreneurial resources that he had in this single instance: marketing skills, social status and social relationships. With these resources, he marketed himself to us again in a way that I had not anticipated. Jin indeed had an excellent grasp of a variety of marketing skills as evidenced by his use of music, guards, television programs, and many other strategies. Everything he presented served his purpose of motivating the attendees to buy courses at his training institution.

Then, I was told that Jin's setting of a quota for student admissions and counting down were strategies called "hunger marketing" (*ji'e yingxiao*, 饥饿营销), and that his emphasis on marketing in unexpected ways was conceptualized as "differentiated marketing" (*chayihua yingxiao*, 差异化营销) in marketing science. The recollection of early life experiences was aimed at emphasizing his current success and arousing the sympathy of the attendees who shared similar family and class backgrounds. Bidding down the price from 90,000 to 6,480 yuan helped to create an image that the training course was worth far more than its cost. None of the three criteria imposed true restrictions. Instead, they were marketing tactics. Urging the trainees to share with others the knowledge and skills that they learned sounded similar to fostering a spirit of sharing, but it may in fact help to promote the training institution to potential customers. The in-class punishment in the form of doing push-ups and singing songs implied two advantages of the courses at the training institution: its trainers were responsible teachers, and the courses were interactive and interesting. Donating unwanted clothes to poor children was not a difficult thing, but it would build a reputation for the training institution and its trainees of being socially responsible. However, the most apparent *zhuangbi* act was Jin's analogy between his institution and Chinese President Xi Jinping in terms of their fame. As Dong said, "He was so bold to package himself in this way. I have never heard of his institution before this activity. He is a typical e-trader who embodies the spirit of *zhuangbi* (*zhuangbi shenru gusui*, 装逼深入骨髓)!" Looking at my shocked face that was caused by their sophisticated analysis of Jin's business tactics, Ren laughed. "We should not have talked so much. Let's stop our own *zhuangbi* performances now."

During my fieldwork, I have often heard my informants use the term *zhuangbi* to judge people or human behavior. In Chinese online media, *zhuangbi* is regarded as a social ill because many internet users believe that in the current age, all people in China are used to performing *zhuangbi* acts in their everyday life (*quanmin zhuangbi de shidai*, 全民装逼的时代). But my e-trader informants contrarily proudly characterize themselves as the pioneers in performing these acts. I was surprised by this view since *zhuangbi* is not a term with positive meanings in common understanding: the word *zhuang* means pretend, and *bi* refers to female genitalia. Putting these two words together, *zhuangbi* is usually used as a synonym for being pretentious, and so I translate it as performing affectation. My informants

did employ this original meaning to satirize or openly criticize other people at times, but more often, their uses mixed negative and positive meanings. The positive usage was especially illustrative when they applied the term to their friends, model fellow e-traders and themselves. Although they disapproved of the insincerity involved in *zhuangbi* practices when describing their friends and model e-traders as people who performed these acts, they showed a certain appreciation of or even admiration for the courage of such people and an admiration of their capacity to engage in active self-promotion. When labelling their own behavior as *zhuangbi*, they were indicating to the listener that they were promoting themselves but in a lower profile, which attempted to avoid being judged as too aggressive and arrogant. For this reason, Mr. Ren concluded the analysis of Jin's *zhuangbi* performance by defining his own interpretative work as *zhuangbi*—if a person could easily understand a high-level and informative *zhuangbi* performance and could explain it in great detail, it revealed that he also possessed the same capacity to perform such acts. Although Dong and Ren stopped their performances at this moment, I found that *zhuangbi* reflected and was representative of both their desires and dispositions in everyday life that would be realized or put into practices whenever they had a chance to promote themselves as (potential) successful businessmen, as modern entrepreneurs, and as e-commerce professionals.

China's actually existing neoliberalism and the making of the enterprising self

This chapter explores the different modalities of the *zhuangbi* practices among Chinese e-traders and the rationale behind these performative behaviors. I argue that by parading their sufficient or limited economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital to other individuals and the public, *zhuangbi* practices function as a technique of the self that helps e-traders to refashion themselves into enterprising versions of themselves to adapt to the neoliberalizing Chinese economy and society. In general, the practices of *zhuangbi* are comparable with the self-branding found in Western societies because they both aim at promoting enterprising practitioners to their target audience through positive self-presentation. However, in some situations, there may be two significant differences. First, when labeling a human behavior as *zhuangbi*, my Chinese informants believe that there must be a pretense or at least some exaggeration involved. But to make an individual stand out, they also believe that these manipulations are necessary and are therefore acceptable. Second, since the performer and the audience know what types of people stand out,

they have a certain consensus on how a performed self should behave in Chinese society. In the United States, scholars of cultural studies criticize self-branding practices as purely instrumental behaviors that circumscribe their meanings within the market discourse, and these behaviors have seriously delimited the possibility of performing the “authentic self” (Hearn, 2008a: 206). In contrast, the anthropologist Ilana Gershon finds that many career counselors and job seekers believe that they should align their branded self with their authentic self that is unique (Gershon, 2016: 231, 237-239). Thus, whether to pursue authenticity and uniqueness becomes the key issue that underlies the discursive and practical differences between the performance of Chinese *zhuangbi* and American self-branding.

Ideas such as technologies of the self, the enterprising self and self-branding are often related to neoliberalism in the scholarly literature. Michel Foucault defines technologies of the self as a neoliberal governmental technique that “permit[s] individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault, 1988: 18; 2008). This technique was widely adopted in advanced Western liberal societies after the Second World War against the background that the states in these nations increasingly retreated from the arena of welfare provision and turned to governing their populations at a distance (Rose, 1996). Individual citizens are urged to become neoliberal subjects who can maximize their quality of life through the rational choices that they make in their own right (Rose, 1992, 1996). These subjects are often characterized as autonomous, responsible, enterprising, flexible, calculative, self-reliant, self-directed, self-activating, and self-disciplined (Du Gay, 1996; Dunn, 2004; Rose, 1992, 1996). In particular, Foucault highlights that the neoliberal subject, the *homo oeconomicus* (economic man), is an entrepreneur of himself. This enterprising self is constituted by “being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, [and] being for himself the source of his earnings” (Foucault, 2008: 226), which can be manifested through choices regarding political citizenship (Ong, 1999), biological citizenship (Rose, 2007), employment (Dunn, 2004), marriage and intimate relationships (Freeman, 2014), and everyday consumption (Du Gay, 1996).

Although individuals may articulate their entrepreneurship by seeking and

exploiting external opportunities such as in the above studies, they can also make it by working on their minds and bodies. One way to do so is self-branding. When American employees brand themselves, Ilana Gershon defines their branding practices as “a performance genre that includes a set of semiotic techniques designed to solve a problem that emerges when workers seek to present themselves as worthy of alliances under contemporary neoliberal conceptions of the ideal working self” (Gershon, 2016: 223). This definition also aptly applies to other neoliberal subjects who seek self-realization. Previous studies have considered how media workers, authors of the personal branding literature, career counselors, job seekers, and employees understand and/or practice self-branding in the neoliberal world (Gershon, 2014, 2016; Hearn, 2008a, 2008b; Vallas and Cummins, 2015). There is also a growing new media scholarship on how internet users with a neoliberal ethos brand themselves through various social media (Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017; Marwick, 2013, 2015; Page, 2012; Van Dijck, 2013).

This chapter also investigates how Chinese e-traders construct their neoliberal subjectivity by performing affectation online through social media and offline. However, the preliminary question that we must face when we transplant the theory of neoliberal subjectivity that was developed in the West elsewhere around the world is whether the local context is neoliberal (Ong, 2006a; Ong and Collier, 2005). There has been a long debate among scholars regarding whether China is undergoing a neoliberal transformation and/or whether the mode of governance in Chinese society is becoming neoliberal. Many scholars believe that China is neoliberalizing (Anagnost, 2004; Anagnost, Arai and Ren, 2013; Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Huang, 2016; Ong, 2006a; Rofel, 2007; Yan, 2003b), but some object to this view (Kipnis, 2007, 2008; Nonini, 2008). I agree with the objections concerning the points that the Communist Party-state still exercises controls over the Chinese market economy and that the current mode of governance in Chinese society inherits many legacies from its ancient traditions and socialist past. However, during the fieldwork I observed a wide application among e-traders of economic reasoning to the various domains of life, which is the cornerstone of Foucauldian scholars’ definition of neoliberalism (Foucault, 2008: 242-243). These private entrepreneurs internalize market logic and emphasize self-reliance, self-sufficiency, and self-responsibility in their businesses and everyday life. People such as Mr. Jin further promote these entrepreneurial qualities as a personal brand in their narratives about an individual who strives for a better life to pursue material

benefits and social recognition. This chapter explores how Yiwu-based e-traders articulate the neoliberal ethos by performing affectation in their everyday life against a background where Chinese society has manifested a type of “actually existing neoliberalism” (Brenner and Theodore, 2002) in terms of both the mode of governance (Hansen, 2012; Hanser, 2002; Hoffman, 2010) and the political economy (He and Wu, 2009).

The specific socioeconomic conditions in Yiwu City exemplifies “actually existing neoliberalism.” Scholars have noted the need to distinguish neoliberalism on the nation-state scale and on the local scale (Wu, 2010; Zhang and Ong, 2008: 4-5). One reason for this distinction is that there may be significant differences in the adoption of neoliberal socioeconomic measures and in the cultivation of neoliberal mentalities in different localities. This geographic difference is observable in contemporary China. In general, coastal provinces appear to be more neoliberal than inland provinces, largely because their local economies and societies where private entrepreneurs play a significant role are more marketized. Located in the center of Zhejiang Province, my field site of Yiwu was among the first cities to embrace market mechanisms, and similar to Wenzhou City, the private sector has developed most of the local economy in the past two decades. Since imperial times, trade has been a defining characteristic of the Yiwu local tradition. Central planning mechanisms dominated the local economy during the Maoist years, but as early as 1974, there were already some underground marketplaces in the city. In 1982, trade was formally legitimized by the local government, and in 1984 the first physical marketplace was established with government endorsement. Today, Yiwu contains the largest wholesale marketplace in the world and has become the richest county-level city in China (Lu, Wang and Yang, 2008; Wu et al., 2016). When visiting the city, one can easily perceive that the people there are market- and profit-oriented. Individuals strive for their living by efficiently working and trading, and they are flexible in satisfying the changing market demands. Many e-traders in Yiwu are rural migrants from the inland provinces. They told me that they had been impressed by the local business atmosphere and the shrewdness of Yiwu-based businesspeople when they first arrived. However, when they started to conduct business, they embraced the same mindset to capture business opportunities, the same eloquence to persuade and negotiate with customers, and the same calculative manner to protect their own interests. As one informant stressed, “Doing business is to make yourself part of the business. You have to make yourself look hospitable

and credible to the customers, and always be flexible to satisfy their needs. You are in charge of your business and also responsible for your own business.”

Despite embracing a neoliberal ethos, the enterprising self of Yiwu-based e-traders has its special (if not unique) trajectory as affected by the country’s cultural traditions and socialist legacies. As noted above, one specificity is that most, if not all, e-traders see and accept the practice of performing affectation as purely fake, which has nothing to do with one’s authentic self but fits the Chinese social imagination of a branded self that can stand out among other people. Unlike American self-branding that often highlights individuality and uniqueness (Gershon, 2016), the Chinese performance of affectation, although it follows a similar tendency that features individual characteristics on the surface, seems to conform to those contemporary Chinese collective values that define success mainly by one’s social (or sociopolitical) and economic status.⁵⁸ In living up to these social standards, the performed self must be an individual with sufficient economic, social, cultural, and/or symbolic capital who can establish his or her status in Chinese society. By celebrating individuality by way of a herd mentality, e-traders’ performance of affectation may arguably confirm the distinctive path of individualization in China. While acknowledging the rise of the individual in the post-reform era, scholars contend that the process of individualization in Chinese society is incomplete since the Party-state still constrains the expression of individual desires and the exercise of individual rights (Hansen, 2015; Hansen and Svarverud, 2010; Yan, 2009). The anthropologist Mette Halskov Hansen defines the Chinese path as “authoritarian individualization” in which the state governs its subjects by combining neoliberal self-governing measures with socialist authoritarian measures (Hansen, 2015: 16). I agree with these scholars on the state’s capacity to shape the ideas and behaviors of individuals, including Hansen’s observation that the state has currently shifted the role of educational institutions from instilling a socialist-collective spirit in students to fostering a generation of more self-responsible citizens. However, we should not ignore the influence of the collectivist tradition in Chinese society, which has a legacy of several centuries

⁵⁸ Wealth and fame have long been regarded by the Chinese as collective representations of individual achievement, and youths are often motivated to achieve these reputations not only for themselves but for the collectives to which they belong, such as families, local communities and the nation. Accordingly, scholars have argued that Chinese people are more collective-oriented in achievement motivation, while their Western counterparts are more individual-oriented (Yu, 1996; Yu and Yang, 1994). The spread of consumerism in post-reform China is said to have reawakened Chinese people’s materialistic desires that had been suppressed during the Maoist years. Money and a moneyed lifestyle have become widely accepted markers of successful people in the reform era (Croll, 2006; Hansen, 2012; Rosen, 2004).

dating from imperial times to the socialist period. This embedded tradition, along with other philosophies and ideologies (e.g., consumerism and neoliberalism), produces the Chinese enterprising selves who present their individual characteristics in a homogeneous form.

What are the common characteristics that e-traders are eager to present? My fieldwork finds that they want to deliver three personal images either separately or simultaneously. First, that they are financially well-off, as indicated by their business record and consumption of various goods and services. Second, that they have wide connections with economic and social elites, and sometimes with even cultural and political elites. Third, that they possess the expertise, skills and other cultural resources that are treasured in present-day China. Accordingly, e-traders intend to display through performances of affectation that they are entrepreneurs with (the potential to achieve) worldly success. I consider these expressive performances a part of e-traders' occupational culture.

The act of exposing one's worldly success is more widely observed among the upper and middle classes, and it may be considered a practice of making distinctions (Bourdieu, 1984).⁵⁹ For instance, the sociologist Michèle Lamont has studied how elites in France and the United States drew symbolic boundaries on the basis of status symbols, such as socioeconomic capital (e.g., money, power and social relations), cultural capital (e.g., taste, intelligence and refinement) and moral capital (e.g., work ethics). She found that many upper-middle class Americans emphasized monetary success and preferred to socialize with people who had a comparable or higher financial standing, while the French showed more interest in power and powerful people (Lamont, 1992: 63, 71-74). People in both nations attached great value to the social connections generated in prestigious groups and associations, with the French emphasizing the value of family relations (Lamont, 1992: 75-78). To distinguish themselves from the lower classes, elites also employed cultural measures. The French portrayed themselves as culturally sophisticated and highlighted their intellectual playfulness, capacity for abstraction, eloquence, and style. Although Americans were not very intellectually-oriented,

⁵⁹ Scholars who researched the poor have discussed the "culture(s) of poverty". It was said that with feelings of being hopeless, marginalized and inferior, people who adopted this culture rarely exploited emerging opportunities and seldom made efforts to change their destinies. Their failure to participate in community life also resulted in their lack of supportive social networks. As the values and practices passed from one generation to another, the culture(s) of poverty served as a mechanism to reproduce the underclass (Banfield, 1970; Harrington, 1962; Lewis, 1959). Studies also reveal the existence of working-class culture(s), which is not as aggressive as the upper-middle class culture(s) (Willis, 1977; Lamont, 2002).

they too stressed their grasp of broad factual knowledge and practical expertise (Lamont, 1992: 92-98). Finally, a moral boundary was important in both countries, and people often judged one another by their personal honesty, friendliness or work ethics (Lamont, 1992: 28-36).

In an inspiring study of Wall Street, the anthropologist Karen Ho (2009) examined the culture of investment bankers, specifically the manner in which these financial elites viewed and presented themselves as “the best and the brightest” people in the world based on their cultural capital and extensive social networks that were obtained through their education in Ivy League and comparable schools. Career ambitions, work ethics, communication skills with clients, social interactions with staff members, consumption practices, and even styles of dress all contributed to their ways of living up to this ideal.

My e-trader informants share similar trends in framing and packaging their self-presentations in everyday life and to some extent internalize these self-identified fake or exaggerated portraits, despite the fact that they have diverse financial standings. Using the example of e-trading professionals with varying socioeconomic conditions (who range from poor and average beginners to wealthy), I join the Bourdieusian scholarship by showing that different forms of capital are not necessarily held by only the upper and middle classes. Some dispositions held by the higher classes may also transcend class boundaries and be embedded in people from the lower class. Specifically, while scholars have demonstrated that rural working-class migrants in China are striving to learn and internalize the lifestyles of the Chinese urban upper and middle classes or even those of the West (Griffiths, 2010; Hsu, 2005; Jacka, 2006; Pun, 2003; Sun, 2008), this study suggests that some forms of capital may generate from the bottom up and become legitimate in the process of the entrepreneurialization of Chinese society.

The remaining sections start with an analysis of how e-traders publicize their economic competence to win social recognition and potential clients. Next, I discuss how they present social relationships as precious resources to build or enhance their social prestige. This discussion is followed by an examination of how these e-traders claim techno-cultural authority in both business circles and everyday life by manifesting their entrepreneurial creativity and innovation, knowledge of e-trading culture, as well as distinctive ways of thinking and behaving. By looking at the behavioral characteristics of e-trading professionals through their public displays of the numerous forms of capital that they attain or generate, this chapter

reveals the very process of the making of the enterprising self in the Chinese e-commerce world.

“My dream was to live an affluent life, and now I’ve realized it”: e-traders’ economic capital and consumption-based symbolic capital

The quoted subtitle was proudly expressed by Miss Chen at a start-up forum. Chen is a sales manager for “Happy Fox,” an e-company selling underwear through WeChat, Taobao and other e-platforms. With only a secondary education, this self-proclaimed millionaire came from a poor rural family in the southeast part of Zhejiang Province and had worked as a migrant worker and then a peddler in Yiwu. After making some money, Chen opened a small shop in a major marketplace of the city selling women’s underwear, but her business return was below average. In July 2014, she joined Happy Fox, which adopts a business strategy similar to a pyramid scheme, as a sales agent.⁶⁰ Chen said that the company’s business model and her previous business experience helped her succeed overnight. By January 2015, Chen had developed a sales team of 20,000 members, and her monthly income reached 800,000 yuan. To further indicate her monetary success, this well-dressed woman mentioned that she had two luxury cars: one was a Porsche, which she purchased on her own, and the other was a BMW-X5 awarded by the company for her outstanding sales record. Seeing some attendees show disbelief, she told them that she had parked the Porsche outside the venue and that they could go and find it. Chen concluded her speech by reflecting on how e-business had changed her destiny.

Thanks to Happy Fox, my life has changed substantially. As a rural girl born into a poor family, I have had a dream since I was young. My dream is to live an affluent life, and now I have realized it! I can buy whatever I want! I am sure that everyone here has a dream of life and that you are eager to realize it. We are living in a great age, and the trend of this age is the internet economy. If we ride the trend, we post-80s and 90s generations can easily catch up to the 60s and 70s. Happy Fox is our opportunity! If I can make it, you can too!

Undoubtedly, some of my friends who participated in the start-up forum

⁶⁰ A pyramid scheme, which is also called multilevel marketing, is a business strategy of a company to have non-salaried labor forces sell its products and/or services through a pyramid-shaped commission system.

perceived Chen's speech as a performance of affectation that showed off her wealth and spending power. We did find a Porsche in the parking area, but my friends commented in private that it might not necessarily be owned by Chen since there were car rental agencies everywhere in Yiwu. Although they were not sure if Happy Fox was really a profitable business, they took interest in this start-up project and joined the WeChat online chat group (*weixin qun*, 微信群) established by Miss Chen after her speech. I also joined the group. Almost every day Chen and the other sales agents posted advertisements concerning their project within this group, including graphs of their large sales records and accompanying significant material rewards (see Figure 6.1). We also added Chen to our list of personal friends in WeChat and found that she often posted similar pictures on her WeChat Moments. In one photo entitled "Happy Fox helps you achieve a happy life," she displayed the large amount of money that she had earned with her coworkers (see Figure 6.2), which caused my friends to label her as a person with "performed personality/selfhood" (*biaoyanxing renye*, 表演型人格).

It was obvious that a "happy life" meant monetary success to Miss Chen. Scholars have discussed how the Chinese new rich build and maintain their socioeconomic status by living a moneyed lifestyle. They purchase apartments in gated communities (Pow, 2009; Zhang, 2010), expensive cars (Notar, 2017; Zhang, 2009) and other luxury goods (Yu, 2014; Zhang L, 2017), imported and stylish food (Fabinyi and Liu, 2014; Hanser and Li, 2015; Zhang, 2018), and may pursue a lifestyle migration (Liu-Farrer, 2016). Through such consumption practices, the rich express their desires for social distinction and indicate their capacity to make autonomous choices, which have been considered the crucial indicators of neoliberal subjectivity in late/post-socialist contexts (Hoffman, 2010; Rofel, 2007). However, in Chen's case, her act of flaunting wealth on the one hand, showcased her affluent life that distinguished her from her impoverished former life; on the other hand, it was a strategy of self-promotion, which packaged her entrepreneurial experience and extravagant lifestyle as a business, to attract potential clients to become members of her sales team.



Figure 6.1: An advertisement posted by Happy Fox sales agents



Figure 6.2: Miss Chen’s Status Update on her WeChat Moments (above).

Miss Zhou is one of my friends who attended Chen’s start-up forum. She owns several Taobao e-shops selling women’s leggings with an annual income of approximately 200,000 yuan. Zhou joined the forum to determine whether she could learn some new ideas from other traders who sold women’s products. After

listening to Chen's speech, Zhou felt her performance of affectation went too far which made the speech somewhat suspect. However, Zhou appreciated Chen's courage and endeavors to package and promote herself publicly as a female entrepreneur in a male-dominated social world. This was also the way in which she perceived and took pride in herself.

Zhou was a rural migrant from Henan Province. She came to Yiwu in 2007, and had worked in a factory and an e-shop before starting her own e-business. After she settled down, her parents and elder brother also came to the city. Her father found a job driving a taxi and her mother stayed at home taking care of the family. Zhou described her brother as a "playboy" who made no money but spent a lot. He often asked their parents for financial support and they always tried to satisfy his needs by using their own savings and the living allowance Zhou gave them out of filial piety. The situation became even worse when Zhou's brother found a "materialistic" girlfriend who liked to dine at fancy restaurants, dress in branded clothes, and make up her face with expensive cosmetics. With their parents' support, her brother started to ask Zhou for money directly. Zhou almost severed her relationships with her family members when her brother demanded 200,000 yuan to buy a car. "I was really angry when my elder brother made that demand and my parents supported him! They thought I had the responsibility to secure his relationship with his girlfriend, make her become my sister-in-law, and have them live a happy life. They never cared about me. I used to make money for my family, but now I make it for myself."

Since then, Miss Zhou has spent more money on herself. She seldom traveled or bought luxury goods before. However, after the quarrel with her family members, she joined a tourist group to South Korea for a one-week holiday, shopped in Seoul and travelled to Jeju Island. When she uploaded some photos onto her WeChat Moments, she received many "likes" from her friends. One of them commented that "You should have done this long ago. A successful entrepreneur should not only know how to make money but how to spend it so as to make life enjoyable!" Later, she learned that she used to be viewed as a workaholic and a moneygrubber who had paid little attention to personal appearance or her social manners. "They thought I looked like an uncouth migrant worker more than an entrepreneur who could earn several hundred thousand yuan per year. They suggested that to be an entrepreneur I needed to dress and perform well."

To dress and perform like an entrepreneur, and to live an enjoyable personal

life, Zhou began to shop more at high-end department stores and dined at restaurants in contrast to her previous consumption style, which relied heavily on Taobao and street food stalls. Whenever and wherever she went shopping, dining or traveling, she posted selfies that were retouched by photo-editing software. She also uploaded photos of her sales record and parcels. To Zhou, the new consumption style and prospering business signified her economic independence and earning power, which she believed would win her social recognition. Although this was largely true, I heard our mutual e-trading friends making jokes about Zhou to her face by saying that her performance of affectation sometimes “went too far and revealed its flaws” (*zhuangbi tai xiong jieguo louxian le*, 装逼太凶结果露馅了). For instance, they found some of the restaurants where Zhou took photos were just ordinary or even fast food restaurants, which could hardly add merit to her reputation as a successful entrepreneur. Some of the clothes Zhou bought were said to not fit her temperament very well, which indicated her inadequate self-understanding and bad taste. The worst case was that she once photographed a new private hospital when she went there for medical treatment, and she wrote on her WeChat Moments that “the keystone of this status update is that this private hospital is really luxurious and its service is fantastic. There is a cafe in its waiting area!” Our friends laughed at Zhou by remarking that her words “smelled strongly of nouveau riche.”

During my fieldwork, I found not only high- and middle-income e-traders such as Miss Chen and Zhou who attempted to build their reputation as successful businesspeople by publicly displaying their earning and spending power, but also e-traders with average or low earnings. Mr. Ren, whom I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, was born into a poor rural family in Shanxi Province. I met him when he was still a student at a vocational school which specializes in e-commerce curricula in Yiwu, and we soon became friends. Ren owned two Taobao e-shops and one 1688 wholesale e-shop. He experimented with several products that had helped him earn some money, but unfortunately his efforts all ended in failure. As a determined person, Ren persevered with his e-business after graduation, but his monthly income was quite unstable, ranging from 10,000 (when he obtained opportunities to join the business promotion activities organized by e-platforms) to as low as 2,000 yuan. Ren was unsatisfied with his current economic condition, but he was very proud of himself as a striving entrepreneur. “If you persevere with work, you will succeed eventually” was the motto written in his alumni book.

After the business promotion of the “Crazy Taobao” e-commerce training institution, Mr. Ren, Dong and I stayed in Yongkang for the night. We walked downtown for dinner, and noticed a Ferrari. Ren told me that owning a car of this brand was one of his life’s dreams. He recalled that he felt moved when Jin Tao, the manager of “Crazy Taobao,” narrated his family background and entrepreneurial experience because similar things had also happened to him. He said his family was one of the poorest in his village. When other families had built new two- or three-story houses, his family still lived in an old one-story house for which they were looked down upon in the local community. Ren stated that his second dream was to build a six-story house at the entrance to their village. In this way, he believed that he and his family members would be recognized as having “an affluent and esteemed life” (*timian de shenghuo*, 体面的生活). Similarly, Ren mentioned to me several times how local Yiwu students demonstrated superiority over their poorer classmates from the inland provinces and how established e-traders scorned newbies and their unsuccessful peers. Considering that the possession of luxury cars was widely seen as a sign of success in local society and elsewhere, Ren wanted to appropriate this and other symbols to enhance his social status and social recognition.

Thus, what was Ren going to do if he did not actually have the economic capacity to purchase the goods that he yearned for? Upon seeing the Ferrari, Ren took a photo and posted it on his Qzone and WeChat Moments. He wrote a status update that “Humans live for their dreams! Never forget your dream!” This photo appeared again on his WeChat Moments when Ren bought a motorcycle. In putting the images of the two vehicles together, Ren wrote that the motorcycle was “the first step to realize my dream!” All of our mutual friends knew a Ferrari was the object of his desire and that he was an ambitious entrepreneur. Establishing lofty goals and publicizing them were part of Ren’s project to build a motivated, enterprising self, while he put more effort in training himself to be a persistent and hardworking person and letting other people know about it. When Ren was still a student at the vocational school, he often stayed overnight in the classroom and studied well-reputed e-shops to learn about virtues that he could utilize on his own. To inform other people about his endeavors, he once wrote a status update, “researching e-commerce all night, [I feel] too tired,” accompanied by a picture of a male student sleeping in a classroom with a coat covering his head. Several months later, I discovered that this picture was from a news report, but at the time,

most who saw it thought it was Ren and accordingly gave him many “likes,” including his head teacher. More updates on Ren’s WeChat Moments involved his sales, with images of large sales records, numerous parcels or waybills, online conversation records with clients, and selfies that were taken next to the parcels to be shipped (see Figures 6.3, 6.4 and 6.5). Some local students disliked Ren’s aggressiveness and described him by saying, “the poorer a person is, the crazier he performs affectation” (*ren yue qiong, zhuangbi yue fengkuang*, 人越穷, 装逼越疯狂). In contrast, his everyday self-motivation and self-presentation of entrepreneurship were highly appreciated by his head teacher, and Ren was thus appointed as the monitor of their class and was often asked to speak to visitors and the mass media. Ren knew other people judged his behavior as performances of affectation, and he actually agreed. However, he thought these behaviors produced special meanings for him.

For me, they are records of my life as a striving person. I believe strivers will eventually succeed, as the old saying goes, “where there is a will, there is a way.” Behaving in this way is a self-helping and self-motivating course. I teach myself repeatedly, as a poor person who has to start from scratch, I have to struggle for opportunities on my own. When opportunities do arise, only people who have everything ready can grasp them. So, whenever I grasp an opportunity and achieve a small success, I want to celebrate it. This is a self-satisfying experience that can motivate me to move further. It may also win me some respect and bring new opportunities.

To fulfill his psychological and social needs, speaking highly of his striving self and celebrating his small achievements became Ren’s everyday practices. But there were not very many “achievements” that he could parade. Thus, Ren often posted on Qzone and WeChat Moments photos of himself with the waybills and parcels of other companies. He also showed me apps that could generate fake histories and payments, which I suspect he used.



Figure 6.3: Ren’s sales record when he joined a one-day business promotion activity of “everyday sales” (*tiantian teja*, 天天特价), a group buying section of the Taobao e-platform. As indicated in the figure, in all there were 1,546 orders on this day, and the total transaction volume exceeded 47,535 yuan. In the status update, he complained that he had run out of stock and had to wait for new supplies from the factory with which he collaborated. Ren’s friends pointed out that he was not really complaining but performing affectation by showing off his large sales. Ren admitted that he was “half complaining, half parading.”

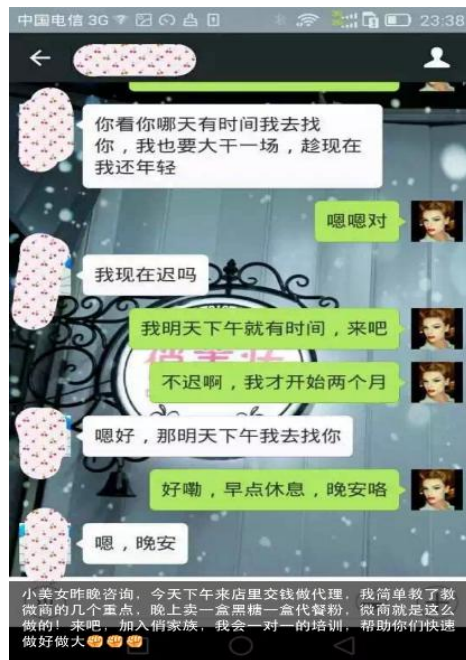


Figure 6.4: Ren’s conversation with his WeChat business team member. The figure indicates that after Ren gave the member a simple training in the afternoon she had two sales in the evening. By publicizing this case, Ren called on others to join his team and announced that he would help to make “their businesses grow bigger and more profitable rapidly.” The fact I knew was that Ren himself was a new sales

agent at that time, and was struggling to increase his own sales. This was another example that Ren's friends often used to expose his habit of performing affectation.



Figure 6.5: Ren's selfie with his parcels. He wrote that his products were on sale and encouraged others to buy.

The examples of Miss Chen, Miss Zhou and Mr. Ren reveal that performing affectation by displaying one's (potential) earning and spending power may transcend economic boundaries. To present themselves as successful entrepreneurs, these individuals tried their best to utilize the material and symbolic resources that they possessed to engage in self-packaging and self-promotion. The wide desire for economic success and social recognition among e-traders and others further generates an emerging market. Many e-shops on Taobao helped people to perform affectation. A simple search for *zhuangbi* or *xuanfu* (炫富, wealth-flaunting) revealed hundreds of shops selling fake money, photos of property ownership certificates in Chinese metropolises, fake quotes for luxury cars on which buyers could fill in their names, photos taken inside luxury cars, photos of bank account balances, and so on (see Figure 6.6). I occasionally saw some e-traders on my WeChat friend list upload photos like the ones below. Such displays of fake money and consumption-based symbols facilitated the self-branding performances of my informants, which might help them achieve actual or greater worldly success.



Figure 6.6: Search results of *zhuangbi* and *xuanfu* on the Taobao e-platform

“Who you befriend determines who you are”: e-traders’ social capital and social network-based symbolic capital

E-traders also like to show that they are people with wide social connections. They define social networks as precious resources, using words in their everyday language such as “networking resources” (*renmai ziyuan*, 人脉资源), and treating the building and management of these networks as a business, as expressed in phrases such as “dealing in networks” (*jingying renmai*, 经营人脉). Numerous scholars have explored the cultivation and operation of social networks, or *guanxi*, in Chinese society and its relations to human sentiment, ethics, economics and political practices (e.g., Gold, Guthrie and Wank, 2002; Kipnis, 1997; Yan, 1996; Yang, 1994). The anthropologist Mayfair Yang noted that although *guanxi* was something that most Chinese people practiced, it was seldom admitted to publicly. This silence involves the fact that building networks was seen as improper behavior in Chinese society because of the risk of equating this with corruption and bribery. For this reason, Yang argued that it was more appropriate to study *guanxi* through everyday participant observations than through formal interviews as some sociologists of China had done, who had obtained misleading findings that *guanxi* was declining in post-reform China (Yang, 2002; cf. Guthrie, 1999). I agree with Yang’s emphasis on the vitality of *guanxi* practice, but my fieldwork finds that the evolving market economy has turned the practice from a taboo subject to an honorable endeavor in the new century. The following cases show how Chinese

individuals represent their interpersonal ties with the economic, social, cultural and political elites as a marker of one's social competence and employ these "networking resources" to build or enhance their prestige, which ultimately contributes to their construction of enterprising selves.

Guanxi is therefore relevant to cases concerning the neoliberalization of Chinese society. Drawing heavily on Yang's ethnographic data from the 1980s to 90s, the anthropologist Donald Nonini also argued that the *guanxi* practice was persistent in China, but he contended that *guanxi* goes against the thesis of neoliberalization of China. Nonini suggested that the operation of *guanxi* had helped to maintain power-holders' privileges and to marginalize the powerless (e.g., workers and peasants), and this resulted in the rejection by the powerless of ideologies such as market socialism or neoliberalism (Nonini, 2008: 163). While this may largely be the case prior to the 2000s, the market economy became more acceptable to, and even preferred by ordinary Chinese citizens thereafter in many parts of China, particularly in the coastal areas where the private economy has demonstrated more prominent growth. In fact, the pragmatic use of social networks for personal interests is not necessarily incompatible with a neoliberal market economy. In advanced Western liberal societies, people with more social capital also enjoy more advantages in conducting business and finding jobs (Granovetter, 1973; Van Oort, 2015: 80-83). Strong interpersonal skills are appreciated in companies and other types of workplaces (Urciuoli, 2008), and professional relationships may also intersect with personal relationships (Rivera, 2012). In studies of American high-technology start-ups, researchers find a similar correlation between social networks and job promotions (Benner, 2002; Barley and Kunda, 2004). It is thus fair to say that the operation of social networks is not a legitimate criterion to deny the neoliberalization of Chinese society, especially if we consider it to be a form of capital that can be converted into material gains. By advertising their networks, the Chinese e-traders whom I studied are consciously involved in conversions of social capital into economic and symbolic capital. They even offer the social capital that they (pretend to) have as a commodity for sale. Below, I describe my informants' business vis-à-vis social networks and explain how this business satisfies the material and psychological needs of these enterprising businesspeople.

Mr. Qin has utilized social networks for business purposes. Driving a BMW and often taking selfies inside his car, this 27-year-old man had worked in a large

Tmall e-shop that was said to have connections with employees in the Alibaba group (named “*xiao'er*”小二). As I noted in Chapter 3, in the public imagination Alibaba employees are powerful people who control tremendous online resources. E-traders who win their favor can enjoy unlimited customer traffic, priority in joining promotional campaigns on Alibaba e-platforms, and effective advice on business operations. The problem is that few people have real access to these authorities. With connections inherited from his previous job, Qin became a professional broker who connected and mediated between the authorities and the e-traders who wanted to win their favor. Besides Alibaba employees, Qin claimed that he had many “networking resources” in the e-commerce world and other industries of which his clients could make good use. In a public forum that Qin was invited to give a speech, he chose the topic “The networking economy in the internet age.” For the first time I heard him mention the concept of *renmai jingji* (人脉经济), which I translate as “networking economy.”⁶¹ Qin’s definition of this form of economy was very simple: it is an economy based on the operation of social networks. In this economy, individual networks become the means of production, and people who control this means of production are the winners in this era. As Qin claimed, “Nowadays, more and more celebrities use ‘economy’ and ‘network’ together because they realize what determines their successes are their networks. It is not just about financial support or business opportunities, but creative ideas and inspiration. You will never succeed if you befriend a beggar. Always try to build high-end networks! The law of our age is ‘who you befriend determines who you are’.”

Qin’s self-presentation followed this “law” exactly. To facilitate his business and recruit more clients, Qin established an e-commerce club and opened dozens of WeChat online chat groups each having about 500 members. Every day, he posted e-commerce information within these groups and news of his growing business and networks on his WeChat Moments. Some commented that “he cannot refrain himself from performing affectation at every moment.” For instance, in an announcement concerning the opportunities to join Alibaba’s promotional campaign during the Double Eleven Online Shopping Festival, Qin claimed that

⁶¹ Scholars have discussed network economy, *guanxi* capitalism, and market clientelism in China, all of which center on the role of *guanxi* practice in running businesses in the country (Osburg, 2013; Wank, 1996; Yang, 2002). During my fieldwork, I found that my informants adopted the term *renmai* more often than *guanxi*, although both words refer to interpersonal connections. This practice may be because *renmai* is a more positive concept in the Chinese social and cultural contexts, while *guanxi* has been stigmatized as Mayfair Yang (2002) explained.

Alibaba employees had given him a guaranteed quota of 30 places. This statement shocked some newbies and small-sized e-traders and generated admiration for Qin, because it was extremely difficult for them to get the quota through official channels.⁶² In another status update of his WeChat Moments, Qin uploaded a copy of an online conversation in which an e-trader who already had connections to Alibaba employees wanted to make friends with Qin because his Alibaba friends told him that Qin had a wide social network (see Figure 6.7). By presenting this picture, Qin demonstrated that through his personal networks, he had built his reputation as a popular and successful entrepreneur. The paragraph below the conversation was equally important. The information contained in this paragraph was classified as “for [Qin’s] club members only.” But by reading the text, readers could easily determine that it was a quote from an Alibaba administrator who asked other employees to remind their clients to update their e-shop websites with detailed illustrations. Since these details were exclusive to the Alibaba employees and their valued clients, Qin’s exposure of this information indicated his proximity to powerful people.

Qin also frequently paraded his connections to other economic, social, cultural and political elites. He always took photos when he visited a company, factory, start-up incubator, and government department, or when he attended or hosted banquets with visitors. When posting these photos online, he always wrote status updates in a standard format by listing all the names of the hosts or visitors with their occupational backgrounds and by expressing sincere appreciation to them (see Figure 6.8). This impressed my other informants, as one indicated, “Qin is a party animal. His friends are everywhere in China. Everyone is his friend.” However, some informants doubted if Qin actually had so many friends. One e-trader scoffed at the way Qin addressed “true” celebrities with whom it was impossible to have a connection. “You see, he addressed Ma Yun as ‘*Ma Zong*’ (President Ma) on his WeChat Moments just like his ordinary friends. In another status update, he called Liu Jialing (Kar-ling Lau, a famous Hong Kong Chinese actress) ‘*Jialing Jie*’ (Sister Jialing) as if they were close relatives when he used her words to promote his goods. Qin performed affectation very hard to make himself look like an

⁶² Alibaba has established an online system for e-traders to apply for the quota. The selection is based on a full examination of individual e-shops’ rankings, sales volumes, prices, customer reviews and many other factors. In this practice, the company does not charge any fee from e-traders. However, Qin’s quota had a price. Some e-traders believed that Qin and the Alibaba employee who gave him the quota had a collaborative business.

entrepreneur with a high social standing” (See Figure 6.9).⁶³



Figure 6.7: Qin’s online conversation with an e-trader



Figure 6.8: Qin’s banquet with business elites

⁶³ The Chinese title *zong* is short for *zongcai* (总裁) and is equivalent to “president” in English. This title is used to show the speaker’s respect for and friendliness to the addressed audience in a business setting. Currently, many Chinese youths also use this title to name their friends who are economically well-off but do not necessarily hold executive positions in large companies. This is the context in which my informants analyze Qin’s wording.



Figure 6.9: Qin’s promotion of his product by mentioning Kar-ling Lau

If Qin’s friendliness or even flattery shown toward various elites was practiced on one side of the maxim that “who you befriend determines who you are,” then his coldness to non-elites presented the other side. I first met Qin through Mr. Ren, who wanted to become Qin’s apprentice and learn business skills. Ren had made an appointment with Qin several days before we went to see him. However, when we arrived at his office on that day, Qin said that he had some important visitors and asked us to wait in a nearby café. Ren called him twice until he finally came, one and a half hours after our initial appointment time, with a displeased look on his face. As soon as he sat down, Qin told Ren that he had only ten minutes to talk because he needed to take his visitors, a group of government officials from Anhui Province who had come to inspect e-commerce development in Yiwu, out to lunch. Ren seized the moment and requested that Qin become his teacher. Qin asked about Ren’s monthly sales volume at his e-shop. Hearing the figure of 20,000 yuan, Qin turned down the request: “I only take apprentices who can sell at least one million yuan of goods per month.” Ren was shocked. Qin then turned to me. I hurriedly presented him my business card and explained that I was a PhD student from an Australian university who was conducting research on e-traders in Yiwu. Qin smiled when I told him that I had heard his name from many people and asked if I could make an appointment with him for an interview later. He said that he did not have a friend who had a doctoral degree and thought that my research was

interesting. Before he left, Qin asked me to add him to my WeChat for further contacts.

Ren was quite unhappy about Qin's attitude and expressed disdain for his snobbishness. However, in fact, Ren was another Qin in other people's eyes. When he was still in vocational school, some classmates saw him as a shrewd student who tried hard to build relationships with their head teacher and the head of the school by presenting small gifts (e.g., local specialties from his hometown) and behaving in the way that they expected (e.g., as a hardworking and enterprising e-trader). It was said that Qin's self-representation on his Qzone and WeChat Moments aimed to impress the school authorities, and his opportunities to become a class monitor and a model student who received scholarships and interviews from mass media were the result. With these status symbols, he won much respect, especially from the newbies of lower grades. I was used as another resource to help Ren build relationships with his classmates. While I believed our friendship was more a result of mutual recognition, I did sense Ren's use of my personal background to build his reputation. For instance, every time we met his friends or unanticipated visitors, he emphasized my identity as "a PhD studying abroad." Some of his friends disbelieved him and questioned how he could find a friend who had a foreign doctoral degree. After hearing my acknowledgement, they made jokes about Ren by saying that he earned a big face. Ren laughed and did not mind the joke.

Ren's acquiescence revealed his approval of the practical and symbolic values of wide social networks. To become Qin's apprentice Ren hoped to learn more business skills (and to make more "high-end" friends as he told me later). His good relationships with school authorities helped him to obtain honors and some material benefits (in the form of scholarships). Although befriending me brought him no direct benefit, my presence in his social circle enhanced his prestige in the eyes of his peers. Beyond his psychological needs as an enterprising person, Ren was aware that networks could also be converted into material gains. The means of conversion might involve not just direct financial support (e.g., scholarships and loans), but knowledge production and circulation that could be materialized for business purposes. The materialization was evidenced, for instance, by Ren's recommendation of a financial radio program called "Lao Ma's Banquet" (see Figure 6.10) on his WeChat Moments. In it, he wrote a status update that combined the advertisement of the program with his own words: "Join the most powerful social circle to gain big shots' priceless wisdom! Networking with successful

people will help you learn cutting-edge knowledge and inspiration to build your own successful entrepreneurship!” Obsessed with the power of social networks, Ren integrated the building and display of networks into his project of making an enterprising self.



课程介绍:

52期音频, 每期30分钟

接下来一年的每个周日:

与“中国巴菲特们”共进午餐, 分享商界大佬天价智慧;

盘点消息、解读市场行情, 为您的财富管理出谋划策;

Figure 6.10: “Lao Ma’s Banquet,” an advertisement Ren posted on his WeChat Moments. This paid radio program was inspired by American business magnate Warren Buffett’s lunch auction. Its major selling point was to provide listeners with updated market information and analysis, and financial management advice.

“Think and behave like a new age entrepreneur”: e-traders’ cultural capital and knowledge-based symbolic capital

As noted, knowledge, inspiration, wisdom, vision, creativity, entrepreneurial quality, and high-tech skills are the terms that my e-traders often use in their everyday life, even though many of them have not received a higher education. By representing themselves as intellectual subjects who possess or desire the above drives and skills, which constitute the cultural capital that is treasured in present-day China, they wish to bolster their image as trailblazers in the Chinese knowledge economy.

To Pierre Bourdieu, cultural capital is a series of class-based preferences, experiences, and knowledge that is passed down generationally and in educational settings. It is manifested in three forms. The embodied form presupposes embodiment and incorporation of certain dispositions, and it cannot be transmitted instantaneously. To acquire this cultural capital, individuals who do not imbibe it

from their parents and schooling in childhood must work on themselves to assimilate the targeted cultural entity over time. The objectified form comprises properties that can be transmitted for economic profit and symbolically conveys one's possession of cultural capital through ownership. The institutionalized form refers to the institutional recognition of individuals' cultural capital by conferring academic credentials or professional qualifications (Bourdieu, 1986). I found all of these forms in the course of my informants' accumulation of cultural capital, despite their different socioeconomic conditions. Bourdieu largely confined his concept of cultural capital to artistic subjects, whereas other scholars have expanded it to cover scientific knowledge and technical skills (Archer et al., 2015; DiMaggio and Bonikowski, 2008; Yuen et al., 2018). This study uses the concept to include many intellectual ideas and practical skills that are acknowledged in the neoliberalizing Chinese economy and society. I show what constitutes cultural capital in the Yiwu local e-commerce world is not only the ideas and skills promoted by the top business elites (e.g., Ma Yun and Ma Huateng) but also those generated by grassroots e-traders, which become legitimate discourses and practices in the name of entrepreneurial creativity and innovation.

Let us return again to Mr. Qin, who parades the cultural capital of “the internet age.” His idea of a “networking economy” was well received in local start-up forums, as some of my informants also began to use this term in everyday life after listening to his speeches. In our private conversation, I asked Qin if he created the concept on his own or learned it from other people. He responded that he invented it himself by extracting his observations of local e-commerce circles and the larger business world. He explained that “To do marketing in the e-commerce world, you have to train yourself to be capable of abstracting and theorizing your observations. That makes you look fashionable and attractive. Ma Yun is a typical expert in this.” I then questioned him on how to “theorize” observations. He answered that it required some effort. To build this capacity, Qin suggested that one could study the ideas of renowned entrepreneurs and e-commerce professionals through printed and online materials. He said he devoted much of his spare time to reading articles on several websites and WeChat Public Accounts (*weixin gongzhonghao*, 微信公众号) that publish news reports and specialized analyses on the e-commerce world. In his office, he also had a three-tier bookshelf. Books on the first tier were mainly biographies of famous Chinese and foreign entrepreneurs. The second-tier books concerned the trends of Chinese economic development and the global internet

industry. The third tier held books on e-commerce skills and e-business management, as well as a collection of a major e-business magazine called *Maijia* (卖家, with its own English translation as E-Commerce Marketing). Qin claimed that reading these online articles, books and magazines not only enabled him to gain a better understanding of the business world and a grasp of many e-commerce skills, but also helped him develop an ability to analyze information in the way that experienced internet entrepreneurs were used to do. “This way of thinking is simple and clear but inspirational. Different people may have different names for it, but I think that is what internet thinking is.”

But a more efficient way to learn this “internet thinking” was to join the circles of internet business elites and communicate with them directly. Qin succeeded at this, as he had established a wide social network with these elites. For instance, through his exchanges with Alibaba employees, he believed he learned a high-end insider’s view concerning online market development and trends in China and around the world. One of the trends was that the market would become more “audience-driven” (*shouzhong qudong*, 受众驱动). He explained this basically meant market demands created by customer needs, and the term was therefore equivalent to the ideas of “market-driven” or “customer-driven.” He intentionally used the neologism on his WeChat Moments to mark the distinctness of the “mobile internet economy” (*yidong hulianwang jingji*, 移动互联网经济) that was built on the popular use of smart phones. In one status update, Qin asked if anyone knew the meaning of “audience-driven,” which was followed by his indirect answer that did not straightforwardly explain that it was the market dynamics generated by customer needs but shifted to emphasize that this concept revealed the “essence” of the current “mobile internet economy.” Next to this assertion, Qin enumerated numerous economic forms with buzzwords that he believed characterized “audience-driven,” such as “fan economy” (*fensi jingji*, 粉丝经济), “communal economy” (*shequn jingji*, 社群经济), “atomized economy” (*geti jingji*, 个体经济), “sharing economy” (*fexiang jingji*, 分享经济), “loser economy” (*diaosi jingji*, 屌丝经济), and “big buyer economy” (*danke jingji*, 单客经济). He provided no concrete explanations for any of these terms, but stressed that these economic forms opened a door for new age entrepreneurs to attain wealth. (All translations are based on my understanding of the original Chinese buzzwords and the context of Qin’s language use, see Figure 6.11)



Figure 6.11: Qin’s status update about “audience-driven”.

I saw that many mutual friends “liked” this update. However, some expressed confusion in private exchanges. Miss Zhou complained that she did not understand most of the terms that Qin discussed, and she did not know why he put the terms together. “What the hell is he talking about? Is ‘*shequn jingji*’ meaning an economy operating on communities? Fans also constitute communities, so why did he separate ‘*fensi jingji*’ from ‘*shequn jingji*’? Why put ‘*geti jingji*’ in contrast to ‘*fenxiang jingji*’?⁶⁴ What are ‘*shouzhong qudong*’ and ‘*danke jingji*’? I have never heard of them! Qin is simply performing affectation!” I asked Zhou why she “liked” Qin’s update if she did not actually understand and agree with him, and Zhou responded that she appreciated his endeavors of self-branding.

Nowadays, to be an entrepreneur you have to package yourself, especially an internet entrepreneur. The internet world is full of creativity, and people compete for attention by throwing out new ideas and technologies. Under this pressure, even if you don’t have a creative brain, you have to pretend that you do. Otherwise, you will lose out. To my knowledge, one way to pretend this is

⁶⁴ In the context of the Chinese political economy, a direct translation of “*geti jingji*” should be self-employed business sector, which is part of the officially defined private economy. Because Qin juxtaposed the term with “*fenxiang jingji*,” which emphasized the sharing spirit among social members, I translated it as “atomized economy.” However, Zhou might not sense this meaning. My translation of “*danke jingji*” as “big buyer economy” followed the same logic, since it was paired with *diaosi*/loser economy (on the translation of *diaosi* as losers, see Szablewicz, 2014).

to play with words. That means inventing new concepts or speaking of the concepts promoted by big shots. I think that is what Qin is doing. He works very hard to package himself as a successful and all-knowing entrepreneur.

Qin also talked about self-branding occasionally, but he saw his adoption of the concept more as a capacity for theorizing or keeping up with trends, which ultimately reflected his embodiment of internet thinking. In his own words, this embodiment was the result of his endeavors of self-improvement, an effort to train himself to “think and behave like a new age entrepreneur.” In fact, his reading of online articles, books and magazines were also believed not only to broaden his knowledge and vision but to motivate him to become a more confident and persistent person, as he learned many entrepreneurs’ stories of how their hard work helped them start from scratch and succeed after numerous failures. To stress the important role of these online and printed materials in shaping his personality, Qin described them as “chicken soup” which guided him to think positively about himself and the world. Speeches or talks given by top internet entrepreneurs such as Ma Yun were also regarded as “chicken soup” because they portrayed a bright future for him and other grassroots e-traders. This unusual self-help literature and training courses reproduced Qin as a self-governed and self-motivated entrepreneur (cf. Dunn, 2016; Rimke, 2000).

The embodied cultural capital (e.g., internet thinking and positive thinking) was not the only form that Qin possessed. Having a shelf of books and magazines addressing complex topics (such as the Chinese and global economy and the global internet economy) was uncommon among the e-traders I knew, since most of them were not well-educated. More importantly, having the spare time to read this literature and being able to understand its content while simultaneously continuing to earn substantial amounts of money further established Qin’s distinctiveness in his circle of grassroots e-traders. Several other e-traders praised Qin’s reading habits and broad vision when they saw the bookshelf in his office, compared to their own lack of time. That was also the image Qin wanted to deliver. Once, a reporter from a local newspaper came to his office for an interview. After the interview ended, the reporter took a photo of Qin reading a book on the Chinese internet economy at Qin’s suggestion. Similar to printed publications, subscribing to the “right” e-commerce websites and the WeChat Public Accounts signaled a certain cultural elitism. There was a general perception that how much one knew

about high-quality e-commerce online resources indicated his or her degree of involvement in the e-commerce world. Qin was well recognized for his knowledge in this regard, but I was often looked down upon by my informants at the beginning of my fieldwork for not being aware of these important websites and public accounts. This type of knowledge became a status symbol in the e-traders' group. Qin's professional qualifications also signified his status, as he had been conferred two certificates by the China E-Commerce Association, one as a senior lecturer on e-commerce and the other as an e-business operator.

Average and low earners also wanted to show off their education. Mr. Dong, for example, was also from Shanxi Province, but unlike Ren, he moved to Yiwu first as a migrant worker with a secondary education. He started his e-business after befriending Ren and relying on Ren for e-commerce skills until he met many other e-traders. Despite his inadequate education and small e-business, Dong was seen as an aggressive performer of affectation by his friends. Ren described him as "all talk." It was easy to notice Dong's use of all types of e-commerce jargon and internet buzzwords in everyday communication. To appreciate someone who had talent, he always used the term *ganhuo* (干货, literally "dry goods," meaning solid, useful, practical and concise information with no fluff). To refer to someone who had a high status, he called that person *daka* (大咖, big shot). To present his ideas and experiences to others, he always described his act as *fenxiang* (分享, to share with), which implied his kindness and sense of social responsibility. Practical experience of e-business operations were addressed as *shicao* (实操). When discussing the details of *shicao*, he filled his sentences with a good number of English abbreviations even though his English was poor. Besides concepts and abbreviations, Dong frequently posted different kinds of formulas for e-commerce operations on his WeChat Moments and Qzone, and considered them the ultimate truth of e-business success. For instance, Dong had once discussed the issue of main product selection for individual e-shops and emphasized that e-traders should make some effort to test a selected item. Dong said that the most important criterion to measure an item's marketability was its rate of being added to wish lists and carts by customers (*shoucang jiagou lv*, 收藏加购率). If it was rated between 8 percent and 10 percent, the item could be seen as a potential best seller. If the rate exceeded 10 percent, it would be a super best seller. After explaining this, Dong provided his formula for calculating this rate:

shoucang jiagou li= (the number of customer who add the product to their wish lists+ the number of customers who add it to their carts)/the total number of visitors to the product's website.

Many mutual friends “liked” this status update on Dong’s WeChat Moments and reproduced his words on their own, but Mr. Ren commented to me that this formula was nonsense. As we had seen Dong post many other formulas about sales volumes, pricing, and business promotion, Ren regarded all of these simply as performances of affectation. “If you are an experienced e-trader, you will know what he says is just common sense. For example, your price multiplied by your volume makes your total transactions, isn’t this something everyone knows?” However, when asked why so many people liked his commonsense formulations, Ren pointed to Dong’s self-packaging work and the impact of Chinese exam-oriented education on people’s way of thinking.

I think there is a collective mentality among Chinese people that they believe formulas are scientific laws (*kexue guilü*, 科学规律) that can help them obtain good results in a more efficient way. When we were in school, teachers always told us to memorize the formulas and learn how to apply them in accordance with the contexts of exam questions. Every subject has its laws. Mathematics, physics, chemistry.....even the exam of Chinese language and literature has standard answers which can be thought out through a right (standardized) way of thinking. Many newbies feel that doing e-business is difficult. If there are some laws to follow, the business will become easier to do, and they may also succeed more rapidly. Considering this rationale, Dong packaged common sense as formulas that were welcomed by the newbies because they appeared scientific and authoritative. The term “formula” itself implies a kind of scientificity.

Ren was discussing how language and contextualized rhetoric could be utilized to serve self-branding, as they might help the narrators to make claims to truth and build individual authority among peers. Bourdieu (1991) argues that language is not only a means of communication but also a medium of power through which individuals pursue private interests and display practical competence.

Bourdieuian-inspired scholars have explored how individuals deploy linguistic resources to empower themselves and build new social identities (e.g., Lan, 2003; Zhang, 2005). In Dong's case, although his e-business was small, his stylish and eloquent speaking of e-commerce jargon, internet buzzwords and "scientized" formulas added a certain value to his self-enterprise. He had been identified as a promising e-trader in the Taobao village where he resided, and was invited to give lectures to new comers at several start-up forums through which he built connections with other e-traders and businesspeople from other industries. By the end of my fieldwork, Dong had started a WeChat business with partners found in the forums.

Despite his criticism of Dong's performance, Ren paralleled Dong in many instances. He too enjoyed displaying his knowledge of e-commerce jargon and internet buzzwords, and was eager to keep up with trends and fashions. When giving speeches at start-up forums or writing on his Qzone and WeChat Moments, he often quoted a remark by Ma Yun: "Apart from our dreams, the only constant in life is change." Following this statement, Ren told his audience, "Every day I spend two hours on studying [e-commerce]. The e-commerce world changes too fast. If we don't stay caught up, we will be left behind... These days I only sleep for four or five hours. I feel guilty if I waste time sleeping. I spend most of my time reading, observing and analyzing online information to upgrade my way of thinking... In a rapidly evolving world, always be ready to change your mind and keep updated." Ren's words revealed his anxiety about and desire for self-improvement, which also resonated with the advertisement of the "Lao Ma Banquet" that was designed for people who "thirsted for knowledge and self-enhancement."

However, what interested me most was Ren's discussion on the different ways of thinking between the rich and the poor. In one status update with his goods and selfies in the background, Ren wrote:

The poor are poor because they spend their hard-earned money on consumption; the rich are rich because they reinvest their money. The poor's thinking is to keep their money in their pockets; the rich's thinking is to maximize their investment profits. Mind-changing is the starting point for success [which was accompanied by a smiling face emoji] (see Figure 6.12).



Figure 6.12: Ren’s WeChat status update discussing the opposite ways of thinking between the rich and the poor.

Ren had addressed this issue several times. Every time, he attributed rich people’s wealth and success to their “advanced” way of thinking, and blamed poor people for their own “backwardness” in their thinking. Ren also criticized the poor for their laziness and lack of foresight, and praised the rich for their industriousness. By contrasting the two groups in terms of financial management and productivity, Ren generated a discourse resembling the American thesis of a “culture of poverty” in the 1960s and 1970s which was criticized for blaming victims and paying little attention to structural factors (Banfield, 1970; Harrington, 1962; Lewis, 1959). Considering that Ren himself was not a rich businessman, his opposing attitudes towards the two groups indicated his self-positioning. As mentioned above, Ren was born into a poor rural family and had suffered discrimination for that in his home community and in Yiwu. These experiences had shaped his worldview. The way to realize his dreams, as Ren indicated in his words and behavior, was to work on and assimilate himself with the dispositions of the rich (especially wealthy internet entrepreneurs). For Ren, these dispositions included crafting and sustaining a striving self, building and making good use of wide social networks with elites, as well as acting within the social imaginations of internet entrepreneurs on a daily basis. Considered from this perspective, Ren’s writing of status updates and

engaging in public discussions regarding the different ways of thinking by different groups were the work that he performed to refashion himself according to the above dispositions. This work demonstrated his strong identification with the “inspirational and industrious” elites and his departure from the supposedly short-sighted and lazy poor. Furthermore, since Ren had been informed by his peers that addressing the differences in the ways of thinking and behaving between elites and ordinary people distinguished internet entrepreneurs from other populations (such as Qin and Dong’s inventions and uses of neologisms, e-commerce jargon and internet buzzwords), his actions could also be understood as part of the everyday performance of e-trading professionals. In the end, both the imagined distinctions (e.g., the rich/elite’s way of thinking and behaving) and the actual practice of drawing distinctions served as the brand of enterprising e-traders like Ren in the Chinese business world.

Conclusion

Ren’s words and behavior represent a typical endeavor by the e-traders to embody and incorporate dispositions that may establish or maintain their status in the Chinese e-commerce world and the larger business world. These dispositions basically concern how to act as successful modern internet entrepreneurs, which include the appropriate ways to earn or sustain one’s economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital. Performing affectation is one of the most popular means to achieve these goals. It works as a technique of the self for e-traders to refashion themselves into enterprising subjects. To a certain extent, performing affectation has itself become a disposition that guides the performers to learn the other presupposed dispositions of internet entrepreneurs and to display them with some manipulations and exaggerations.

This chapter has explored the practice of *zhuangbi*/performing affectation, the Chinese analogue of self-branding in the West, among a group of e-traders with different socioeconomic conditions in Yiwu. Since the city is at the forefront of competitive commercial activity and the private sector dominates its local economy, e-traders who live and conduct business in this environment manifest a strong neoliberal ethos. These individuals internalize the market logic and display characteristics such as self-reliance, self-sufficiency, self-responsibility and strategic calculations in their businesses and everyday life. This ethos and its manifestations are also apparent in the e-traders’ performances of affectation in

which one's economic capital (e.g., earning and spending power, economic independence, and desire for wealth), social capital (interpersonal networks), cultural capital (e.g., use of language, reading habits, and way of thinking), as well as the symbolic capital that builds on these forms of capital all become their means to articulate neoliberal entrepreneurship. By examining how e-traders attain or generate these different forms of capital to engage in self-promotion, this chapter also shows that the flow of different forms of capital sometimes can transcend class boundaries and how entrepreneurs who emerge from the lower classes may contribute to the construction and diffusion of certain types of cultural and symbolic capital. These individualistic expressions of entrepreneurship conform to the contemporary Chinese collective values that emphasize worldly success that is defined by one's social and economic status. By parading individuality in a homogeneous form to meet a uniform social expectation, the e-traders' performances of affectation reveal a distinct path of individualization in China that is shaped by the tensions and collusions among neoliberalism, consumerism, and the country's cultural traditions and social legacies.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Why do the e-traders work/perform so hard?

I would like to conclude this dissertation by telling the story of a local e-trader Miss Zhang. I first met Zhang in a cafe bar. She was introduced to me by her high school classmate Miss Zhu. When Zhang arrived, Zhu looked her up and down. “You seem to have thinned down a lot and look very tired, do you sleep well these days?” Zhang heaved a sigh and said that she only slept for four or five hours a day because of her e-business. Zhu urged her to take more rest, stressing that health was more important than money. Staring at Zhang, Zhu recalled that many news reports now described e-trading as one of the most dangerous occupations in China, which had generated a number of occupational diseases and even led to death through overwork. I also sensed Zhang’s tiredness, as she yawned all the time and found it difficult to concentrate in our conversation. I suggested to Zhu that it would be better for Zhang to have a rest, and I would keep her contact information and talk to her next time. Zhu agreed. But Zhang smiled bitterly, saying that she had no time to rest. She would have to go to her office to package goods and upload new products online probably until midnight.

Several days later I visited Zhang’s office. Zhang ran a Taobao e-shop together with her friend selling women’s clothing, which is not only the largest but also the most competitive submarket on the Taobao e-platform. To attract newcomers as well as retain patrons, she kept updating her list of goods every week. This demanded heavy work. From selecting, photographing to writing descriptions for and promoting the new items, every step asked for a large amount of time and energy, in addition to some daily routines, such as customer service and packaging. That was why Miss Zhang often needed to work till midnight. Zhang had two employees help her with the daily routines, but she said she could only afford two because of the rising cost of employees in Yiwu. Also for this reason, and considering their expertise in creative writing and photography, Zhang and her friend took photos and wrote product descriptions on their own instead of buying services from professional groups. In so doing, they saved at least 20,000 yuan for the first year. But as we have seen, the cost in fatigue was also big. Having run the e-shop for two years, Zhang described that the e-business had put her in a situation that she always felt tired and sleepy but had to stay wakeful. She elaborated, “Every day I have so many tasks to finish. I feel responsible to complete all these and cannot relax, otherwise my e-shop will go wrong. When it goes wrong, all my past efforts will come to naught. It is really stressful.” Apart from sleep loss and stress, e-business also disturbed her meal timing. Zhang only ate twice a day and almost all her meals were

takeaway food because she believed she did not have time to cook; when she was busy, she might even have no time to eat. This irregular eating habit caused a stomach disorder in Zhang and she had to carry stomach medicine wherever she went. Once she poked fun at herself, “Young people in China today all worry about their weight, but I don’t. My e-business makes me feel no appetite and have no time to eat. I don’t need to take diet pills or do exercises that my weight decrease automatically.”

Later on I stayed in Zhang’s e-shop for participant observation. I found that “I have no time” had become her mantra. Zhang’s friends and employees portrayed her as a person so diligent in her work that she often forgot to eat and sleep (*fei qin wang shi*, 废寝忘食). It is true that Zhang is diligent, but she never forgets to eat and sleep. Instead, she intentionally appropriates time for sleeping and other forms of rest, as well as that for meals, for her e-business. Despite tiredness and discomfort, she disciplines herself to concentrate on the business and leaves no time for any recreational activities. From the day I knew Zhang, she had not taken one day off except the Spring Festival when the logistics industry closed down for the holidays. Even during the holiday, she was ready to answer customer inquiries and accept orders through her smart phone. Zhang often joked that she devoted her youth to Taobao, “Since the day I opened my e-shop, I have spent most of my time on it. I don’t have leisure time. I don’t have holidays. Because I stay too long with my computer, I don’t have many friends. I don’t have time to go out and socialize with other people. When I am busy, I don’t even have time to go to the toilet.”

In reflecting on Miss Zhang’s mantra of everyday busyness, I think that while it may be a good portrait of her daily routine, it is also a ritual performance through which Zhang tries to fashion and brand herself as an enterprising subject. In her narrative, this enterprising subject bears the virtues of self-reliance, self-discipline, self-responsibility and industriousness. These are the individual characteristics that define a successful entrepreneur in the Chinese e-commerce economy. Zhang is certainly aware of the costs to become an entrepreneur of this kind. Readers may recall Mr. Wu’s experience I presented in Chapter 2. He also partakes in this daily busyness and has indicated his willingness to sacrifice personal health for his career. Zhang’s devotion to her business implies that she has made the same choice. What underlies their commitments, however, are their hopes and aspirations. By establishing his own career, Wu hoped to prove himself as a high-quality entrepreneur and rid himself of the stigma of being born a rural person (see Chapter 4). Born into an urban working-class family, Zhang does not need to worry about the same prejudice against rural citizens that concerns Wu. What

she hopes for is to live a free and affluent life. Zhang has several wealthy high school classmates who spend much time traveling inside China and abroad and enjoy posting their photos online. I have heard Zhang several times speak of building her financial capacity to free herself from work and have more leisure activities after she viewed her friends' WeChat Moments. As she said, "The biggest freedom for a person is to have the economic condition (*jingji tiaojian*, 经济条件) to do whatever she wants."

Like Zhang and Wu, I found most of the e-traders I met in Yiwu incredibly hardworking. But they kept complaining about the laboriousness and pressures of e-business. I was always puzzled over why the e-traders stuck to their occupation despite such discontent, and why they worked so hard, even at the expense of health, leisure, or friendship, like in Miss Zhang's case. The most obvious answer to these questions is that they make money through the laborious business. That is true, but we may need to consider other factors. There is a long and prevalent cultural image of Chinese people as tireless workers inside and outside China. The anthropologist Stevan Harrell (1985) has questioned this cultural stereotype and examined why the Chinese work so hard. He noted that some Western observers believed the Chinese were socialized to work hard since their childhood. While this assertion might be correct in some cases, Harrell wrote that empirical research had found contradictory examples that people did not act upon their belief. He also noted that other observers resorted to theories of human nature as "economic man" and emphasized the importance of material incentives in shaping the Chinese people's industriousness. But there were also many examples where people worked hard without immediate material rewards, or they chose not to become industrious even when the rewards were in sight. To explain such complexities, Harrell proposed that the Chinese embraced an ethic of entrepreneurship that led to a long-term quest to gain security for their families. He specified the peculiarities in the Chinese entrepreneurial ethic, which emphasized long-term security over short-term monetary gain, and focused more on the collective (especially family) interests than individual benefits (Harrell, 1985: 216-217; see also Basu, 1991a, 1991b; for a critique of this view, see Greenhalgh, 1994).

Harrell's thesis has some explanatory power relevant to my case studies. I found e-traders from a rural background, as well as the urban poor often had a wish to do well by their families through doing e-businesses. They expected that the businesses would provide their family members with long-term security and help them move up the social ladder in their home communities (see, for example, Mr. Ren's case in Chapter 6). On the other hand, these rural and urban working-class youths, like their peers born into

urban middle-class families, regarded the e-businesses as their personal careers, as illustrated by Mr. Wu's case. For these e-traders, mostly in their 20s and 30s, the businesses offered not only access to wealth but also a channel for self-enhancement and self-fulfillment. Miss Zhang's quest for financial freedom and a leisure-class lifestyle discloses the young traders' desire for self-liberation. The emphasis on the self reflects a process of individualization of Chinese youths in the post-reform era (Yan, 2009a; Hansen and Svarverud, 2010). Facilitated by the profound expansion of the grassroots neoliberal market economy and consumerism, this ongoing process has increasingly shifted the new generation's entrepreneurial ethic from collectivistic to more individualistic.

Individualistic entrepreneurialization of Chinese e-traders

Throughout the dissertation I also show that the Chinese practitioners of e-commerce are undergoing another socio-psychological process that I call *entrepreneurialization*. It is a process through which these business actors develop a common entrepreneurial culture informed by the market logic, and apply economic reasoning to all spheres of their life. I borrow this idea from Foucauldian scholarship on neoliberal subjectivity. According to this scholarship, in societies that embrace a neoliberal technology of governing, citizens are encouraged to become self-reliant "entrepreneurs of themselves" who can maximize their quality of life through the rational choices that they make in their own right (Miller and Rose, 2008: 49; Ong, 2006: 501-502; Rose, 1992). When this ethos of enterprise is elevated to be the generalized principle of functioning in a society, which means "the whole ensemble of individual life be structured as the pursuit of a range of different enterprises, [including] a person's relation to his or her self, his or her professional activity, family, personal property, environment, etc., are all to be given the ethos and structure of the enterprise-form," it will lead to the entrepreneurialization of the given society (Gordon, 1991: 42).

Chinese society has largely experienced this process. Celebrity entrepreneurs and enterprises, such as Ma Yun and his Alibaba Group, have been held as role models for Chinese individuals and businesses (Davies, 2010; particularly for e-traders, see Chapter 3 in this dissertation). Rural migrant workers are eager to learn self-improvement techniques (e.g., social skills and lifestyles) so as to adapt to the urban market economy (Jacka, 2006; Pun, 2003; Yan, 2008). University graduates and urban professionals become more autonomous and calculative in making choices of employment (Hanser, 2002; Hoffman, 2010). Even state officials are increasingly

involved in state and semi-state businesses that are entrepreneurial in the sense of profit-seeking, risk-taking and productive, rather than rent-seeking, speculative or profiteering (Duckett, 1998). This dissertation demonstrates that the e-traders are also learning to be self-reliant, self-responsible, and self-managed entrepreneurs in their section of Chinese society.

Yet, scholars are still trying to differentiate the path of entrepreneurialization in China from the neoliberal path in Western advanced liberal societies. One significant difference they find is in the degree of individualization. This is important because neoliberalism posits that market individualism is the key to economic and social progress, and that the best outcomes for society will only be realized when governments retreat from economic and social interventions. Self-responsible individuals, in turn, will govern themselves according to market principles of discipline, efficiency, and competitiveness (Ong, 2006a: 277). In the Chinese case, although neoliberal deregulation of the economy has urged individuals to become more industrious, self-disciplined, calculating and pragmatic, they are confined by the authoritarian state to exercise their agency only within private life and economic activities in the public sphere (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2010: xix). Yunxiang Yan believes people socialized in this environment can hardly become “enterprising individuals” as defined by Foucauldian scholars, but “striving individuals” who are not fully individualized because of their lack of claim to political rights and experience in political participation (Yan, 2013: 283). Lisa Hoffman recognizes that Chinese individuals are enterprising, but she stresses what they pursue in their careers are not just personal gain but also collective interests, such as contributing to the strength of the nation. To her, the concern for the well-being of the nation reveals the persistent influence of socialist-collective ideology on the patriotic professionals (Hoffman, 2010: 10-11).⁶⁵

I agree with these scholars that the Chinese state is still imposing political control over its citizens and that many Chinese individuals may still feel value in, or are obliged by, some socialist-collective notions. Mr. Liu’s belief in the role of a socialist morality against labor exploitation (see Chapter 4) and Mr. Hong’s identification with the Maoist idea that subalterns can try every means to survive when rulers are immoral, repressive, and exploitative (see Chapter 5) are cases supportive of this observation. However, I

⁶⁵ However, it is not uncommon to find citizens in (more) neoliberal societies have concerns for the nation. Aihwa Ong notes that in East and Southeast Asian societies neoliberal ethics of self-responsible citizenship are often linked to social obligations to build the nation. For instance, ordinary citizens in India, Malaysia and Singapore are expected to develop new mindsets and build digital capacities in service of national strength (Ong, 2006b: 502).

would suggest that, in general, e-traders in Yiwu, who are mostly post-1980s and 90s rural migrants, are much more individualistic than the populations that have been studied by the above research, such as Hoffman's post-1970s urban professionals in Dalian city and Yan's peasant interlocutors of similar ages in Heilongjiang province.

In her study of Chinese urban professionals, Hoffman finds that they often take national interests into consideration when choosing jobs. Some took positions in state institutions as a way of devoting themselves to the Chinese nation. Some got employed in foreign companies but claimed that they would leave for domestic ones after learning business and management skills (Hoffman, 2010: 96-102). I seldom find this kind of national loyalty in my informants. Most e-traders I met in Yiwu ran their e-business on Taobao, Tmall and 1688 wholesale online marketplace, which are all operated by the "Chinese" e-commerce giant Alibaba Group, but they were also trying Amazon, eBay, and Wish.⁶⁶ Behind their passion was a consensus in the Chinese e-commerce industry that transnational e-business was the next "Blue Ocean Market" (*lanhai shichang*, 蓝海市场), meaning a market with great potential but not yet exploited.⁶⁷ In their pursuit for profits, the traders were completely indifferent about the "nationalities" of e-platforms.

The Alibaba Group is an even more illustrative case. Many e-traders knew that SoftBank Group and Yahoo are the two largest shareholders of the giant (see Chapter 3), and they sometimes joked that the largest shares of profits in the Chinese e-commerce market went to the Japanese and the Americans, while the Chinese took only the leftovers. But this common perception did not stop them from doing e-business on Alibaba e-platforms. As one explained, "The business world is always unequal. Some people get more and some get less. As long as you have a share, don't complain, take your share. If you don't want to continue, many people are ready to take your seat." Some e-traders like Mr. Huang further suggested that Chinese entrepreneurs should learn from Alibaba's case. It was said that when Ma Yun first established the company, he had asked many domestic entrepreneurs for investment but nobody thought it was a promising project. But Japanese and American investors saw the prospect of e-commerce in China. "Chinese investors should broaden their horizons and be more open

⁶⁶ Wish is a mobile and web e-platform based in San Francisco, the United States. Its business model is similar to Alibaba and eBay. Small businesses and manufacturers can sell goods directly to consumers across the globe by opening e-shops on the e-platform.

⁶⁷ This commonly used concept is first developed by business theorists W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne in their best-selling book *Blue Ocean Strategy* (2005). The opposite of Blue Ocean Market is Red Ocean Market, where competitors fight for business domination and turn the ocean/market space red with blood. Chinese domestic online market was considered as a Red Ocean Market by the e-traders in 2015.

to new ideas.”

While in general my informants’ critiques of “domestic” entrepreneurs and enterprises are soft and apolitical, they have some criticisms with political implications. When they accuse Alibaba e-platform administrators of acting like government officials, they are denouncing both the enterprise and the Chinese state for bureaucratism and authoritarianism (see Chapter 3). Baidu, the company that runs the largest search engine in China, is the biggest target for satire among my informants. Before Google left the Chinese market in 2010, the two search engines were both popular among e-traders who had started their e-business at that time, as indicated by a saying that “Searching for domestic issues in Baidu and foreign issues in Google” (*neishi bu jue wen baidu, waishi bu jue wen guge*, 内事不决问百度, 外事不决问谷歌). The sudden closure of Google broke their information searching habits. More disturbingly, they learned from this event that Baidu had provided much private information of its users to the Chinese government, while Google was forced to leave because it refused to do so, in addition to the fact that they already knew: Baidu has a stricter censorship on blocking “sensitive” information. Comparing the two, my informants considered Google as a respectable company but dismissed Baidu as a “running dog” (*zougou*, 走狗) of the Chinese government. Some intentionally chose not to use Baidu but other search engines, such as 360 search and Sogou.

The Wei Zexi event (魏则西事件) in April 2016 further stoked outrage among my informants. Wei was a 21-year old Chinese college student in Shaanxi province. He died after receiving experimental treatment for synovial sarcoma at the Second Hospital of the Beijing Armed Police Corps, which he learned of from a promoted result on Baidu (Ramzy, 2016). Like other Chinese netizens, many e-traders I knew condemned Baidu for its advertising practices, which they believed caused Wei’s death. They shared news of the event on their WeChat Moments and made comments like “Baidu is poisonous, users may die by using it!” and “This unscrupulous company has done so much evildoing!” The company came under fire again in March 2018 when its CEO Li Yanhong declared in a public forum that Chinese people were less sensitive about privacy and were willing to exchange their personal data for convenience and efficiency (Liang, 2018). Li’s view drew strong reactions from Chinese netizens. I saw many e-traders express disagreement on their WeChat Moments. Some said “I am not willing!” Some questioned Li by asking “Who told you we are willing to give up our data?” One angry trader wrote “Li Yanhong, you’d better fuck yourself!” My follow-up

conversations with the e-traders found that Li irritated them for two reasons. First, they felt Li disrespected their rights. And second, his words generated worries about their own material interests, especially state taxation of small e-business, which would become possible when e-platform giants broke their promises and provided sales figures of e-traders to the government.

The e-traders' indifference to the nationalities of e-platforms and their reflections on the entrepreneurial environment in China indicate that they are rational individuals with few fetishized understandings of the nation-state. Their anger and resistance to the state and corporate sector's infringement of their rights to information, privacy and private property further demonstrate that they have a sense that they are individuals who are entitled to civil liberties and who have a certain capacity to protect these liberties. I do not want to overstate that the e-traders have become dissident citizens who have full political consciousness and participate in political movements actively. But they are clearly unlike Lisa Hoffman's professionals who are obsessed with the nation. Neither are they politically unaware striving individuals, as Yunxiang Yan describes, who have no sense of political rights and no experience in political participation at all.

Why do these post-1980s and 90s e-traders appear more resistant to socialist-collective values and more conscious of their rights? This may have a relationship to the generational differences in the degree of individualization. Existing literature has indicated that China's post-1980s and 90s generations are much more individualistic in values than their counterparts born in the 1960s and 70s (Lian, 2014; Sun and Wang, 2010). In particular, scholars have found high support for "neoliberalism" among Chinese youths, and some surveys have shown over 50 percent of post-1980s youths agreeing that individual interests should take precedence over state or collective interests (Rosen, 2014). The country's transition from a planned economy to a more market-oriented economy, the rise of consumerism, and the globalization of Euro-American popular culture are considered as the crucial factors that trigger the above value changes. These dynamics of economic, social and cultural transformations are certainly important for us to understand the larger context in which the individualization of the post-1980s and 90s e-traders take place. However, I would argue that educational background and experience with market economy are more specific factors in shaping these young people's individualistic enterprising selfhood.

In exploring the source of her professionals' patriotic ideology, Hoffman finds that it is through the moral education and career guidance provided by the universities that these people learn that they should consider the interests of the nation when making job

choices (Hoffman, 2010: 94-96). It has been widely reported that the Chinese Party-state has successfully instilled patriotism, nationalism and other socialist-collective values into the young generation through educational institutions (e.g., Zhao, 1998; Wang, 2008; Wang, 2013; but other studies have found the opposite, see e.g., Naftali, 2018; Qian, Xu and Chen, 2017). However, I find this mechanism largely ineffective on my informants. As mentioned in the Introduction and also implied in the subsequent chapters, the majority of the e-traders I met in Yiwu have not received a higher education. Originating from the countryside of inland provinces, many of them moved to cities as migrant workers after graduating from high school (or secondary technical schools). They became e-traders only after saving enough money through manual labor. Some traders have studied in vocational colleges and universities, but the quality of education in these institutions is far from that of elite universities that were included in the 985 and the 211 national projects. Considering that the Party-state tends to impose more ideological control over elite academic institutions and students (Bregnbæk, 2016), but pays less attention to the non-elite ones, such as vocational institutions (Woronov, 2016), those who do not perform well in academic pursuits are therefore much less influenced by its political work.⁶⁸

Even in high schools, which almost all my informants have attended, political education has a limited effect. Many e-traders described themselves as “losers” in the Chinese education system: they were “bad” students who did not like studying and performed poorly in examinations. Because they did not study or listen closely to their teachers, political doctrines had much less influence on them than on the “good” students. Also because they could not help teachers build their reputation and were often disobedient, they were marginalized to sit at the back of the class. As long as they did not break classroom rules, teachers paid minimal attention to them. In other words,

68 Even in elite academic institutions, students are not unaware of the Party state’s political work. Research finds that many Chinese top university students are pragmatic in joining the Party. They seldom take party membership seriously, but use the experiences in party organizations for self-development and the resulting political capital for material interests (Bregnbæk, 2016: 77; see also Rosen, 2004). In vocational institutions, Terry Woronov finds that teachers are often careless about students. They do not take key curriculum seriously, not to mention political education. Neither do the students care about their studies, as Woronov heard from their teachers, “Be happy. Eat good food. That’s all they can think of” (2016: 100). Educational researcher Fengshu Liu also finds a similar self-centeredness in her informants. She argues that, in planning their lives and attempting to achieve their life goals, university students in China have adopted an individualized approach, displaying a form of the self that is consistent with the autonomous, self-authoring and individualistic neoliberal subject, with little reference to the socialist-collective values with which the Party-state has been attempting to indoctrinate Chinese citizens. Liu explains the differentiated concerns of socialist-collective values among her and Hoffman’s informants by referring to the research contexts. She notes that, “Chinese participants may respond differently to a Chinese researcher, an ‘insider,’ than to a westerner, who might often be perceived as an ‘outsider’ representing China’s rivals in the world stage.” (Liu, 2008: 209).

being “bad” students ironically saved them from heavy indoctrination of socialist-collective values.⁶⁹

While the state-sponsored educational institutions have largely failed to instill collective ideologies into the e-traders, the Chinese market economy has fostered an individualistic entrepreneurial ethos in them at different stages of their life. When they were in high schools or even earlier, they had experienced peer competition over the amount and value of their possessions. Several informants told me that through these competitions they learned the importance of money and individual capacity in making money.⁷⁰ Experiences of being poor were especially influential for some e-traders. Mr. Ren’s story in Chapter 6 is illustrative. This 20-year-old man said his family were one of the poorest in his home village. While other families built new two- or three-story houses with remittances sent by their family members working outside the district, his family still lived in an old one-story house for which they were looked down upon in the local community. With a hope to achieve monetary success, Ren came to Yiwu and studied e-commerce in a local vocational college. I have presented how he had formed an enterprising and calculating personhood in this new environment. Contacts with his wealthy local classmates and other businesspeople further increased his desire to prove himself as a capable businessman, and that led him to adopt more techniques of self-discipline and self-improvement. He only allowed himself to sleep for four or five hours every day. Besides e-business, he spent most of his time studying e-commerce skills and new business ideas. From life goals to techniques of self-governing, notions of the individual occupied a central place in both Ren’s performance and his pursuit of entrepreneurship.⁷¹

The longing for monetary success and self-actualization drives the e-traders to join the e-commerce market and refashion themselves into competitive market players. The Chinese state plays no direct role in motivating them to do so. In Chapter 2 I have

⁶⁹ In her ethnographic study of a Chinese rural high school, Mette Halskov Hansen also notices that teachers there tend to limit their discourse on individuals’ responsibility of building the nation and helping it prosper to classes in which these topics are part of the curriculum. They seldom bring this up in private discussions and beyond the contexts of formal teaching. Neither do they integrate this discourse into their narratives about individual career pursuits or ambitions for their children and students (Hansen, 2015: 157-158). This may imply that the teachers do not believe in the political discourse themselves, and that probably will weaken the effectiveness of political education.

⁷⁰ On Chinese children and youth’s materialism and consumption patterns, see Croll (2006), Rodoshen, Li, and Zhang (2011), and Rosen (2004).

⁷¹ E-traders like Ren also care about the well-being of their families. While this may be interpreted in the way that they still hold some collective values inherited from traditional Chinese culture, anthropologist Charles Stafford (2015) suggests that individual happiness in Chinese society is often linked to that of one’s family members. In other words, the well-being of one’s family is itself an integrated part of Chinese people’s pursuits of individual happiness.

quoted the e-traders' criticism of the state's promotion of entrepreneurship as "doing nothing but talking." Some traders openly denied that the state propaganda had an effect on their decisions to join the e-commerce industry, and emphasized that profits were their major concern, "If there is no actual benefit, only idiots will do it." Considering their opposition to state intervention in economy (Chapter 2), their discontent about the moral decline in Chinese society (Chapter 5), and their critical projection of state bureaucracy on the company structure of the Alibaba Group (Chapter 3), I am not surprised to find no e-trader has expressed explicitly that he or she conducts e-business for the nation or the state. Instead, many have appropriated the fact of China's economic slowdown in recent years and the state's discourse of mass innovation and entrepreneurship to highlight the importance of their economic activities (see Chapter 2). The collective interests of the nation and the state, in this regard, become their tools for self-legitimization rather than a goal of their endeavors.

Grassroots neoliberalism in Yiwu's e-commerce industry and beyond

How did this pragmatic and individualistic entrepreneurialization of e-traders come into being? I argue that it emerged from the growing grassroots neoliberal e-commerce economy in Yiwu. This dissertation looks at this actually existing form of neoliberalism in the city from two angles, namely the political economy and the subjectivity-making, the two areas on which the largest bodies of scholarship on neoliberalism have concentrated (Ortner, 2016: 52; see also Ganti, 2014: 94). As the previous section has addressed the e-traders' self-making of neoliberal enterprising subjects, I will now turn to the political economy of the neoliberalized e-commerce industry in Yiwu local society.

Numerous scholars have defined China's post-socialist transition as neoliberal and have also seen it as an intentional choice of the Party-state (e.g., Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Ong, 2006a; Pun, 2016; Zhang and Ong, 2008). In the economic domain, the state-led reforms, such as rural decollectivization, marketization of labor, fiscal decentralization and the weakening of the central state, privatization and corporatization of the state sector, commodification of state services, and deepening of trade liberalization are all taken as evidence of neoliberalization in the country (So, 2009: 51-53). However, this view has been challenged constantly. For instance, a number of scholars argue that China's post-reform development follows an East Asian developmental-state model (e.g., Baek, 2005; Beeson, 2009, 2017; Blecher, 1989, 1991, 2008; Blecher and Shue, 1996, 2001; Knight, 2014; Oi, 1995, 1999; Thun, 2006; Unger

and Chan, 1996, 1999; White, 1988, 1993; Zhu, 2004). Recent political economy scholarship suggests that the Chinese economic model should be categorized as “state capitalism,” in which most sectors are marketized while some strategic industries remain controlled by the state (Hsueh, 2016; Naughton and Tsai, 2015). As the post-Mao reform is carried out differently in different regions (e.g., the Sunan model driven by collectively-owned enterprises, the Wenzhou model driven by private enterprises, and the Guangdong model driven by foreign investment) and in different industries (e.g., textiles, telecommunications, and automobile), we can find evidence to support all these arguments.⁷² Considering the complexity of China’s reforms, this dissertation does not intend to contend that the Chinese economy is undergoing neoliberalization as a whole, but rather in certain industries of some specific localities, such as the e-commerce industry in Yiwu.

This downsizing argument is also reflective of the current debate over the neoliberalization of Chinese society among anthropologists. The existing scholarship often studies one specific domain in one or several localities but tries to generalize its finding to a broader Chinese context. In the highly commercialized urban labor market in Shenzhen and Beijing, where Ngai Pun (2005) and Hairong Yan (2008) studied the exploitation of migrant labor, it is unsurprising to find some proof of neoliberalism. However, these scholars tend to project the localized neoliberal system to the whole country. Andrew Kipnis (2008) denies the existence of neoliberalism in China overall, but the empirical data he uses is largely drawn from public schools in a rural county of Shandong province, where the Party-state’s presence is more visible than market forces. Lisa Hoffman (2010) takes a moderate position by arguing that the professional subjects she studies are influenced by a late-socialist governmentality that combines socialist and neoliberal techniques of governing. Yet, she is still ambitious in generalizing her finding to the broader social and geographic context of “urban China” rather than just the city of Dalian. By reading news reports and doing short-term fieldwork outside Yiwu, I have been aware that there are various trajectories of e-commerce development in different parts of China. In the regions (mostly in central and western China, but also in some eastern provinces) that only embraced e-commerce recently as a means to alleviate poverty, the state had a deeper involvement in developing the industry locally (see Chapter 2). In Yiwu, however, local, national and transnational market forces had

⁷² On the different development models in Sunan (Southern part of Jiangsu province), Wenzhou, and Guangdong, see Tsai (2007: 152-161). On the Chinese state’s differentiated interventions in different industries, see Hsueh (2011). Even for the same industry, local governments in different regions may have diverse policies, see Thun (2006).

already fostered a prospering grassroots e-commerce economy before the state stepped in. Even when the state's presence became more visible by propagandizing "mass innovation and entrepreneurship," building e-commerce industrial parks and launching training campaigns, it was still regarded as ineffective and useless because of its failure in satisfying the actual needs of e-traders. Today, the local e-commerce economy remains market-driven and dominated by the private sector.

The experience of Yiwu has a few more implications. As neoliberalism originates as a theory of political economy, the state becomes one of the most common sites for scholars to examine its practices and effects (Ganti, 2014; especially on David Harvey's reliance on the "neoliberal state" as the key unit of analysis, see Ong and Zhang, 2008: 9). In countries that undertake neoliberal reforms, the states are assumed to withdraw control over economy and to facilitate the working of free markets. The Chinese post-Mao reform has been regarded as neoliberal since the state has promoted marketization, deregulation, and privatization in the country. In doing so, scholars believe that it intends to invigorate the economy, speed up capital accumulation, achieve modernization, and ultimately make China a strong nation in the world while maintaining the power of the ruling party (Harvey, 2005: 129-130; Chu and So, 2010: 47-48; So and Chu, 2012: 170). In other words, the adoption of neoliberal measures in China is seen largely as a pragmatic choice of the state (for an opposite view, see Huang, 2008; Nee and Opper, 2012). In the past several years, with the purpose of maintaining economic growth in an era of economic downturn, the state also formulated numerous neoliberal as well as developmental policies to promote e-commerce entrepreneurship. Yet, e-traders saw all these policies as nothing but "empty talk." For instance, they believed the policies of opening financial markets to e-commerce enterprises and protecting intellectual property meant nothing but would do harm to them, since their small business had little chance to be listed on a stock market but often copied other sellers' products. Instead of following the direction proposed by the state, the traders tended to dismiss its guidance and look for their own way of building an e-commerce economy in the grassroots market. Here, the Chinese "quasi-neoliberal" state did not work effectively, even though it indeed created a less-regulated business environment in which the e-traders could conduct business without facing much state intervention (see Chapter 2). Considering that the e-commerce industry in Yiwu has undergone successful neoliberalization in a way different from the expectations of the Chinese state, I suggest that neoliberalism does not have to rely on a neoliberal state to take place. A neoliberal state may help to expand the influence of market mechanism and improve its working,

but market agents are more fundamental to the system. While this argument has been well documented in the neoliberal theories of Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, the current state-centered analysis of neoliberalism has turned scholarly attention away from it.

Among the market agents, there is also a differentiation of power between national/transnational corporations and local/grassroots business. In Chapter 3, I have written about how small- and medium-sized e-businesses are regulated by e-platform giants such as the Alibaba Group. Due to the state's neoliberal policy of deregulating the e-commerce economy and its inadequate knowledge of this new industry, as well as the very fact that the e-commerce market was first nourished by them, the larger e-platform giants enjoy much autonomy to manage themselves and have the power to regulate their subordinates and other smaller players. By functioning as intermediaries between the state and grassroots e-traders, they reproduce the neoliberal mode of governance in the Chinese e-commerce world by which the state governs the e-trading population at a distance (cf. Rose, 1996, 1999). Under the rule of the giants, grassroots e-traders admire their technological advancement and great influence on the one hand, and feel anxious and angry for being their subjects of exploitation and surveillance on the other. This ambivalence leads them to develop various strategies to adapt to, negotiate with or resist the giants' domination. These interactions, despite being full of tensions, have stimulated economic vitality in Yiwu's grassroots e-commerce market.

Although both the Chinese state and e-platform giants have certain roles in generating prosperity in Yiwu's e-commerce economy—the state's less-regulative policies and the giants' provisions of online trading venues—the small- and medium-sized private e-businesses are essential to the development of the grassroots e-commerce market. They take advantage of Yiwu's wholesale marketplace by moving all its products online and by experimenting with new products based on its strong supply chain. The popularization of *dadi ku* (打底裤, which I translate as winter leggings) is an illustrative example of the Yiwu-based e-traders' market sensibility (see Figure 7.1). The predecessor of *dadi ku* is *jianmei ku* (健美裤, literally “body-building pants”). Usually made of spandex, *jianmei ku* was very popular among Chinese women during the 1980s since it was regarded as a symbol of individuality. However, it lost its popularity in the 1990s. According to Miss Zhou, who owns several Taobao e-shops selling winter leggings, Chinese girls became more obsessed with physical thinness starting from the mid-2000s. It was said that to show off their thinness, they even wore skirts in winter. “But in most parts of China the winter was really cold. So some e-

traders in Yiwu began to think of designing a kind of pants that could keep people warm while displaying their thinness. Finally they invented *dadi ku* by copying the style of *jianmei ku* but using cotton or wool.”⁷³ Once the winter leggings came on the e-commerce market, it became extremely popular and attracted many other e-traders and factories to imitate it. When I first started to research e-commerce in Yiwu, I had been repeatedly told by my informants that I must pay attention to the winter leggings, because “it is the greatest and most profitable invention of Yiwu-based e-traders; it created a new market!” I was told that, in 2009, 90 percent of the winter leggings sold in the Chinese domestic market (including both online and offline markets) came from Yiwu. By the end of 2015, a local newspaper reported that the city had more than 2,000 factories and 50,000 workers producing this product with an annual output over 600 million yuan, and it had a share of 50 percent of the whole domestic market (Jin, 2015b). By selling thousands of products, of which many are as profitable as the winter leggings, to customers all over China and even abroad, the 200,000 e-traders living in Yiwu have built the city into a major hub of China’s e-commerce economy.

It is worth noting that e-business not only earns the e-traders impressive profits and increases the sales of wholesalers and factories, but also nurtures a number of other industries, such as logistics, e-commerce training, website design, photography and modeling. The growth of the logistics industry has been anticipated by the local government and e-platform giants where they have also made contributions by building transport infrastructure and service networks for the logistics companies.⁷⁴ But industries like photography and modeling emerged in a way that the bigger players have little involvement. In the 2000s, many e-traders operated their e-business simply by going to the wholesale marketplace and taking photos of the products they wanted to sell online with their mobile phones. They had little sense of aesthetics. However, as the e-commerce market has become more competitive in recent years, the e-traders have had to make their products appear more desirable and their e-shop layouts more attractive in an endeavor to attract customers (see Chapter 4). The taking, processing and editing of photos of goods are key to the e-shop products’ attractiveness, and have given rise to the rapid growth of “Taobao photo studios” (*Taobao sheying*, 淘宝摄影)

⁷³ I am not sure if the winter legging was truly invented by Yiwu-based e-traders, but this is a common belief among the e-traders and wholesalers.

⁷⁴ In Chapter 3 I have mentioned Alibaba’s involvement in the logistics industry. Its Cainiao Logistics (*Cainiao wuliu*, 菜鸟物流) works as a platform assembling different logistics companies to provide buyers and sellers with information of transportation and delivery services. It has also invested on several major logistics companies in China, including Yuantong (圆通) and Baishi (百世).

and “Taobao models” (*Taobao mo te*, 淘宝模特). These two industries are often interrelated in the way that a studio contracts with a modeling agency for the supply of professional models, and both of industries are quite sensitive to the needs of the local e-commerce market (for my informants’ visit to a Taobao photo studio, see Figure 7.2). An illuminating example of this has been the increased demand for foreign models among Yiwu-based e-traders in recent years. To satisfy this demand, local modeling agencies have contracted with quite a few foreign models in Hangzhou and Shanghai (in addition to employing several Russian models based in Yiwu), while the photo studios are responsible for contacting the e-traders to share the expenditure of inviting them to Yiwu (Jin, 2015c). Together with logistics, e-commerce training and other related industries, the agencies and studios have built up an integrated e-commerce ecosystem which is supportive to both current and prospective e-traders in building their wealth and careers in the city. Running an economy mainly on an ecosystem established by local small- and medium-sized business consisting of different industries and facilitated by larger e-platforms, but with little state support and regulation, the Yiwu’s case reveals that a neoliberal economy may be driven not only by upper-level institutions, such as neoliberal states, transnational corporations and international financial organizations (e.g., World Bank, IMF and WTO), but also by grassroots market agents themselves in creating the form of grassroots neoliberalism, or “neoliberalism from below” (Gago, 2017).



Figure 7.1: Winner leggings, a photo from my informant’s e-shop.



Figure 7.2: A scene of my informants' visit to a Taobao photo studio.

Rethinking the good life under neoliberalism

Sherry Ortner has famously summarized the anthropological literature on neoliberalism since the 1980s as a “dark anthropology,” which focuses on the harsh dimensions of social life (e.g., power, domination, inequality, and oppression) and on the subjective experience of these dimensions in the form of depression and hopelessness under neoliberalism (Ortner, 2016: 47).⁷⁵ Having himself been a critic of neoliberalism for several decades, James Ferguson wrote in a recent piece that he was struck by the rapidly expanding literature on neoliberalism whose conclusions were almost the same—“a conclusion that might be expressed in its simplest form as: ‘neoliberalism is bad for poor and working people, therefore we must oppose it.’” He said he did not disagree with this conclusion, but sometimes he wondered “why I should bother to read one after another extended scholarly analysis only to reach, again and again, such an unsurprising conclusion.” (Ferguson, 2010: 166). Indeed, neoliberalism has been regarded by this literature as the root of all evil in the contemporary world. Only a few scholars have started to reflect on this standpoint and pay attention to the positive impact of or experience with neoliberalism which probably exists in different societies and among different social groups. Writing on the post-Soviet transition in Russia, Stephen Collier suggests that neoliberal reforms in the country provide a justification

⁷⁵ For a comprehensive portrait of the destruction of human life under neoliberalism, see Comaroff and Comaroff (2001).

for redistribution and social welfare and help preserve the norms and forms of social modernity, instead of destroying the social safety net and norms established by the previous socialist state (Collier, 2011). In post-socialist Serbia, research also finds that neoliberalism has been employed by local populist elites as a moral project to criticize an excessive and corrupt public sector and to redress the unjust redistribution of societal resources in their society (Mikuš, 2016). While recognizing the existing harmful effects of neoliberal measures, this revisionist literature reveals the potential of appropriating neoliberal elements for the common good. However, as Ferguson has reminded us, it is only when we stop treating “neoliberalism” simply as a synonym for “evil” and become more open to the innovative forms of new politics in the contemporary world that we may realize the “polyvalent” potentials of the neoliberal arts of government (Ferguson, 2010: 174).

More broadly, in reaction to the “dark anthropology,” recent anthropological scholarship also begins to look at the positive social life and experiences in different parts of the world, in which neoliberalism may or may not constitute the socioeconomic backgrounds of given societies, under the names of anthropologies of “the good,” of “the good life,” of “happiness,” and of “wellbeing” (Ortner, 2016: 58-60; examples see, Fischer, 2014; Kavedžija and Walker, 2016; Mathews and Izquierdo, 2009; Robbins, 2013). This trend is important for us think of our subjects’ world beyond suffering, depression and hopelessness, and pay respect to their desires, aspirations and endeavors for an inspiring, meaningful and happy life. In Guatemala and Nicaragua, the two poorest yet neoliberalized countries in Latin America, scholars who have documented local coffee growers and garbage collectors state that they are happy and have optimistic expectations regarding their future (Fischer, 2014; Vázquez, 2013). For migrant workers in China, who Ngai Pun believes have become resentful and who initiate labor strikes because of their sufferings in neoliberal urban sweat factories (Pun and Lu, 2010; Pun, 2016), other researchers find that many of them in fact treasure the experiences in the urban labor regime and see them as meaningful. It is reported that these rural youths regard their migrations to cities as a process of searching for a new identity and self-development rather than just a way of earning money. Their overarching concerns are expressed in terms of “growing up,” “becoming independent,” and “seeing the world” (*jian shimian*, 见世面). It is these desires for autonomy, hopes and aspirations that drive them to leave home and seek adventure in cities (Fang, 2011: 13; see also Jacka, 2006: 134-138). Migrating to and engaging with the urban world that operates on a more neoliberalized system of production and consumption therefore can

be seen as meaningful life projects these rural youths have initiated based on their visions of the good life.

I suggest that the grassroots neoliberalism in Yiwu's e-commerce industry, which is constructed by ordinary e-traders together with e-platform giants and is tolerated by the Chinese state, also has profound meanings for the e-trading population. First of all, although facing the e-platform giants' domination, exploitation and oppression and the uncertainty these create (see Chapter 3), numerous e-traders in Yiwu have accumulated wealth and achieved upward social mobility through conducting e-business. By observing their everyday lives and exchanging daily conversations, I have learned that monetary success is a key component in their vision of the good life, especially among the rural migrants-turned-entrepreneurs. Money enables them to live not only an affluent but also an esteemed (*timian de*, 体面的) life which they have always aspired to and which is what the Yiwu local society values. Having money in hand (or real estate and cars) makes them feel financially secure and establishes the material foundation for their wellbeing. Secondly, since e-commerce is considered as a cutting-edge endeavor in China, as practitioners the e-traders gain cultural capital from their business ideas, technical and management skills, and even familiarity with e-commerce jargon and internet buzzwords. Because they are living a life and possessing cultural resources that are socially recognized, the e-traders win wide respect or even admiration among their peer groups and local society (see Chapter 4; on e-traders' cultural capital, see also Chapter 6). The respect of others is crucial for the traders' subjective wellbeing. It not only satisfies their desire for social recognition, especially for those from the rural poor with their painful memories of being subjects of discrimination in urban society, but also helps them to realize (again and again) their capacities of achieving self-actualization. Therefore, getting respect or admiration from others is always a pleasant and fulfilling experience for the traders, which has significantly cultivated contentment in their everyday lives and increased their life satisfaction.

Thirdly, the grassroots neoliberalism in Yiwu's e-commerce industry has fostered a sense of self-reliance and independence among many e-traders, which is reinforced by their own entrepreneurial experiences. Here, I want to emphasize their independence from the state in particular. In chapter 2, I have written about how these e-traders acquired the necessary resources for their business and lives through market exchanges. Because they have become used to obtaining resources in this way and because their businesses are more directly regulated by e-platforms, their dependence on the state is much less than for people in other industries. The e-traders' peculiar involvements in

guanxi practices are indicative of their distance from the state. Since their customers are largely unknown online shoppers living all over the country or even abroad, the e-traders rely on e-platforms to reach these people. For this reason, they are more interested in building *guanxi* networks with e-platform administrators than state officials (cf. Osburg, 2013, 2018).⁷⁶ The state's ineffective developmental projects, which are bureaucratically managed and which often ignore small- and medium-sized e-business, also push the e-traders away. Moreover, my informants who are concerned with business ethics attribute the moral decay in Chinese society to the bureaucratism and corruption of the government (see Mr. Huang's narrative in Chapter 5). All of these factors help distance the traders from the state, shape their indifferent or resistant attitude to state intervention in the e-commerce economy, and arouse their desires for freedom both as market players and as individual citizens: the freedom to do business in whatever ways they want (including adopting moral and immoral business practices, see Chapter 5), the freedom to afford whatever they want to do (or financial freedom, see Miss Zhou's case in Chapter 6 and Miss Zhang's case in this chapter), and the freedom to safeguard their rights to information, privacy and private property against state and corporate intrusions (see e-traders' criticism of Baidu in this chapter) and so on. These freedoms, mostly focusing on the economic domain but sometimes crossing the border of the political domain, are regarded by the e-traders as important components of the good life. By enjoying or striving for these freedoms, their job and life satisfactions have been improved remarkably, and their dignity as rightful citizens has also been maintained. All these contribute to the traders' long-term subjective wellbeing, despite the uncertainty that e-platform giants create sometimes make them nervous.

To state that the e-traders are independent citizens who are pursuing individual freedom, I am not suggesting that these grassroots entrepreneurs may or have become supporters of political change in China.⁷⁷ They are not politically unenlightened, but are more concerned with what Isaiah Berlin (1969) calls "negative liberty," which is the freedom of not being interfered with by other people and institutions. Even so, this pursuit is still meaningful if we situate it in the study of the good life under neoliberalism, based on which we may come out with some new thinking about the

⁷⁶ From what I have observed in Yiwu, a few traders do have good relationships with state officials, but these relationships are by no means a one-way traffic. Instead, the state officials also try to curry favors with them because both parties share mutual interests (see Jin Tao's and Mr. Qin's cases in Chapter 6). In some cases, established e-traders are the ones being courted by local officials as the latter hope to lure them to invest or provide e-commerce training in their jurisdiction (see Chapter 4).

⁷⁷ Discussions on Chinese private entrepreneurs' attitudes to western democracy, see Chen (2013), Chen and Dickson (2010) and Tomba (2014).

power of neoliberalism, especially in authoritarian contexts.

In narrating the global rise of neoliberalism, many scholars seem to see it as a conspiracy of the state and/or corporate sector that is directed by a small minority of elites. David Harvey argues that neoliberalism is “a political project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites,” and “The theoretical utopianism of neoliberal argument has, I conclude, primarily worked as a system of justification and legitimation for whatever needed to be done to achieve this goal” (2005: 19). Nikolas Rose portrays neoliberalism as a new modality of government adopted by “neo-conservative political regimes,” which works by “creat[ing] a distance between the decisions of formal political institutions and other social actors, conceiv[ing] of these actors in new ways as subjects of responsibility, autonomy and choice, and seek[ing] to act upon them through shaping and utilizing their freedom” (Rose, 1996: 53-54). These measures aim to have the actors enjoy certain freedoms (or form a false consciousness that misleads them into thinking that they have freedom, as more radical left-wing scholars may argue) and learn to become entrepreneurs of themselves so as to improve their own wellbeing through free market competition. In adopting these governing strategies, the ruling elites are able to accumulate more wealth and power by getting rid of providing welfare for the working class and the poor and by driving the middle class to work harder and more productively. Critical scholars position themselves as whistleblowers who bear the responsibility to expose the neoliberal conspiracy for the non-elite populations. They remind us that being desiring consumers will not help them gain equal citizenship but only create sharper class distinctions (Pun, 2003); embracing self-improvement techniques will not help them achieve true development but only reinforce the existing class structure (Yan, 2003b); even the happiness they are yearning for are goods sold by elites for wealth and political stability (Davies, 2015). In authoritarian countries like China that introduce a neoliberal economy and adopt a neoliberal mode of governance, the neoliberal measures are believed to consolidate or even strengthen political authoritarianism (Harvey, 2005; Ong, 2006a; Tomba, 2014; Yang, 2015). In short, the power of neoliberalism is negative by nature, the wellbeing neoliberalism promises the non-elites is fake, and ordinary people’s search for the good life under neoliberalism is just an action of “cruel optimism,” an unrealistic attachment to a significantly problematic object (Berlant, 2011: 24).

While it is true that neoliberalism has benefited the elites more than others, the representation of neoliberalism as a project that intentionally seeks to restore the elites

and dismantle the non-elites risks by reducing the complexity of the social world to a set of mechanisms that can be controlled by a minority of selfish, omniscient individuals (Hilgers, 2010: 356-357). It also underplays the ordinary people being governed as only unconscious and passive masses who can be easily deceived and manipulated. But ordinary people in fact have the capacity to consider the discourses and techniques of neoliberalism, appropriate those elements that can serve their interests, and reject those that appear harmful to them. Writing on the health-keeping practices of elderly Chinese, Wanning Sun (2016) finds that their acceptance of the neoliberal discourse of self-responsibility is not based on its moral assumption that individuals are obligated to take care of their own wellbeing, but rather was based on the social reality in Chinese society that they cannot afford to trust the advice of others. Li Zhang (2017) shows in her research that while political and economic elites in state and corporate institutions launch psychological education for their employees with the purposes of enhancing productivity and maintaining social harmony, the employees themselves are active agents in choosing, challenging, and transforming this governing technique for their own benefit. In this study, I find that individual e-traders have benefited from China's growing neoliberal e-commerce economy by taking advantage of the opportunities created by e-platform giants' initiatives and the state's weak regulation to build wealth, and by exercising "neoliberal agency" (Gershon, 2011) to refashion themselves into more self-enterprising and self-fulfilling subjects. They are not passive subordinates to neoliberalism but active collaborators, or even initiators of what I call grassroots neoliberalism. However, when they find their interests being violated by stronger neoliberal forces (e.g., e-platform giants), they may also resist (see Chapter 3).

More importantly, neoliberalism may provide economic and discursive resources for ordinary people to counteract state power and expand their individual freedom, especially in authoritarian countries. Scholars have noted that neoliberalism in post-socialist central and eastern Europe has been taken by reformers as a moral corrective to eliminate the legacies of "socialist paternalism" among workers as they tended to live dependently on the state and have a "penchant for clientelism and corruption" (Mikuš, 2016: 215). Although they are supportive of the claim that neoliberalism helps strengthen authoritarian rule in China, Aihwa Ong and Li Zhang have also pointed out that neoliberal privatization has shaped private thinking and activities in different spheres of social action, and the resulting individual freedom to pursue private objectives "can spill beyond the business realm to include critiques of state power" (2008: 2-3). In this study, the Chinese e-traders' entrepreneurial adventures in the

grassroots neoliberal e-commerce market have established their independent economic base from the state and fostered in them a sense of autonomy. A serious concern about this wealth and autonomy has two effects on the e-traders. It first makes them a self-protective group. This is most observable in their resistance to the state's call for e-business registration, even though the state has promised to simplify administrative procedures, reduce taxes, and provide financial support in the form of direct subsidies or bank loans. By not registering with the government, they can save both time and energy of negotiating with government officials, be flexible in choosing offline locations to avoid state surveillance (this is especially important for e-traders who sell counterfeits), and evade taxes and government fees which they believe will end up in the pockets of corrupt officials (see Chapter 2).

But the concern about wealth and autonomy also makes the e-traders more enterprising and audacious. It drives them to search for creative strategies and tactics for expanding their business freedom and making more money, practices which may sometimes may break the law. One of these strategies is to apply economic reasoning to their competitors, customers and the state. By imagining these individuals and the state as calculating subjects, they gain unusual courage and confidence to venture into the gray zone of e-business and test the bottom line of state power. In Chapter 5 I have written about how Mr. Huang retaliated on his competitor by having his friends write dozens of negative reviews in the latter's e-shop after his own was attacked. Believing that his competitor was a rational businessman, he anticipated that the man dared not make accusations against him to the Taobao e-platform because he himself would also get punished if he did so. In the same chapter, I also wrote about how Mr. Hong bribed his customers to acquire positive reviews of his products. As Hong explained, his tactic was largely successful because Chinese customers were self-interested and careless about other people. These practices are sure to violate the regulations of the Taobao e-platform and probably are illegal under commercial law constituting acts of unfair competition. Hong and some other e-traders further engaged in selling counterfeit goods and earned large profits, even though this practice is prohibited by law. They dared to engage in this illegal activity because they thought the Chinese state was a rational machine: by paying the costs of loosening control over the market and tolerating violations of copyrights and consumers' rights, the state maintained economic growth and its citizens' confidence in the country's future development in an era of economic slowdown. We do not know if the Chinese state and the political elites who control it indeed reason in this way, but the actual situation e-traders in Yiwu found was that very

few people had been punished by the government for selling counterfeits. The worst case was that an e-shop was closed down by e-platforms, but its owner could soon open another one and sell the same counterfeits. This situation increased some traders' boldness to adopt illegal business practices and ultimately won them more business freedom than people without the confidence to try.

Another strategy used by e-traders to counteract state power and expand their freedom is to highlight their contribution to the e-commerce prosperity in Yiwu as market players and downplay that of the state. Although they are aware that the e-commerce industry in the city is primarily built on its wholesale marketplace and transport infrastructure in which the state has made a great investment, the e-traders tend to ignore this effort. Instead, they like to criticize the state for its ineffective industrial policies, bureaucratism and corruption (see Chapter 2). And because the state has these problems, they hold that it had better stay away from the e-commerce industry and let the market play the game. Since this neoliberal discourse has grown into a consensus in Yiwu's e-commerce industry and in local society, it forces the local government to recognize the importance of market mechanisms and position itself as a market-facilitating machinery, even though it often oversteps its role in actual practice. At the grassroots level, in villages that wish to develop into e-commerce clusters, local party committees and administrative committees indeed become that kind of market-facilitating machinery. In order to attract e-traders and have them settle down in their jurisdiction, local cadres try their best to improve the infrastructure and business environment and serve the traders as "golden phoenixes" (see Chapter 4). Recognition from the local government and grassroots authorities gives the e-traders plenty of freedom to do business and live a life in the ways they want.

In different chapters of this dissertation I have described how the e-traders established themselves economically, socially and culturally. To do so, they have made good use of the economic opportunities created by the neoliberal e-commerce market economy and in turn have themselves become part of it. They have borrowed many resources from the neoliberal-entrepreneurial culture that is popular in the Chinese media and among their e-trading peers to build their social and cultural status. Their employment of neoliberal thinking and discourses, such as the mantra about economic reasoning, superiority of the market, and state inefficiency, have helped them counteract state power and gain more freedom. Michel Foucault has reminded us that power can be a negative and repressive thing, but it can also be a positive and productive force (Foucault, 1979: 23-24). The same is true of neoliberalism. Its power is a double-edged

sword: it can serve the elites to rule the common people, but it can be also used by common people to achieve a flourishing life.

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