

RESEARCH

Life Efforts Online: E-commerce Entrepreneurship and Platform-based Governance in Rural China

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Abstract

This article explores how people work as e-commerce entrepreneurs under the control of platforms and the blueprint of rural development laid out by China's central government. It asks: through what mechanisms do the state and the platform govern rural e-commerce entrepreneurs to achieve their economic and political goals? And how the unprecedented scale of e-commerce in rural China has reshaped local communities and people's lives? It argues that the popularization of e-commerce in rural China is encouraged by the partnership of state and Chinese platform giants as a public-private alliance. Rural e-commerce entrepreneurs are aspiring to be their own bosses, nonetheless, they are in "the digital cage" where work and life get blurred in the social domain. The family-based online entrepreneurship in rural China contributes to China's future developmental mode from the grassroots.

Keywords: E-commerce, platforms, rural China, entrepreneurs, governance

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Introduction

This article investigates how people work as e-commerce entrepreneurs and how they conduct their business by using e-commerce intensively under the control of platforms and the rural development pattern laid out by the Chinese central government. It analyses state discourses, platform engagement with China's rural e-commerce, and personal e-commerce entrepreneurship experiences on a local scale. In general, China's rural e-commerce boom began in 2014 when the Alibaba Group launched its Thousand Counties and Ten Thousand Villages Plan (千县万村计划)² on Taobao.com. At the time, Alibaba had planned to invest 10 billion Yuan over the next three to five years to develop 1,000 county-level e-commerce service centers and 100,000 village-level e-commerce service stations. In fewer than twenty years, the number of Taobao villages has increased from three in 2009, to 7,023 in 2021 (Zuo 2021). Among them were 745 Taobao villages with transaction volumes of more than 100 million RMB, accounting for 13% of the total number of Taobao villages, and the number of active online stores reached 2.96 million.³ The progress of platform giants like Alibaba in China's rural areas has relied on the support of the Chinese government's rural development discourse and policies. For example, the selection standards of Taobao Village are dependent on capital investment and local government operations. This shows that a public-private alliance has been established between the state and platforms.

Since China joined the WTO in 2001, the Chinese government has been committed to attracting foreign investment, liberalizing markets, and gradually shifting from heavy reliance on importing foreign technology to a greater emphasis on boosting domestic capacity for indigenous innovation and 'leapfrog' development (To 2022:89). During this period, foreign direct investment brought about the technological improvement of Chinese firms, the construction of numerous "special economic zones", growing demand for temporary laborers in urban areas, and an increase in wages. These have caused many young adults from rural areas in China to rush to the cities, draining the population of the countryside. Meanwhile, China's urbanization rate has risen significantly, from 36.22% in 2000 to 63.89% in 2020. The per capita disposable income of urban residents has increased from 6,280 RMB in 2000 to 40,378 RMB in 2020, compared with 2,253 RMB in 2000 and 15,204 RMB in 2010.

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- 2 The Thousand Counties and Ten Thousand Villages Plan is a plan for Alibaba Group to invest 10 billion RMB within three to five years to establish 1,000 county-level county logistics centers and 100,000 village-level service stations. This project was promoted by local governments alongside Alibaba, and aims to establish the logistic network in rural China and advance rural e-commerce in China.
 - 3 Alibaba Research Center. 2020. Annual Report on China's Taobao Villages. Alibaba Research Center.

for rural residents.⁴ However, due to the Household Registration System⁵ and its associated welfare connotations, migrant workers continue to be denied the same privileges as urban residents despite the shrinking wage disparity.

After 2010, the urbanization process slowed down. The continued rise in wages for workers in labor-intensive industries has given China no advantage over other developing countries in the low-skilled labor market. In 2012, China's working-age population declined for the first time in recent history (To 2022:92). Along with other issues affecting the inefficiency of the Chinese growth model, such as an ageing population, the Chinese government began to recognize the limitations of the nation's demographic dividends. In 2015, Premier Li Keqiang announced the "Internet Plus" action plan, which was China's first official large-scale strategy for information and communication technologies (ICTs) (The State Council of the PRC 2015a). In the same year, Li Keqiang announced another strategy called "mass entrepreneurship, mass innovation (大众创业, 万众创新)" as a response to global trends in digitalization (The State Council of the PRC 2015b). In Central Document No. 1 of 2016, "rural e-commerce" was mentioned separately as a single concept for the first time for assisting China in solving the three rural issues,⁶ and has been considered essential in China's rural development strategy, such as poverty alleviation and rural revitalization by energizing the grassroots in the countryside.

Meanwhile, the expansion of e-commerce into rural areas has created a new battlefield for platform capitalism. Alibaba, China's largest e-commerce company, started its investigation of rural e-commerce in 2014, as mentioned previously. Taobao.com was founded by Alibaba in 2003 and is positioned as a customer-to-customer, or C2C retail platform. At the same time, China's economic growth model was also in transition, resulting in a delicate and mutually beneficial relationship between the state and platforms. In retrospect, Alibaba's Taobao Village initiative resembles a standard top-down system in that it functions as a partner to the provincial and county governments at the local level, acts as a think tank agent at the national level, and develops and promotes a variety of rural e-commerce models based on villages

4 National Bureau of Statistics. 2021. "Resident Income and Consumption Expenditure in 2020, National Bureau of Statistics" (National Bureau of Statistics, 18 January). Beijing, CN: National Bureau of Statistics. (http://www.stats.gov.cn/xxgk/sjfb/zxfb2020/202101/t20210118_1812464.html)

5 户口制度, *Hukou* System, a population management system in China that began in 1950 and led to the establishment of a dual structure between urban and rural areas, resulting in different employment, education, and social welfare systems for urban and rural residents.

6 三农问题, *sannongwenti*, a concept that was first put forward at the Fifth Plenary Session of the Sixteenth Central Committee of the October Party in 2005, which encompasses issues regarding agriculture, rural areas and peasants.

at the village level (You 2020:92). Later, Pinduoduo,⁷ Douyin,⁸ and other e-commerce platforms began their rural e-commerce popularization journeys in different ways, such as the “10 billion subsidies” promotion on Pinduoduo.⁹ It was estimated in 2021 that rural online retail sales in China reached 2.05 trillion RMB, accounting for 15.66% of total online retail sales in China¹⁰ – this is the outcome of the state’s and platforms’ collaborative efforts to popularize e-commerce in the countryside.

The existing literature on China’s rural e-commerce and Taobao Village primarily focuses on three distinct areas. First, quantitative research has discussed the correlation between rural e-commerce development and China’s economic growth model. These studies often pay attention to a certain variable in the model, such as the income of rural residents and increases in the sales of agricultural products, thus exploring the impacts of rural e-commerce development within a limited scope (Chen et al. 2022; Lin et al. 2022; Komatsu and Suzuki 2021). Second, political economy analyses of China’s rural development path have highlighted how, in the 2010s, China’s industrialization policies gradually moved towards technological innovation. Thus, these studies have treated the development of rural e-commerce in China as part of a process of rural platformization under state capitalism probing into the multiple interactions between the state, local governments, platform firms, and entrepreneurs (Haji 2021; You 2020:101). Finally, research on the influence of rural e-commerce on traditional social structures has contended that the development of rural e-commerce is a process of integrating traditional rural social relations with the new spirits of the market under globalization in which disadvantaged groups like the elderly and women are empowered through new trends in technological innovations (Avgerou and Li 2013; Boullenois 2022; Lin et al. 2016; Yu and Cui 2019). However, despite platforms becoming one of the main carriers of the state’s project of rural revitalization, how rural entrepreneurs engage with e-commerce activities at the individual level and what mechanisms constitute the governing technologies through e-commerce entrepreneurship have remained under explored.

7 The Chinese version of Temu. Initially, by selling relatively inexpensive goods, it attracted users in rural areas as its main target customers.

8 The Chinese version of TikTok. Unlike traditional e-commerce platforms like Taobao and Pinduoduo, Douyin sells goods based on the traffic gained through video content production or live streaming of influencers.

9 Pinduoduo platform issued 500 million RMB in shopping subsidies, including coupons that can be used when people pay for their orders on this platform.

10 China Rural E-Commerce Development Report (2021-2022), <https://ciecc.ec.com.cn/upload/article/20221024/20221024113120420.pdf>.

This paper aims to address this gap by asking what mechanisms the state and platforms use to govern rural e-commerce entrepreneurs to achieve their economic goals. How has the unprecedented scale of e-commerce in rural China reshaped local communities and people's lives? To answer these questions, this paper begins by reviewing the literature on digital entrepreneurship in China, and drawing from conversations in platform studies and theories of governmentality to develop the theoretical framework. I then describe my methodology, which consists of a year-long ethnography in a Chinese county. I claim that local governments introduce platforms into the lives of rural residents through projects such as e-commerce training courses, thereby enabling it to exert control over the rural reserve army of the workforce to extend from workplaces to the social domain; however, work-related stress is unchanged. While entrepreneurial laborers on platforms who are motivated to launch their online businesses believe they are their own bosses, they tend to be exploited by platforms in an unequal non-employment relationship with high risks, and, because of the platforms' ranking systems, they must constantly be self-enterprising. Additionally, because these entrepreneurs run their businesses as family-based, the boundaries between work and life, workplace and home, are largely blurred while they are actively involved in e-commerce entrepreneurship year-round.

Cultivating E-commerce Entrepreneurial Laborers from the Grassroots in China

Michel Foucault (2007) developed the concept of governmentality as the "conduct of conduct", that is, governance, based on a power relation between knowledge and its subjects (or objects), is translated and enacted through a multitude of programs, strategies, tactics, devices, calculations, negotiations, intrigues, persuasions, and seductions that are conducted by the authorities in families, schools, prisons, factories, and other spaces. In many contemporary contexts around the globe, the proportion of government interventions is decreasing, while the settings for governance are increasing. As governance spreads, the government's responsibility to the individual is gradually dissolving and being replaced by "technologies of the self": self-enterprise, self-regulation, and "taking care of the self" (Foucault et al. 2007; Rose 1999). Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose explain that the state no longer builds relationships with individuals by providing a series of public services, but by individualizing "private" choices so that each individual conforms to the expectations of the state while maximizing their individual "quality of life" (Miller and Rose 2008:78). This approach has been applied to scrutinize China's marketization and privatization over the past several decades by arguing that individuals' market choices, everyday lives, and aspirations are not only driven by the market but also through political techniques from a distance for adapting China's developmental mode (Hoffman 2010; Rofel 2007; Zhang and Ong 2008; Zhang 2017).

With the emergence of digital platforms in China, the digital economy has become dominated by the power-money-intellect iron triangle while the government turned to hide behind platforms by using less coercion and centralized guardianship as the primary control methods (Yu 2017; Zhao 2008). As an entrepreneurial agency, the state has introduced and promoted platform capitalism in new territories in China particularly in the countryside (Wu 2017). Van Dijck (2013:29) contends that the platform is “a mediator rather than an intermediary”, because it shapes sociocultural performance instead of merely facilitating resources (Andersson-Schwarz 2017). Therefore, as platform capitalism has expanded and more individuals were cultivated into digital laborers, platforms have come to serve as one of the most effective tools for governance, restructuring the personal choices, aspirations and everyday lives of digital laborers by conforming to the government’s instruction.

Platform-based governance is reflected in several distinct aspects. It generates a wealth of data and shares this information unevenly, implements calculative and reward mechanisms, individualizes the users, and heightens competitive relations among them (Vallas and Schor 2020). The governance of the platform is also represented in biopolitics, such as time-space surveillance through algorithms (Cheney-Lippold 2011). Who owns the platform and is attempting to change the world with it? This question has been raised and explored by many authors to elaborate on “the technological affordances of platforms in relation to their political, economic and social interests” (Gerlitz and Helmond 2013; Gillespie 2010; Hands 2013; Langlois and Elmer 2013). In Western countries, where middle-class people are generally regarded as the primary group of digital laborers, the argument is that platform giants like Facebook shape consumers or users on platforms into digital laborers who contribute to the production process of platforms without any payment (Fuchs 2014). China’s scenario is more complicated since, as part of this process, the state has also achieved its expectations for digital laborers through regulations on platforms and the ideological output they propagate.

Along with Alibaba’s Thousand Counties and Ten Thousand Villages Plan in the Chinese countryside, a new form of flexible production based on platforms with seemingly low thresholds has taken root in rural China (Liang 2022). Rural people appear to have found a pathway to freedom: their working time, location, and the contract type are more flexible, with the work content becoming task-oriented (Castells 2004:309; Srnicek 2016:43). However, this is undoubtedly a false impression produced by the mechanisms of platforms. Drawing on Max Weber’s (2005) critical concept “the iron cage,” Vallas and Schor (2020) propose the concept of “the digital cage” as a critique of the exploitation that users face through digital technologies. The algorithm is a typical instrument used by platforms to accomplish a sort of “soft

biopolitics” through a set of regulatory rules by sorting, ranking, categorizing and displaying certain content (Cheney-Lippold 2011) so that users’ personal choices and aspirations are reshaped when they endeavor to achieve a higher ranking or better category. Compared with traditional employer/employee relationships, the relationship between platforms and their users is more complex. As Vallas and Schor (2020:278) note, “The general theme is that platforms reduce the worker’s capacity to resist, elude, or challenge the rules and expectations that firms establish as conditions of participation”. Additionally, for these online entrepreneurs, the boundaries between work and life, paid and unpaid labor, have become blurred (Ritze and Jurgenson, 2010), which may result in “an accelerant of precarity” compounded by the lack of welfare (Gray and Suri 2019:162; Vallas and Schor 2020).

Consequently, similar to how Marx previously theorized the future of laborers, migrants in China were to be freed from the land through the removal of long-standing rights, and freed for being exploited in the labor market (Rose 1999:70). With the rise of the platform economy, some of them have been freed from factories due to the popularity of platforms and their low thresholds for new entrepreneurs, however, freed for being exploited on platforms. Furthermore, characterized by family-based, rural e-commerce entrepreneurship motivated a number of the countryside’s reserve army of surplus laborers, such as rural elderly and rural women (Zhang 2021). At this moment, the boundaries between “labor” and “entrepreneur” are blurred, as self-reliance has become common for workers (Zhang 2023:3). Eventually, although there is no employment relationship between platforms and their users, the former restricts users by the agreement of unequal protocols, and will not provide them with related labor security like traditional employers (Gray and Suri 2019:162; Vallas and Schor 2020).

The development of rural e-commerce, as this paper will show, is a microcosm of how rural individuals are subjected to the governance of both the state and platform giants, and how they shape their own lives via this process. Thus, the contribution of this paper is that it demonstrates rural e-commerce as a case of Chinese developmental projects in line with the expansion of Chinese platform capitalism. Different from platform studies in Western countries which tend to concentrate more on middle-class workers, this paper offers an angle from which to view how the daily lives and aspirations of rural communities in China are shaped by the governance of platforms that introduced by the government. At the same time, it explores how the rural grassroots are progressively heading towards precarity while nevertheless contributing to the developmental path of China.

Research Method

This study is based on fieldwork conducted in Chengshi County, Zhejiang, during May and June of 2022. Situated at the source of the Qiantang River in the western region of Zhejiang Province, Chengshi County is one of six districts under the jurisdiction of Quzhou City. The Quzhou government's censuses¹¹ show that 0.423 million individuals, or over 21% of the entire population, live in Quzhou and work in agriculture, with 0.181 million of them being women. Just 0.019 million of these individuals are under the age of 35, while 0.18 million are between the ages of 36 and 54, and 0.224 million are 55 and older. Chengshi County has an area of 2,224 square kilometers and a population of 0.36 million. With a forest coverage rate of 79.2%, industry as a means of promoting economic growth is prohibited. Nearly one-third of the population migrates to nearby cities like Shanghai and Hangzhou because residents of Chengshi County have long maintained that Quzhou is the poorest city in Zhejiang and that Chengshi is a poor county inside Quzhou. As a result, many of the county's rural population lack steady employment and do not work in agriculture. Since Chengshi County is in Zhejiang and adjacent to Yiwu, its advantageous location and logistical resources enable some of the county's residents – who were my primary informants – to become e-commerce entrepreneurs on their own.

This study relied on two primary ethnographic methods: semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant observation which were conducted from May 2021 to July 2022. The investigation covered both usual periods and special occasions (e.g., June 18, November 11, and the pandemic lockdown). A total of 61 people were interviewed, including local government officials, the management of a local e-commerce industrial park, e-retailers, manufacturers, potential e-entrepreneurs, and gig workers in industries that support e-commerce (e.g. couriers.). Respondents ranged in age from 20 to 75 years old, while most were between 20 and 50 years old. Among them, 25 were interviewed at least three times. The participatory observation initially took place in a local e-commerce industrial park. As the survey deepened and the social networks with the interviewees were established, my observation extended to interviewees' offices, homes, and their commutes to work. In addition to the first-hand information, second-hand data was collected from the local government's official website and WeChat public platform.¹² Informal conversations were instructive for this investigation as well.

11 Bulletin of the Seventh National Population Census, The third agricultural and rural census.

12 微信公众平台, *weixingongzhongpingtai*, APIs embedded into the WeChat app, which can be operated by both individuals and institutions, similar to Blogs.

The interviews mainly centered on how rural livelihoods and everyday life are shaped by people's participation in e-commerce. Empirical questions encompassed the entrepreneurs' previous life experiences, daily routines, family strategies, dilemmas they encountered as e-entrepreneurs, and their consumption practices, with special attention to entrepreneurs' experiences and perceptions of change as a result of rural revitalization and the penetration of platform capitalism into the countryside.

Becoming a Rurality Seller: Governing Entrepreneurship from Afar

This section elaborates on the mechanisms that local governments have implemented to incorporate rural people into the platform economy through e-commerce. "Internet Plus", "mass entrepreneurship, mass innovation", and Alibaba's Thousand Counties and Ten Thousand Villages Plan were all launched in the 2010s, suggesting that a new form of public-private alliance governance composed of the state and platform capital has emerged. In this context, the state or local governments as agencies, in an effort to better integrate rural people into the platform economy, introduced a series of policies, such as infrastructure construction and free training classes.

Consequently, nearly all Chinese counties have a variety of public facilities, including lecture halls for rural revitalization and exhibition halls for agricultural products. The exhibition halls are used to showcase regional agricultural brands and goods, while the lecture halls are set up for skill development at the county level. The local government of Chengshi County regularly organized programs like e-commerce classes for entrepreneurial incubation, provided financing for free seminars on e-commerce incubation, contracted out this work to for-profit e-commerce companies, and evaluated it based on participant attendance. Furthermore, these e-commerce incubation businesses received incentives from the local government for each entrepreneur successfully incubated. The standard for successful incubation was monthly online sales exceeding 5,000 RMB for six consecutive months.

The target audience for these courses was villagers who were either interested in or facing layoffs at home. In every class, women made up over 60% of the participants. The instructors for these free courses were usually so-called successful e-commerce business owners who illustrated how regular rural people might become wealthy through e-commerce while imparting the essential knowledge of e-commerce. When one class ended, another one started. Some residents in Chengshi County enrolled because the sessions were free and they had no work at home; some did so because they wanted to "pick up one more skill," while others did so because they believed

that e-commerce would one day make them wealthy. Several disadvantaged groups in rural China took part in these training classes. They heard tutors' personal stories and their own aspirations for being successful online entrepreneurs during class. In addition, they created social networks within the class and followed each other on the internet.

Product exhibition halls have been built to provide a venue for showcasing regional agricultural products and act as a middleman between consumers and agricultural business owners. The local government of Chengshi County created the public integrated brand "On the Riverside", which was divided into five product categories: fish, tea, honey, camellia oil, and root carving. The local government also created cartoon representations for agricultural products, such as WeChat emoticons, to promote the brand more widely online.

These marketing techniques, which subtly limited the content of local e-commerce businesses, created the connection between local agricultural goods expositions and e-commerce. Local e-commerce entrepreneurs quickly realized that following the government's brand planning might increase traffic to their products on many e-commerce platforms. While some entrepreneurs worked to get their products integrated under the public brand "On the River" with the hope of expanding their sales channels through displaying in the rural revitalization exhibition hall, others used these five categories to replace their products and match their keywords to this brand on platforms.

Government rewards have also been a significant tool for motivating e-commerce entrepreneurs. For example, the central government holds some e-commerce-related competitions through subsidies utilizing a top-down strategy with the central government distributing duties and incentives to all levels of government while local governments then assign them to specific departments and individuals. As a result, in order to win projects, lower-level governments increase investments in relevant content so they can receive subsidies from upper-level governments. For example, the central government calls for encouraging and subsidizing e-commerce entrepreneurial talent and projects, and local governments like that of Chengshi County immediately launch competitions for e-commerce entrepreneurial talent. It is easy for people to believe that e-commerce is equal for everyone because the county-level entrepreneurship competitions that are presently held in many counties do not have high prerequisites for achievement.

Mr. Xu, who once participated in e-commerce training classes in Chengshi County, and now operates three online e-commerce stores, is a typical case of a successful

online entrepreneur who was cultivated by the public-private alliance, currently, in his forties, Mr. Xu grew up in a village on a mountain in Chengshi County. It takes more than an hour to walk up the mountain from the bottom. Due to its location only a few elderly people still live in the village, and young and middle-aged people have already gone down the mountain to make a living. Owing to the impoverished situation, Mr. Xu migrated to cities in his early twenties and worked in factories for almost 20 years. In the first half of 2022, Quzhou held the first entrepreneurship competition called Hometown Spokesperson of Rural Revitalization, which was designed to select rural influencers suitable for rural revitalization propaganda. To participate in this competition, starting in April, he would stroll far into the mountains every morning. In addition to filming the mountains and rivers in his hometown, he also captured glimpses of rural life in the area, including how to make rice dumplings, tofu, and dried sweet potatoes during the Dragon Boat Festivals. He then edited, polished, and narrated these videos before uploading them to Douyin with the hashtag “Three Rural Issues”, which drives more traffic to the platform.

In 2016, the Thousand Counties and Ten Thousand Villages Plan, promoted both by the Alibaba Group and the local government, entered Chengshi County. Mr. Xu applied for the county-wide recruitment of Alibaba’s rural business department and was selected from 2,600 competitors to be a Rural Taobao partner¹³ at the township level. He began managing all Taobao transactions for his village, including local purchases on Taobao and county-village delivery. By doing this, he would receive a 2%-7% commission from Alibaba. This was where Mr. Xu started his online entrepreneurial career. It was also during this period that he began to have contact with the local government through Alibaba: he accomplished the first “express delivery to the village” case in Chengshi County with the aid of Alibaba’s logistics capabilities, and subsequently turned into a model for the development of local government logistics.

Soon afterward, due to the expenditure, Alibaba returned its Taobao business to the county level, and the rural Taobao came to an end. As a result, Mr. Xu shifted his identity from that of a rural Taobao contractor to a logistic contractor. During this process, he attended local e-commerce training classes and discovered that e-commerce and logistical services could be combined. He learned that the local government was developing online sales of agricultural products and creating an agricultural brand, thus, he established his online store selling agricultural products and was able to successfully integrate his brand with the government-created public brand.

13 For delivery between cities and villages, Aliaba conducted Rural Taobao in 2006, establishing logistical infrastructure, and selecting contractors called Rural Taobao Partners in each township to ensure that the deliveries would go smoothly.

Now, he resides in the house with his wife, mother, and his brother's family and runs three online Taobao stores selling his agricultural products and a Douyin account that primarily serves to advertise these products through video posts. Mr. Xu does not actively participate in the production process; instead, he contracts this out to experienced processing manufacturers outside the county. He established a brand named after the village where he grew up. He selects products from peasants, packages them with lovely decorations, and markets them in a way that gives the impression of a high-quality lifestyle. This is how he selects his suppliers:

There are ten villages in our township. We selected a person for quality control in each village and cultivated one variety of agricultural products for each. The person responsible must have prestige and a certain degree of integrity as well. We signed contracts with the villagers. We only accept agricultural products that meet the standards and eliminate others because bad things can't be sold, and good things don't have to worry about selling.

Nowadays, the number of individuals in China without enough food is extremely low. What is this going to result in? Consume limited, natural, and difficult-to-get items. "Expert's mode" is anticipated to be our future marketing approach. Using sweet potatoes as an example, do you know how to eat them healthfully? Can you distinguish between good and bad? We intend to include these components in our goods.

Some villagers attacked Xu's strategy, claiming that he was profiting from them by choosing the crops they cultivated and selling the goods online for far more than he paid them. "They can also sell at this price if they can, but it is impossible," Mr. Xu retorted, "These things can only be eaten as food if we don't collect them. Actually, we're assisting them in turning a profit." Nonetheless, many people were envious of him since he rose to prominence as an influencer, made ties with the local government, and made money online. This connection can be traced back to his signing with Alibaba as a rural Taobao partner.

Mr. Xu and a co-founder manage this small-scale business, and his wife helps him with package deliveries. He is regarded as a local influencer in Chengshi County, meanwhile, due to his close ties to the local government, his likeness can be seen on the product packaging, with his brand being integrated into the public brand that the government established. His products can also be bought at the rural revitalization exhibition hall in the local. He is regularly invited to talk about e-commerce and rural revitalization at county events, and he sometimes appears on shows in the local media.

The success of Mr. Xu sheds light on the kind of rural person China has aimed to develop. He became an e-commerce entrepreneur after experiencing the initial cooperation between the local government and the Taobao.com platform. He also took part in training and incubation classes and made money by maintaining the rural image that the local government wanted to project on platforms. Nonetheless, as a result, the platform economy has become ingrained in his life, choices, and goals, and his family puts great effort into supporting him. This is the precise goal of the public-private partnership founded on platforms.

Flexible Entrepreneurship in the “Digital Cage”: Controlling the Digital Laborers Through Platform Governance

One day, the nephew of one of my informants came to visit her family. During the conversation, I learned that he had just come to work in Zhejiang not long ago. He was 18 years old, and was quick to express his disdain for the factory workers:

I don't work in the factory. I went in for one day and never wanted to go in again because it was dirty and took up too much of my time. I am still young and can make money in the future, but freedom is important to me. I want to see the world, and I don't want to live a hard life.

In fact, his ideas are well-represented among young rural people in this locality. Many of my interviewees in their twenties had migrant experiences before becoming rural e-commerce entrepreneurs but they mostly worked as service workers such as hotel attendants, and apprentices in barbershops or beauty salons, and never thought of going to work in factories as their elders did. An indispensable reason for them to become e-commerce entrepreneurs was “freedom”. As one of my interviewees said, “E-commerce makes me my own boss!” Becoming their own bosses which entailed autonomy and flexibility, was a very common answer when asked why they became e-commerce entrepreneurs. But this begs the question, is this really achievable? The answer is no. In this section, I discuss the precarities faced by these rural e-commerce entrepreneurs as a result of platform governance, Chinese state restrictions that platforms must adhere to, and unequal platform-user relations.

While many people imagine that low-cost e-commerce entrepreneurship can make them rich, most of them turn out like Mr. Wang, who has been exploited by the “digital cage” (Vallas and Schor 2020) throughout his e-commerce entrepreneurship career. Chengshi County has a tea market with over 30 tea wholesalers and retailers, four of whom have online businesses. Mr. Wang is one of these, and he has been operating

his online tea shop for more than ten years, with nearly 90% of his income coming from the internet. Mr. Wang is in his forties. He migrated to Quzhou after graduating from high school but returned after half a year because he disliked the migrant lifestyle. He then followed in the footsteps of his father and decided to become a tea farmer. Initially, he contracted a tea plantation and recruited peasants to collect tea leaves every spring in his tea highlands, making profits by wholesaling processed tea to dealers. Due to the low profits, he eventually abandoned his tea plantation and became a tea salesman. In 2008, after one of his friends told him that it was simple to make money on Taobao.com, Mr. Wang launched his own e-commerce business journey.

This was around the time that Taobao.com began to gradually gain popularity in China. Mr. Wang and his Taobao online store have seen firsthand how Taobao has grown from a startup to a massive platform; at the same time, he has also gradually lost his privileges as a common Taobao.com e-commerce entrepreneur.

Platform traffic allocation rules are subject to constant change. The rule was that “the most recent products that were posted obtained the greatest traffic” when Mr. Wang first started looking into e-commerce on Taobao.com in 2008. This meant that as long as Taobao entrepreneurs regularly displayed items, customers would be able to notice them and create potential orders. Tmall is a business-to-customer, or B2C, retail platform where only businesses can join, in contrast to Taobao.com, which is a customer-to-customer, or C2C, retail platform. Since then, Taobao stores have seen a decrease in traffic as it has been diverted more and more to Tmall. In 2017 and 2018, Taobao.com saw very little free traffic that was distributed randomly. Instead, most of the traffic was distributed through package purchases or more sophisticated algorithms like lower price competition.

Platform accessibility guidelines are also updated continually. Mr. Wang has been utilizing Taobao for over a decade, during which time the platform has consistently enhanced the certification requirements for online entrepreneurs such as himself. Originally, product information labels on packaging bags were required. Nevertheless, as product classification evolved, tea was moved from the agricultural to the food category, requiring a Quality Safety (QS) certificate. The QS certificate was replaced by the SC (Shengchan, 生产, production) certificate in 2018 by the Chinese government, and now running an internet tea shop requires having the SC certificate. While it makes sense that platform requirements would adjust as the state's food standards rose, the methods platforms used in this process were often arbitrary.

Sometimes, we woke up and suddenly found that all of our online items had been compulsorily removed by the platform. In the meantime, we received notification that we needed to submit the new certificates. But when we applied for and acquired these certificates and subsequently reposted our commodities, the traffic and data that had accrued over time vanished. We had to start all over again.

It is worth mentioning that the current SC certificate has relatively strict requirements for elements such as company scale, technological procedure, and equipment list. That is, even online, the space for small-scale shop owners is constantly being squeezed.

There was a sharp increase in the number of platforms and a constant diversification of their features over the past decade. Most of the people I spoke with have several Taobao stores, one Pinduoduo store, and an account on Douyin. Mr. Wang, however, has just one Taobao store. Before 2015, he recalled, there was only one well-known platform – Taobao – and his business was far better than it was in 2022. He used to be filled with optimism for his e-commerce business. However, as diverse e-commerce platforms like Pinduoduo, Douyin, and others have grown in popularity, customers have become increasingly more split, and their business has declined. Mr. Wang appeared to be helpless in this situation:

We are too tired to accomplish anything else such as filming videos on Douyin for commercial purposes. We also don't have enough money to pay for advertisements from internet influencers. Furthermore, once we have become accustomed to the mode of this platform, what happens when a new platform is launched? So, whatever, so be it.

Things may be getting even worse. Currently, Mr. Wang and his spouse manage their internet store while his mother collects tea from tea peasants. Mr. Wang and his spouse respond to questions and complaints from consumers as customer service agents for their internet store every day from the time they wake up until the time they go to bed. The store's traffic allocation would be directly impacted if the responses were delayed. They package and ship the goods in the afternoon within the allotted time window; otherwise, customers would leave unfavorable reviews. To boost traffic, Mr. Wang must also develop a range of discount offers coordinated by platforms despite the fact that their profit margins have been declining. The platform's algorithm incentivizes price reductions, leading to intense competition in this market; yet, the wholesale price of tea remains unabated due to the escalating wages of temporary tea laborers.

These days, traffic rather than product quality determines the number of sales. What, then, is the significance of e-commerce? How much can rural revival be achieved? These days, only the elderly farm. I can't even climb a mountain at the age of forty. At the moment, every person who assists us in harvesting tea leaves is older than 55. If they are unable to get the tea for us, I have no idea how I will be able to stay in this field.

Mr. Wang, who seems to have many complaints about life and business, is the source of the criticism mentioned above. In contrast to Mr. Xu, who is thought to be an excellent example of e-commerce entrepreneurship, Mr. Wang's case is relatively unsuccessful and shows how rights and access are gradually being excluded on platforms over time. Mr. Wang's situation is not unique. In fact, his story mirrors many digital platform entrepreneurs. Digital labor rooted in platforms is more precarious for rural grassroots workers than factory laborers were in the past because of these platforms' unevenness, high level of competition, constantly changing reward systems, time-space algorithmic control, and users' individualization (Cheney-Lippold 2011; Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010; Van Dijck 2013; Van Dijck, Poell, and de Wall 2018:47; Vallas and Schor 2020). Although platforms have yielded a substantial number of apparently entrepreneurial opportunities, they have also made capitalist exploitation more hidden and difficult to resist.

Redefining One's Life as a Family-based Self-enterprise

China has been relying on cheap labor as the primary driver of its economic growth and capitalist development since 1978, resulting in rural residents being the main force of the reserve army of labor through their migration. Following the 1994 fiscal recentralization reform and the reform of China's real estate market in 1998, land became a vital growth resource (Lei 2023:32). Throughout this process, 40-50 million dwellers became landless peasants. The population that the governmentality of China targeted changed from migrant labor, to consumerist subjects and entrepreneurial labor (Pun 2003; Zhang 2023). By 2022, the number of rural online stores reached 16.33 million.¹⁴ Consequently, platforms have been presented as a way to help laborers who leave the factories but do not wish to return to the land by developing them into online entrepreneurs who both consume and produce content online as digital entrepreneurial laborers, blurring the lines between life and work.

14 China Rural E-Commerce Development Report in 2022.

Rural e-commerce entrepreneurship is generally family-based (Zhang 2021, 2023), which entails two advantages from the perspective of the state. First, such an arrangement makes it possible for the platform-based industrial system to incorporate an even larger reserve army of surplus laborers in rural China. Second, the boundaries between work and life, and between business expenses and daily consumption, are becoming more obscure (Castells 2004:309; Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010; Srnicek 2016:43). In a word, entrepreneurs turn into digital laborers on platforms and keep their businesses running by integrating their family's assistance – this is precisely where the state shares its responsibility with the individual and their family.

According to the China Rural E-commerce Development Report 2021, 10.1 million entrepreneurs returned to rural areas in 2020, 1.6 million more than in 2019. Among these, 55% of rural entrepreneurship projects were primarily related to the internet, such as launching online stores.¹⁵ Chengshi County has a population of 360,000, with almost 100,000 migrants per year. For these individuals, e-commerce seemingly allows or even requires their families to stay together and support one another.

In Chengshi County, e-commerce entrepreneurship typically spans three generations. For example, the wife may oversee customer service and deliveries while the husband runs the store and designs promotions. Their parents are frequently responsible for their children's daily needs. Young couples usually live with the husbands' parents. During the day, the spouses' parents care for the children. At night, the children's mother puts them to bed. One of my interviewees, Ms. Zheng, who is in her twenties, informed me that she and her mother had previously migrated. She worked at a beauty shop, while her mother worked in a factory. Due to marriage and childbirth, she and her husband returned to Chengshi County and launched their e-commerce store. When she is busy, her mother comes over to help and she gives her mother an appropriate salary. E-commerce allowed her to reunite with her relatives in their homeland, although life and work have been thoroughly blurred for entrepreneurs like her.

Ms. Zheng starts her day like this: she gets up with her child at 8:00 am, arrives at her warehouse in an e-commerce economic zone at 9:30 am, and begins to type out the courier orders to be sent out and sort them according to different types and models. At noon, she cooks for her husband (who is responsible for online store operations and customer service during the day) and the temporary workers they hire. In the afternoon, she continues packaging and shipping and tries to get all the

15 The Information Center of Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, 2021.

day's deliveries out by 5:30 pm. During the daytime, her in-laws help them with their child. After returning home at night, she takes care of her child while working as a customer service person for her online stores. There is a peak of order inquiries at 9:00 pm, and after 11:00 pm, the number of inquiries becomes less. "I have my own time at 11:00 pm since my son has gone to bed and the customer service shift is essentially finished", she told me, "But I was exhausted after playing for a while and promptly went to sleep at twelve o'clock". Though Zheng believes that it is difficult to accumulate wealth through online entrepreneurship, however, it is better than when she was migrating, she said.

Even though the dream of e-commerce entrepreneurship often appears in the propaganda discourse of platforms, e-commerce has not made the vast majority of entrepreneurs rich. As one of my interviewees mentioned:

We don't make a lot of money from e-commerce. The money earned is almost equivalent to the income generated from migration, and what we earn is just enough to support our family. The advantage is that we conduct e-commerce in our hometown, and everyone works together with mutual respect.

Take one of my interviewees, Mr. Liu's family of four, as an example. The husband and wife run an e-commerce business to sell socks, and their two sons go to primary school and kindergarten respectively. Their annual gross profit on the e-commerce platform is about 1.2 million RMB, but the payment for traffic purchases on platforms reached 800,000 RMB, excluding costs, and their annual net income is about 200,000 RMB (Figure 1). In daily life, their major annual expenditures include about 3,000 RMB for the new rural cooperative medical insurance for six people in the family (parents, husband and wife, and two children)¹⁶ and 18,000 RMB for the social pension insurance for the young couple. This latter expense is due to the requirement to purchase social insurance for the parents in order for their elder son to enroll in primary school, since they did not buy an apartment in the county seat. The cost of renting a house in the county is about 10,000 RMB per year, and the tuition fee for the elder son is 12,000 RMB per year (including the cost of hiring a retired teacher to help him complete homework after school). There is also daily food and clothing consumption which amounts to about 30,000 to 60,000 RMB per year. "In most cases, at the end of the year, we can't save much money". Mr. Liu commented.

16 新农合, *xinnonghe*, the public medical insurance for rural people in China.

Table 1 One-year expenses for a family of four as an e-commerce entrepreneur

	Expenditures on Platforms (Yuan)	Expenditures on Necessities (Yuan)
Advertising costs	800,000	
Turnover costs	200,000	
Insurance		21,000
Rent		10,000
Children's education		12,000
Food and clothing		45,000
Total	1,000,000	88,000

Mr. Xu mentioned above operates an online shop with his wife, who manages a logistics point in their township. Sometimes, he lives in his hilltop house to film short videos related to the rural lifestyle, while his wife is responsible for their online shops and township-level logistics point, as well as taking care of their family. An ordinary e-commerce entrepreneur like Mr. Wang, who started doing business in the early days, also runs his online tea shop with his mother and wife, with the labor being divided between them. Given the family-based e-commerce entrepreneurship, women, the elderly and other disadvantaged groups in rural areas are involved in the state's developmental mode through platforms.

Conclusion

This paper examined a group of rural-based online entrepreneurs who are energized by both the Chinese government and platform capitalism and engage in the Chinese platform economy. It scrutinizes how China as an agency facilitates platforms for incubating online entrepreneurship, and how these entrepreneurs are situated in the new workplace and life scenarios. The prevalence of rural e-commerce in China distinguishes its platform economy from those in the West in that platform giants are becoming less submissive to sovereign governments or states because of their competitive market values (Van Dijk, Poell, and de Wall 2018:163).

Digitalization is happening in rural China, and e-commerce is one of the main examples. The collaboration between Chinese platform companies and the state is promoting the growth of e-commerce in rural China. The Thousand Counties and Ten Thousand Villages Plan, which was a national initiative carried out by Alibaba

in cooperation with the Chinese government, served as its foundation. People are motivated to become self-employed by the entrepreneurial dream driven by an ethos of success, but they are actually stuck in the “digital cage”, where work and life are blurred in the social factory and exploitation occurs within unequal unemployment relationships (Fuchs 2014:285; Vallas and Schor 2020). Bröckling (2016:81) argues that the essence of neoliberal governmentality is that governing means promoting competition, while self-governing means promoting one’s own competitiveness. As a result, by using ranking systems on platforms, online entrepreneurs must become continuously self-enterprising transforming from factory laborers to entrepreneurial laborers who are supported by their families and contribute to China’s developmental mode from the grassroots (Pun 2003; Zhang 2023).

The platform-based governance is typically regarded as the governing relationship between platforms and the users. However, in China, platform giants and the government frequently work together to achieve governance. China’s 509.79 million rural residents have become the primary target of both the state and platform giants, with the former emphasizing employment rates and labor reserves and the latter seeking to develop daily activities and users. The cases of digital entrepreneurs in rural China presented in this paper contribute new insights to existing studies by highlighting that, following industrialization, privatization, and urbanization, the Chinese countryside is now experiencing digitalization, which has been promoted by both the state and platforms. Much like in the past, modernization mechanisms are being applied to current rural development (Mao et al. 2024; Nguyen et al. 2024); the difference is that the state and platforms represent two distinct interest groups, even if their needs somewhat overlap and mutually constitute each other.

Taobao Village is recognized as the birthplace of rural e-commerce in China and represents the first attempt at a mutually beneficial cooperation between China and Chinese platform giants. Starting with Taobao, more sophisticated rural e-commerce models were progressively established by other platforms like Douyin and Pinduoduo. The partnership between China and Chinese platform capitalism has grown to be the key component of China’s techno-developmental regime, regulating people’s work and life (Lei 2023:22). Rural populations, which once constituted China’s “neglected” army of informal laborers (Huang 2009), are now being transformed into entrepreneurial laborers (Zhang 2023). Therefore, the Chinese countryside is being integrated into global digital capitalism through e-commerce, not only offering new opportunities for rural people, but also new forms of precariousness.

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