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Recoupling Corporate Culture with New Political Discourse in China's Platform Economy: The Case of Alibaba

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Abstract

Previous research on the corporate culture construction in China primarily highlights how Chinese firms draw on its traditional culture and socialist heritages as two crucial intellectual resources. The highly marketised high-tech sector with declining employment security and changing political environment renders a new context and dual process for the 'engineering' of corporate culture in China's platform economy. An ethnographic study of Alibaba unveils the resources the management draws on to construct its culture, including not only the founder's entrepreneurial stories but also the economic and social changes allegedly brought by Alibaba's platforms and technologies. This article theorises a new tripartite state–employer–employee relationship manifested through corporate culture by showcasing how the discourses of market meritocracy in China's reform era and national renaissance based on technological progressivism have both fuelled the corporate culture construction, delineating its simultaneous yet paradoxical decoupling from and recoupling with the national political discourse in China's high-tech industries.

Keywords

Alibaba, China, corporate culture, digital economy, E-commerce, employment relationships, high-tech industries, national renaissance, platform economy, platform work

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Introduction

Corporate culture as a research topic and a management technique has gained its popularity in the 1980s in the US as a response to the perceived successful Japanese competitors (Hawes, 2008). In the high-tech workplace, corporate culture is often related to an obsession with technical accomplishment and pursuit of professional excellence, a sense of ownership, and a strong commitment to the workplace (see Cooper, 2000; Kunda, 2006). However, the cultural logic of the US high-tech firms cannot be simply replicated in the Chinese context. Beck et al. (2016) argue that it is vital for researchers to pay attention to the complexity and plurality of work and employment around the world, particularly in the Global South. Engaging with the Global South encompasses more than geographical extension, as there are ‘multiple Souths within the global South as well as within the nation itself along its divergent temporal-spatial axes’ (Kofman et al., 2021). In China’s case, without the knowledge of its historical contexts such as the decline of state-owned enterprises and the rise of the market economy (Danford and Zhao, 2012), the changing tripartite state–employer–employee relations (Huang, 2008), and the increasingly hybrid management style and diversified individual and collective worker protests (Pun et al., 2020; Zhu and Nyland, 2017), one can hardly comprehend what led to the country’s unique configurations of work. Rather than simply adopting the western analytical approach, this article responds to a call for new conceptual and empirical approaches to unpack China’s rapid economic development since the reform era in understanding work and employment in China (Kofman et al., 2021).

This article offers an updated analytical lens by theorising a divergent formation of corporate culture in China’s tech sector contextualised in a specific state–employer–employee relation, contrasting and complementing key research in this area (Davies, 2007; Hawes, 2008; Hawes and Chew, 2011; Huang, 2008; Kunda, 2006; Lai et al., 2020). The recent Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the nationwide ‘Chinese Dream’ propaganda have marked a new stage of the reform in China when national renaissance has become the zeitgeist of the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) political narrative (Kofman et al., 2021). More specifically, seeking to become a great global power, the CCP has developed new national discourse of revitalisation through technological development, ‘indigenous innovation’ and soft power building since 2012 (Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee [PD], 2014). The high-tech giants are thus situated in a unique position in and relating to the emerging national renaissance propaganda. Against this background, the authors grasp a rare opportunity to examine how Alibaba, as one of the most important and exemplary high-tech and platform giants in China, adopts different discourses with more contemporary Chinese characteristics to uniquely ‘reengineer’ its supposedly phenomenally successful corporate culture through a *dual* process. In contrast with previous research that reveals how the corporate cultures of Chinese firms mainly refer to the heritages of socialist era and traditional Chinese culture (e.g. Danford and Zhao, 2012; Hawes, 2012; Hawes and Chew, 2011; Huang, 2008; Lai et al., 2020; Tsui et al., 2006), the recrafting of corporate culture in the highly marketised high-tech industry employs discourses of market reform, national renaissance and technological progressivism. The concluding part analyses how the Alibaba corporate culture relates to the state, its national revitalisation agenda and the

new political discourses, followed by a discussion of the efficacy and risk of Alibaba's *inherently paradoxical* corporate culture as a management technique, which is increasingly market-mediated and highlights an entrepreneurial spirit of maximising self-interests, yet at times clashing with fundamental socialist ideology.

Corporate China's culture as management technique

The concept of culture, what anthropologists refer to as 'the stories, myths, symbols, rituals, and stylised actions and interpretations the group uses to make sense of what they are doing, what they have done, and what they should do' (Batteau, 2000: 727), has been borrowed by organisation and management scholars for the study of work organisations. The promotion of corporate culture as an academic field and its popularity as a management technique took off in the US in the early 1980s in responding to its perceived successful Japanese competitors (Hawes, 2008, also see Hochschild, 1997; Kunda, 2006). In the management literature, corporate culture is mostly seen as 'a set of referential statements available for management manipulation, a separate (and "soft") affair from the ("hard") facts of technology, finance, and corporate control' (Batteau, 2000: 726). Corporate culture as a form of normative control adopts a Foucauldian approach, emphasising how workers internalise managerial discourses and deal with identity struggles under the power of discipline and surveillance (Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995). It should nevertheless be highlighted that neither the loyalty nor the commitment of workers prescribed by the Foucauldian approach is complete because workers often try to manage multiple identities and deliberately distance themselves from management discourse (e.g. Brown and Coupland, 2015; Clarke et al., 2009; Costas and Fleming, 2009).

As a key technique of managerial control, corporate culture is 'something to be *engineered* – researched, designed, developed, and maintained – in order to facilitate the accomplishment of company goals' (Kunda, 2006: 7). Several techniques can be used for the construction and transformation of corporate cultures (Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Hawes, 2012): well-polished corporate philosophy and values, history of the firms, especially the intentions and stories of the founders, organisation rituals and managerial narratives, and even tacit workplace rules and everyday work practices. In this article, these techniques provide a guiding frame for investigating corporate cultures in the Chinese context.

Corporate culture with Chinese characteristics

The prevalence of corporate culture in the US management literature should be contextualised in a peculiar (historical) employment relation of reciprocity; namely, the social pact of exchange between efforts and commitment of a group of 'core' workers and job security and substantial workplace benefits from an employer (see Davies, 2007; Hochschild, 1997; Kunda, 2006). Chinese enterprises, unlike their American counterparts, accessed and adopted the notion of corporate culture in a distinctive political, economic and cultural context. After the market reform, Chinese firms suffered from a lack of effective management techniques for employee motivation, and it was only after the post-World Trade Organization (WTO) period since 2001 that the CCP 'started to

view corporate culture building as a central transformational technique that could solve many of the problems facing corporations and simultaneously allow the government to exercise more supervision over the privately controlled economy' (Hawes, 2012: 12). Given the ubiquitous influence of the CCP, the corporate cultures of Chinese firms can only be understood in the tripartite state–employer–employee relations in China. Unsurprisingly, the official political and ideological propaganda of the CCP appears in the corporate culture narratives of many Chinese firms (Hawes, 2008).

The tripartite relations may manifest themselves differently for the State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) and private-sector firms (Tsui et al., 2006). The market reform may significantly change the organisational structures of SOEs (e.g. Zhao, 2002), as their official narratives of corporate culture show more emphasis on political and economic concerns in addition to the values of the firms (Hawes, 2008). For example, Huang (2008) has demonstrated the declining influence of *guanxi* networks on job search and acquisition in the private sector in contrast with the state sector, which exemplifies one aspect of the diverging corporate cultures of the two sectors. Facing the competition after the market reform, the privately owned firms have engendered an awareness of the market demands of customers and incorporated the market values in their corporate culture construction. In the case of Haier, a Chinese multinational home appliances and consumer electronics company, its corporate culture started to emphasise customer needs and quality control for its business success in the market (Hawes, 2012). From an anthropological point of view, work organisations inevitably embrace national and regional cultures (Batteau, 2000; Chong, 2015; for a classical ethnographic study in Japan, see Kondo, 1987). Rather than simply replicating western management techniques of corporate culture building, traditional Chinese culture and the socialist heritage have provided two crucial intellectual resources for constructing corporate cultures in the Chinese context. Danford and Zhao (2012) have noted that a considerable body of literature emphasises the importance of Confucian beliefs in benevolence, harmony and loyalty to higher authorities in their management styles and employment relations. Hawes (2008) has also found that three representative leading firms in the Chinese private sector did not only present themselves as ardent followers of the official prescription of corporate culture building, but also as keen promoters of Chinese culture in their official narratives of corporate culture. Another example, Huawei, a high-tech and telecommunication firm in the private sector, incorporated constant 'self-criticism' and 'hard struggle' (*jianku fendou*) into the corporate cultural indoctrinations, both from the CCP's campaigns in the pre-People's Republic of China (PRC) era (Hawes and Chew, 2011). Even the international branch of Chinese firms cannot be exempt from the influence of its national origin. In their study of a UK-based Chinese multinational telecommunications company, Lai et al. (2020) have elaborated how the managers emphasise China's 'one hundred years of humiliation' and portray the firm as a symbol of China's rise on the global stage. The Chinese *jianku fendou* mentality was used to encourage the employees to 'eat bitterness' (*Chiku*), and nationalism to encourage them to work as 'corporate soldiers', though not necessarily emphasising monetary rewards or self-interest. Facing the cultural differences and conflicts between western and Chinese management styles, international firms need to develop a 'signified corporate culture' that suits the changing business culture

and social milieu in post-Mao China (Chan et al., 2005; for an unsuccessful case, see Chong, 2015). Davies (2007) has shown that the successful localisation of Wal-Mart corporate culture in China relies on linking the Wal-Mart pursuit of success to *Mao Zedong Thought* and presenting its culture as a comprehensive way of life that unites workers' work performance with personal and social morality, just like the socialist era work unit (*Danwei*). Nevertheless, we argue that firms employ new intellectual resources for their corporate culture construction to adapt to the changing historical, political and economic context of China. Now we turn to the distinctive context of corporate culture building for Chinese high-tech companies.

A new context of corporate culture building in China's high-tech industry

The Chinese high-tech industry shares similarities with its US counterpart in terms of long working hours, high volatility of jobs and skills, and its revolutionary effects on work organisations (Liang, 2016, 2019; Yan, 2020). The legendary commercial successes of Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent have not only created economic prosperity, but also motivated tens of thousands to pursue their 'entrepreneurial dreams' in the Internet economy (Li, 2019). According to its financial report, Alibaba has achieved a revenue of US\$71.985 billion in the fiscal year 2020 with its 117,600 employees. The E-commerce giant has 960 million active users globally, with US\$1 trillion of gross merchandise volume transacted in the fiscal year 2020, and has expanded its business to logistics, cloud-computing, digital media and entertainment, 'new retails', financial technology and other business services (Alibaba Group, 2020).

High-tech firms in China construct their corporate cultures in a distinctive historical, political and economic context. The BRI and the nationwide 'Chinese Dream' propaganda have marked a new stage of the reform era, when national renaissance has become the spirit of the CCP's political narrative (Kofman et al., 2021). The massive layoffs and problematic managerial practices in the high-tech industry, in particular the '996 work schedule' and the subsequent online 996.ICU movement (Li, 2019) have shown that the social contract between employment security and loyalty and commitment has irreversibly changed. In the tech sector, employment relationships and management have become increasingly market-mediated, peculiarly exemplified by the rising of contractual relations, indirect employment and agency working in Silicon Valley (Kunda and Barley, 2004).

Even in the era of precariousness, certain normative discourses are necessary to legitimise and naturalise managerial control in these new workplaces. In Kunda's (2006) words, today's market rhetoric can be viewed as another form of culture rhetoric in the workplace. How corporate culture is engineered in the flourishing, highly marketised high-tech industry in the current Chinese context thus requires a timely investigation. Is there a different tripartite state–employer–employee relation in the platform economy that transforms how corporate culture is constructed and 'contested' within and without the high-tech organisations? How does the declining employment security transform the narratives of corporate culture? The case study of Alibaba offers a rare opportunity to examine the power of corporate culture and its manipulation in the current Chinese context.

Methodology

To understand how management presents its corporate culture narratives in an actual organisational setting and how far workers receive and adopt such rhetoric in their daily practices, an ethnographic approach that enables first-hand experience and close-up observation of corporate culture's multidimensional manifestations (verbal, textual, visual, spatial), rapport building, and formal and informal dialogues with both managers and workers appears to be the most appropriate and comprehensive methodological tactic. In the summer of 2018, one of the authors secured a rare chance to spend 150 hours in an intensive participant observation in the Alibaba Group as part of its Alibaba Global Dreamers (AGD) training programme.¹ Thirty trainees from nine countries observed in 13 Alibaba departments or subsidiaries (Table 1). The programme included talks and training sessions given by 16 Alibaba senior managers across 13 departments (each lasted for one and a half to two hours), but also individual and group work with lower-level employees. To construct an organisational culture requires internal rituals that immerse its members in representations of the culture in everyday organisational life (Kunda, 2006). The corporate talks and training sessions of the AGD training, which targeted primarily potential and new employees, were intensive formal rituals for corporate culture building that provided valuable data for analysis of Alibaba culture.

With the rapport developed through the AGD training, both authors subsequently revisited Alibaba's headquarters in Hangzhou in 2018 and 2019 and conducted formal, semi-structured interviews with 15 workers in Alibaba and other technology companies. Although one author initially engaged in semi-covert participant observation, all interviewees were well informed about both authors' academic background and research objectives before they consented to the interview. To ensure anonymity, all interviewees were given pseudo-names. Their demographic data, exact job positions and affiliated departments were also partially altered to minimise the chance of re-identification. Five Alibaba workers also consented to the researchers following their non-work social activities and carrying out further informal conversations and observations about their work-life balance in their natural environment. For formal interview, a list of open-ended interview questions was developed to guide the discussions with interviewees about: (i) their work experiences in the high-tech industry and/or platform companies; (ii) the organisational culture, on-the-job training and environment of their past and current workplace(s); (iii) their perceptions of career, job security and satisfaction, occupational prestige and work-life balance; (iv) broader social, cultural, economic and technological changes in China; and (v) the government policies implemented to China's digital and platform economy. On those visits they also participated in workers' work and leisure activities, witnessing how the workplace culture was constituted and contested through interactions in specific spatial settings and through organisational norms and work practices.

Field notes were written up daily during the AGD programme and 426 photographs were taken by one author through his participant observation to comprehensively record site visits. All of the corporate talks and training sessions (all in Mandarin) and the formal interviews (13 in Mandarin, two in English) were recorded and transcribed in full. In developing this article, all interview responses and field notes were coded using NVivo 12 software, and selected quotes were translated into English. The first round of coding

Table 1. Alibaba's 13 units participating in the Alibaba Global Dreamers (AGD) programme in 2018.

Department	Scope of research and business development
A.I. Labs (阿里巴巴人工智能实验室)	Artificial intelligence
Ali Cloud (阿里云)	Big data analytics, cloud computing and smart city
CSR (阿里巴巴公益基金会)	Corporate social responsibility, environmental and economic sustainability
Digital Media & Entertainment Group (阿里巴巴文化娱乐集团)	Ali Music, Alibaba Pictures & Youku Tudou (video-streaming)
Olympics global partnership team	Support for the Olympics and related publicity
Security Department	E-commerce-related online and offline security
AliGenie (天猫精灵)	Internet of Things
Ant Financial (蚂蚁金服) / Alipay (支付宝)	Fin-tech and digital payment processing
CaiNiao (菜鸟网络)	Green logistics
DingTalk (钉钉)	Business-to-business management app
Hema (盒马)	Technology supermarket and 'new' retail
TaoBao (淘宝)	Consumer-to-consumer E-commerce
T-Mall (天猫)	Business-to-consumer E-commerce

was a spontaneous process during which various themes and keywords related to the topic of corporate culture were generated, extracted and discussed. In the second round of coding, those themes and keywords were refined and reorganised into selective codes to serve the discussion of this article: (i) the official narratives of corporate culture (especially the visions and missions of the corporation); (ii) the entrepreneurial stories of the founder and how the employees feel relatable; and (iii) how the business of Alibaba (especially its platforms and technological capacity) is articulated as relevant to the broader social and economic changes in contemporary China. The visual and textual content of all of the photos varied from the snapshots of talks, training sessions and site visits to leisure activities among workers and AGD participants, from the spatial settings of Alibaba's headquarters to the information charts displayed on the office notice boards or other internal public relations materials. All photos were captioned and classified based on a list of recurring, organically generated themes. Only those particularly relevant to the verbal, textual, visual and spatial narratives of Alibaba's corporate culture were used for subsequent analysis in this article. Such content informed how corporate culture was internally and multimodally constructed in the workplace. Several representative photos were selected to supplement the presentation of empirical data.

Alibaba: Recoupling a corporate culture with (new) Chinese characteristics

Corporate culture born in the market economy

The organisational culture of Alibaba, similar to other Chinese tech titans (e.g. Tencent, Baidu, NetEase and the rising giant ByteDance), was allegedly characterised by its

Table 2. The 10 most-used corporate slogans (阿里語 Ali Yu) in Alibaba.

Slogan	Translation
1. 为过程鼓掌, 为结果买单	Applaud the process, pay for the results
2. 让天下没有难做的生意	Make it easy to do business around the world
3. 相信小的伟大	Believe in the greatness of small
4. 不忘初心, 方得始终	One's goal can only be achieved through sticking to the initial resolution
5. 技术是为了跨越鸿沟, 而不是带来新的不平等	Technology should serve the purpose of reducing existing inequalities instead of introducing new ones
6. 认真生活, 快乐工作	Live seriously, work happily
7. 想象力是第一生产力	Imagination is the first productivity
8. 就算天下塌下来, 也能拿它当被盖	Even if the sky were collapsing, you could use it as a quilt
9. 客户第一, 员工第二, 股东第三	Customers first, employees second, shareholders third
10. 今天最好的表现, 是明天最低的要求	Today's best performance is tomorrow's baseline

openness, worker autonomy and lack of hierarchy (Liang, 2016, 2019; Wu, 2017). Several interviewees testified that their autonomy was 'respected' and that they had 'space' to conduct work in their own ways. Work relations, most believed, were 'simple' without workplace politics. Nonetheless, with autonomy came responsibility and heavy workload. Jokes like 'I've never seen daylight when I leave work' and 'I don't need work-life balance because my work is all of my life' were anecdotal in Alibaba. However, the extremely long work hours, namely, the devotion of time and energy, by itself did not guarantee career success in Alibaba, as a widespread corporate slogan read: '[the company] applaud the process, pay for the results' (Table 2). At the end of the day, it was a *result-oriented* company.

In contrast to the corporate cultures with indigenous socialist discourses and Chinese culture (Davies, 2007; Hawes and Chew, 2011; Lai et al., 2020), the corporate slogans of Alibaba were idiosyncratic for the absence of such discourses or political and ideological propaganda. For example, the slogan 'Customers first, employees second, shareholders third' prescribed a moral order of market economy matter-of-factly (similar to the case of Haier; as a representative corporate culture after the reform, see Hawes, 2012). The seemingly missing role of the state (and the CCP) in this official narrative of corporate culture revealed that the high-tech industry was leading at the edge of the market reform and economy in China. As a leading firm in the private sector, Alibaba thus constructed its corporate culture with the indigenous language of the 'pure' business world. Meanwhile, it played by the rule of publicity in the commercial world, just like its western competitors. For example, Alibaba had become an Olympic Partner (sponsor) of the International Olympic Committee along with Coca-Cola, Samsung, and other firms, which gave Alibaba confidence to consider itself among the world's most prestigious brands (Figure 1). This PR initiative was used internally to develop identification and



Figure 1. The Olympics worldwide partner signage displayed in front of Alibaba's Hangzhou headquarters.

Source: Tse, 2018.

pride among the employees. The human resources department exploited it ceaselessly during the AGD programme.

As the company would 'applaud the process, [but only] pay for the results' with the high standard of 'Today's best performance is tomorrow's baseline' (Table 2), the management widely recognised the principle of meritocracy based on market competition. If the firm had to strive to survive in the market competition, why not the employees in internal competition? The corporate culture encouraged workers to learn, included self-improvement in the evaluation system, and provided seminars and resources for learning.

This emphasis on market competition among employees inside the firm highlighted the employer's declining promise of job security in the fluctuation of the digital economy. The market competition discourse was so powerful that Don, a worker in DingTalk team with four years' experience, believed that '[if I were laid off] I would first reflect on myself'. For him, the primary concern was why 'I' got fired, not why 'the firm' laid me off. This individualism mentality was in response to the increasingly unstable employment relation in the industry.

Charismatic leader and entrepreneurial spirit

Corporate culture was often constructed from the founder's entrepreneurial story, beliefs and identifications (Rowlinson and Procter, 1999). In Alibaba's case, the life story of the

founder Jack Ma arose over 100 times during the fieldwork. The first induction day at Alibaba's headquarters in Hangzhou featured 'Master Ma' (*Ma Laoshi*) in a corporate video in which Ma was more-or-less deified as one whose intellect, eloquence and perseverance should inspire everyone in the firm. The implication was that anyone aspiring to become the next self-made billionaire entrepreneur and to change the world's view of China could usefully imitate Jack Ma. Lightboxes, posters, banners and flags featuring Ma's mottos were ubiquitous at Alibaba, indoors and outdoors, from the canteen to the gymnastics centre.

Jack Ma was born in 1964 in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province. As an English teacher in a local college, Ma established an early local network, especially through many English-learning groups, with his natural charisma. In 1995, Ma first encountered the Internet in the US in an unsuccessful gig as a translator. Such experience inspired him to initiate his first Internet-related entrepreneurship, 'China Pages' (*Zhongguo Huangye*). As one of the earliest Internet companies in China, China Pages was an online directory for Chinese companies particularly interested in attracting foreign clients. In 2003, Ma started Taobao.com, the E-commerce platform that would spell great fame and fortune. In 2004, Alibaba set up Alipay (*Zhifubao*), which made online shopping significantly more accessible and later evolved into a financial service company, Ant Financial (*Mayi Jinfu*). These businesses have made Ma one of the wealthiest and most influential persons in the world, and he remained the de facto controller of the Alibaba Group after his nominal retirements in 2013 as Alibaba CEO and in 2019 as Chairman of the Alibaba board (from fieldwork, also see Chen, 2015).

Alibaba's mission to 'make it easy to do business around the world' was portrayed as having been Jack Ma's prophetic vision since he started his business in 1995. The China Pages website was later referred to as an altruistic endeavour of introducing Chinese firms to the global market. Similarly, when he was determined to develop cloud computing in 2008, Ma's justification was that 'we must develop cloud computing now because it will definitely help medium and small businesses'. In a 2014 public speech, Ma described Alibaba's vital role in the logistics industry, '[Alibaba] helps others for delivery and logistics', and in E-commerce, '[Alibaba] supports 8 million vendors to sell, instead of selling their own products' (Chen, 2015: 213). Despite this selfless, altruistic corporate narrative, Ma insisted that 'public good must be achieved in a business approach', therefore Alibaba had to be profitable in order to be sustainable. The Alibaba Group's 2019 financial report asserted that its culture, profoundly defined by its mission, vision and values, was vital to its success. As a billionaire entrepreneur, Ma believed in the market, and Alibaba's profitability was hence regarded as valid proof of its efficiency in achieving both its commercial and public goals.

The portrait of Master Ma's entrepreneurial story aimed to confirm that the high-tech industry was a marketised economic sector in the reformed China, where the market economy and technological progressivism had obtained a legitimate status. Instead of emphasising socialist norms such as 'hard struggle' or 'eating bitterness', or traditional Chinese culture in its managerial narrative, Alibaba culture embraced technological developments and rewarded the entrepreneurial spirit in the innovative business world. The alleged decoupling of the corporate culture from socialist ideologies and cultural traditions was promoted by the management as a form of liberation. In the socialist norm,

'hard struggle' and 'eating bitterness' were motivated by nationalism and socialist beliefs, ideally without self-interest, while in the market economy, individual efforts and hardworking ethics only made sense when they contributed to the profit-making and were eventually motivated by self-interest.

During the AGD programme, Alibaba managers testified how the visions and missions of Alibaba could be achieved through commercial ways. Starry, the Head of Taobao ACG (Anime, Comic and Game) and previously a social influencer as a famed cosplayer, explained in a presentation how he reconciled his individual interest with that of the organisation. While happily showing his cosplay look, Starry proudly said he used to enjoy playing Japanese anime characters and organised cosplay events in his university days. Later, unsatisfied with just imitating, he started considering recreating characters from ancient Chinese folklore by synchronising his creativity with what he saw as the nation's cultural mission and setting out to aestheticise the profundity of Chinese culture. He subsequently became the helmsman of Taobao ACG and started to think more entrepreneurially in order to reshape his interests into something more marketable and profitable – his Alibaba dream:

[What] I aspired to . . . seems to be quite irrelevant to Alibaba's vision . . . Now I realise that in fact those things I used to dream of were too shallow, too ideal . . . I was once furious whenever people asked us, 'Could you make money through cosplay?', and we thought, how could we make money out of our own passion and interest? . . . When you've changed, you'd realise that what you perceived as very harsh in the past . . . would become valuable . . . [and] be in synch with your original perspective.

The shift from personal interest to Alibaba's business goals marked the rise of a tech entrepreneurial character. Pursuing business interests with a tech entrepreneurial spirit was the fundamental element of Alibaba culture, while revitalising the national culture through his successful work was paradoxically only a by-product.

Technological progressivism

Corporate cultures could not live in a vacuum of national and historical context. After decoupling from the socialist ideological and political propagandas and traditional Chinese culture, Alibaba culture is, in our observation and analysis, carefully reengineered to *recouple* with the zeitgeist of current China. The managerial attempt of Alibaba to reengineer its corporate culture should be contextualised in the national discourse of revitalisation through technological development, 'indigenous innovation' and soft power building. In seeking to become a great global power, China's government has positioned its tech industry as an anchor for national branding, hoping to revitalise the nation's international image as progressive and innovative. Since the 2000s, there has been an escalation of the national discourse on 'indigenous innovation' and 'mastery of core technologies' in support of leadership in next-generation network technologies and, ultimately, a leading role in the global order (Zhao, 2010). Alibaba, as one of China's most successful and influential high-tech companies, had the ideal conditions to activate a corporate culture coupled with the revamped Chinese national propaganda.

Collaboration with the state. In the talks of senior managers and corporate promotion videos during the AGD programme, its collaboration with the government's public services was frequently emphasised. DingTalk, branded as a state-of-the-art management software, was embedded in government departments in many cities to make the civil service smarter and more efficient. It was used, for example, in policing child trafficking and in poverty alleviation work to facilitate communications in rural areas. The managerial narrative underlined the technical role Alibaba played in providing more powerful tools for the government. The narrative was intentionally apolitical to highlight the politically neutral technology of Alibaba. In a way, the government was even described as being 'empowered' by this tech giant: Alibaba represents technological progressivism in contrast to relatively conventional governmental offices.

Economic development of China. During the participant observation and interviews, Alibaba was frequently characterised as contributing significantly to the nation's economic development. In addition to tax revenue and its employer role, the E-commerce platforms of Alibaba, Taobao and T-mall served as infrastructure for E-commerce in China. Through them, retailers made total sales of US\$1 trillion in the 2020 fiscal year (Alibaba Group, 2020). 'The greatness of small' was the theme of a publicity campaign tailor-made for Alibaba's Olympics partnership. It was intended to highlight how Alibaba's E-commerce platforms helped small businesses bloom. The management emphasised that as a tech giant that monopolised its domestic market, Alibaba was not competing with smaller companies, but built its success on the flourishing of a vibrant market instead. Alibaba's booming business thus converged with Chinese economic prosperity, a point underlined by the General Secretary of the Alibaba Group when he proudly claimed that 'everyone recognises that Taobao, and the development of E-commerce in China as a whole, are already at the forefront of the world. Today, there is no country in the world, in terms of E-commerce development, that can be compared with China, including the United States and Europe.' DingTalk, an influential management software product with more than 200 million users (Anonymous, 2019), was promoted with a similar narrative. Don, with three years' work experience in the DingTalk team, said in the interview that he believed DingTalk 'passed Alibaba's advanced management experience to small and medium firms with the help of technology', a shockingly similar wording of the official narrative.

'Imagineering' global competitiveness and scientific strength. Senior managers also equated Alibaba's technological advances with national scientific strength. In a review of the firm's history, Alibaba's 'difficult but necessary' choice of developing an independent storage and cloud-computing system was emphasised, which freed itself from reliance on international service providers such as IBM and Oracle. Such a business-wise, cost-saving decision somehow reinforced the firm's image as an indigenous tech firm fighting against international oligopolists. As the Alibaba Group's General Secretary said:

We were struggling about replacing . . . IBM's minicomputers, Oracle's database software and EMC's storage. Now we have replaced them all. Alibaba has no IBM stuff, and all the technologies used are independent intellectual property . . . There isn't a second firm in China that has this ability, and there may be only Google worldwide.

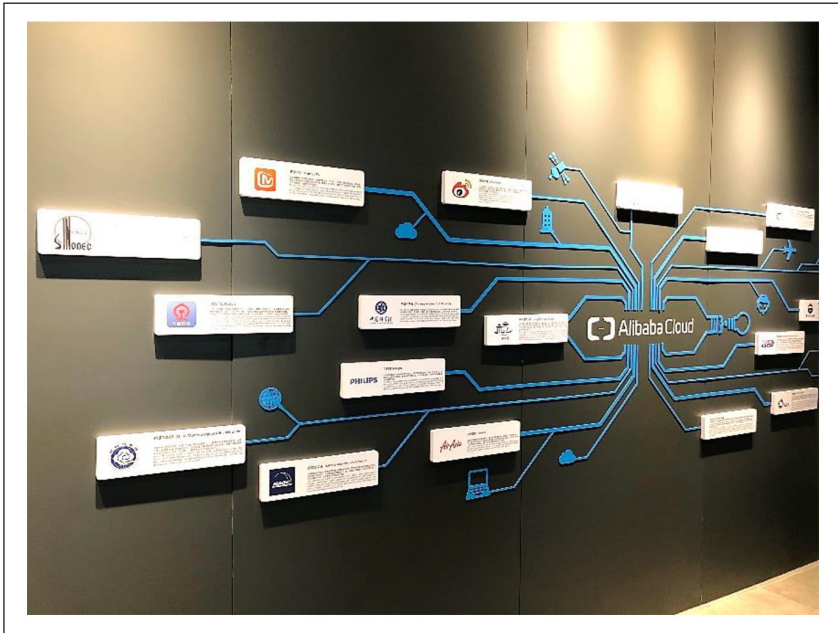


Figure 2. A display of local and international brands and government bodies using Ali Cloud for their technical operations.

Source: Tse, 2018.

Alibaba's success has an underlying association with the ebb and flow of China's global economic role (Figure 2). In one of the AGD presentations, a senior manager of Ali Cloud explained Ali Cloud's proactive initiative in assisting the global expansion of Chinese firms and building China's national power in addition to its technological advancements. Ali Cloud's competitive advantages are closely tied to its Chinese characteristics:

What kind of advantages does Ali Cloud have? . . . On the one hand, it is what we call 'go abroad'. With the rapid development of China's economy, more and more powerful Chinese companies hope to expand their business overseas . . . Naturally, many top companies are willing to take Ali Cloud as an option . . . The second advantage is called 'go China' . . . Many overseas top companies want to enter China, and Ali Cloud is also an important option for their landing in China.

Social progressivism. The narrative from Alibaba senior management was that their technologies and corresponding applications were making the Chinese society 'more developed' than the western developed countries. The most noticeable and far-ranging changes in Chinese people's everyday life were online shopping and digital money. As Dai, a senior manager who started his career in Alibaba in its early years, proudly explained:



Figure 3. Billboards portraying happy consumption experiences at T-Mall.

Source: Tse, 2018.

It may be a very casual and convenient thing to shop in China now, but that may not necessarily be the case abroad. We used to think that foreign countries were more developed, right? Now we may have surpassed the United States in this regard . . . We already have cashless cities in China. We don't need a wallet; we can just go out with a mobile phone.

The Double 11 Shopping Festival, now a phenomenal annual shopping festival, was started by Taobao in 2009 and has become China's 'Black Friday' event online. On 11 November 2019, sales of ¥268.4 billion were booked, attracting 500 million customers shopping online on that single day (Steinbock, 2019). Ben, who exhausted himself at the Double 11 Festival, shared the sense of pride among many of his colleagues and believed that they had created a 'modern Spring Festival' for Chinese businessmen and consumers alike (Figure 3).

These social changes were merely the surface manifestations of deeper changes in the morality and mindset of Chinese people, according to Jacky, the Information System Director of Alibaba. Quoting Master Ma, Jacky asserted that *trust* between people in China was lost after the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s until after the turn of the century. Since then, however, through digital technology, Alibaba had succeeded in rebuilding trust in the community by quantifying 'social credibility' through sophisticated rating systems on E-commerce platforms and third-party digital payment platforms. Now buyers could trust what was advertised online and that the products purchased would be delivered. The rating system was reliable and objective for both E-sellers and E-buyers.

Senior managers repeatedly emphasised a somewhat utopian vision of Alibaba – that social empowerment was the goal while profit was only a by-product.

To summarise, the recoupling of Alibaba corporate culture with new Chinese characteristics, through its collaboration with governmental departments, its share in the economic prosperity and social progress of China, and its technological innovations and platformisation for China's national renaissance, illustrated how the senior management of the tech giant subtly realigned its corporate culture to contemporary China's revitalisation discourse. The significance of Alibaba culture was how it was narrated in an innovative, empowering and futuristic manner instead of referring to discourses of socialist China or traditional Chinese culture. Instead of being 'empowered' by socialist heritages or Chinese traditional culture, Alibaba culture was 'empowering' China. In its official discourse, Alibaba maintained and developed the digital infrastructure for E-commerce in China and its corresponding E-payment and logistics systems. For example, Zhang was leading a team optimising Alibaba's delivery system. He expressed a belief that Taobao's booming business had pushed the development of China's logistics network, making it more modern, efficient and economical. Zhang's talk was filled with a sense of pride on how his work would increase the nation's global competitiveness by improving efficiency. To him, Alibaba is working on new technological solutions designed to further optimise the entire supply chain of China 'by deciding where one sets up a factory and how industries are distributed'.

Discussion and conclusion

Our study has elaborated on how the organisational visions of Alibaba as a high-tech firm are contextualised in the contemporary technological and social changes in China. Previous research has already established that the state, employer and employees are all stakeholders in the construction of corporate cultures, and that the socialist history of China and traditional Chinese culture have been two important intellectual resources for the engineering of corporate culture in the Chinese context (Davies, 2007; Hawes, 2008; Hawes and Chew, 2011; Lai et al., 2020). The case study of Alibaba, the authors contend, exemplifies how management of the leading high-tech firm and E-commerce platforms adopts an evolved strategy to carefully recraft corporate culture with the declining employment security and increasing power of the high-tech industry. The analysis has shown that the discourse of Alibaba corporate culture, on the one hand, has been decoupled from the socialist and traditional China heritages, but on the other, has recoupled with the latest discourse of national revitalisation through technological progressivism. More specifically, Alibaba management draws on the discourse of market economy in the reformed China to accentuate two elements of its culture: the meritocracy principle of market competition and entrepreneurial spirit of self-motivation; it also draws on the discourse of technological progressivism and 'indigenous innovation' to construct a more subtle narrative of how Alibaba's technological innovations and capacity contribute to the prosperity, 'modernisation' and social progress of China; Alibaba is thus, through this unique *dual process*, recoupling with China's national revitalisation in a way that it 'empowers' the nation with business and technological innovations.

This article contributes to the conceptual framing of corporate culture formation in the current Chinese context by shedding light on the complexity of the tripartite

state–employer–employee relations (Danford and Zhao, 2012; Davies, 2007; Hawes, 2008; Hawes and Chew, 2011; Lai et al., 2020) and the varying mechanisms of corporate culture as a management technique across political-economic models and social-cultural settings. The dual process could only be understood in the tripartite relations. In China's case, the company's industrial relevance to the contemporary national revitalisation agenda is of particular importance. Nevertheless, the recoupling of corporate culture construction with the national revitalisation discourse was in continuous tension. Since 2020, President Xi has attached importance to China's economic self-reliance by emphasising 'dual circulations' (*Shuang Xunhuan*): the 'internal circulation' of domestic consumption in addition to 'international circulation' of exporting (see Pettis, 2020). The rising nationalism in China, especially fuelled by the tension between China and western countries, has also driven many customers to Chinese domestic brands (see Zhou, 2021). Against this background, many Chinese firms adopt a similar strategy as Alibaba did by contextualising their business success in the national renaissance, especially with the narrative of technological progressivism. Despite not being explicitly stated, the corporate culture of Alibaba is peculiarly relevant to the buzzword of political propaganda in China since 2012 – namely, President Xi Jinping's 'Chinese Dream'. The promulgation of the Chinese Dream, led by the Publicity Department and the Civilization Office of the CCP's Central Committee, has unleashed three streams of Dream propaganda emphasising prosperity, national revitalisation and 'the happiness of the people' (PD, 2014) through a variety of media in diverse forms. The Alibaba Global Dreamers training programme did not just coincidentally share the word, but also spelled out a similar discourse structure: economic, national and social changes.

However, when Alibaba's management actively draws on the discourses of national renaissance and technological progressivism in recounting its culture, its *inherently paradoxical* narratives sometimes clash with the state's wider visions. The fundamental tension between the capitalist pursuit of profit and socialist state regulation is unresolvable. Consequently, overemphasising either the firm's (Alibaba) or capitalist's (Jack Ma himself) power in market and social reforms or the national branding may have negative repercussions, as evident in one most recent incident, when Ant Financial's IPO (Initial Public Offering) was unexpectedly and abruptly suspended by the financial regulators of China. As the 'actual controller' of Ant Financial, Jack Ma publicly criticised traditional banks and complained about regulators of China in a financial conference in Shanghai in late October 2020. Afterwards, Ma and the top management of Ant Financial, ready for its \$34 billion stock debut in Shanghai and Hong Kong, were invited to 'supervisory interviews' by regulators (see Chen, 2020; Niewenhuis, 2020). The suspension of Ant Financial's IPO and the later fine of \$2.8 billion after a monopoly probe (Hu, 2021) were a strong symbolic message sent by the CCP that the free market, especially the financial world, must be under strict state regulations in China. The symbolic value of free market as well as platform entrepreneurship emphasising (or even just equating) individual gain over (to) common good, for which Ma has been an active advocate, diverges from the national political ideology of the CCP.

One limitation of the article is that we were unable to access how Alibaba's management narrated the events inside the firm while they unfolded in the past two years. Future research on Alibaba, if field access and interviews could be achieved, should look at how the management addresses the tension between the firm's pursuit of profit and the

socialist state regulation and how the corporate culture is recrafted and relocated in the changing political context. Amid China's new nationalist emphasis on internal circulation rather than international expansion, we foresee that different privately owned (high-tech) firms – including Alibaba in the 'post-Jack Ma era' – must come up with divergent strategies to recraft the fundamental capitalist-socialist tension and 'globalising dream' narrative in their organisational growth and corporate culture control of workers. The capitalist-socialist tension is also evident in other Chinese platform giants. For two representative examples, Tencent and ByteDance hold strong media and societal power by controlling their social media platforms, WeChat and TikTok respectively, and might abuse their power for profit maximisation. In contrast to Alibaba's confrontation with state regulation on the financial sector, they are more concerned with the state regulation and censorship on social media. To provide a holistic, nuanced understanding of China's emerging state–employer–employee relation, how and why major tech giants in China (Tencent, ByteDance and the post-Jack Ma Alibaba, among others) differently articulate their own corporate cultures in the new historical, political and economic context of Xi's China deserves further academic investigation.

Another noteworthy inherent paradox in Alibaba's vision is the tension between its altruistic narrative and its incessant pursuit of profit. Discontinuity is common in the official narratives of corporate culture (Rowlinson and Procter, 1999). In the Alibaba case, senior managers frequently emphasise altruistic empowerment can be achieved by the logic of profit-seeking; the *capitalistic and socialist visions are paradoxically synchronised*. But in practice, Alibaba has transferred all the pressures of profit generation to its employees and the vendors on its platforms, which opens discussions of overwork, monopoly and unfair platform practices. This paradox is particularly vivid for the employees. Workers are constantly reminded to demonstrate their competitiveness and commitment by overtime work. But the corporatisation of employees' minds and emotions through corporate culture is never a complete success. Amid the 2019 anti-996 public debate, Jack Ma was surrounded by public controversies when he defended the managerial practice by claiming that the 996 work schedule was 'a blessing' for tech workers, even an 'opportunity unavailable for many' (Li, 2019). It is no surprise that some workers distanced themselves from the organisation's narrative and took a cynical view of Alibaba's official narrative of corporate culture. Individual workers may resist against the normative control technique of corporate culture and serve their idiosyncratic goals and interests. Cincy, a Branding and Marketing executive, honestly admitted that she was just not as ambitious as other Alibaba workers. Ada, a Global Talent Acquisition executive, said she sometimes felt 'trapped in Hangzhou' and cannot live her life 'like an ordinary young person'. The authors are aware of the constraints of this short-term participant observation, the limited diversity of the interview sample, and the non-disclosure of interviewees' identifiable demographic and work-related information in fully understanding how corporate culture is planned, manifested, reinforced and resisted in more natural work settings and by workers in different social and occupational positions. Future research should pay more attention to workers' own accounts and shed light on academic understanding of workers' varied levels of agency in the complicated state–employer–employee relationship.

Previous research on corporate culture as a management technique, especially those in the western context, did not pay adequate attention to the tripartite relations but mainly conceptualised it in the employment relationship (e.g. Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Hochschild, 1997; Kunda, 2006). However, as Kunda (2006) has noted, when the employment relationship in the US became increasingly market-mediated, the market rhetoric can be viewed as another form of cultural rhetoric in the workplace. In other words, the corporate culture construction in the western context has been shaped by the hegemonic economic discourse of neoliberalism. By looking into different forms of the tripartite state–employer–employee relationship and going beyond a dichotomous theorisation of neoliberal-capitalist West versus state-socialist China, corporate culture scholars can benefit from reinvestigating how corporate culture constructions are deeply connected to varying political-economic models and social-cultural settings, rendering divergent yet interconnected labour regimes.

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Note

1. Conducting ethnography in a major Chinese high-tech and platform company was difficult to achieve due to issues of field access, trust, and political and commercial sensitivity. After rounds of unsuccessful attempts to secure interview opportunities with Alibaba workers through both personal and professional connections, the author directly applied for the annual AGD training programme as an applicant (with a declared academic interest in learning about Alibaba's corporate culture and business model), went through two rounds of phone interviews by the Human Resources Supervisor and AGD Program Manager, eventually got selected and flew to Alibaba's headquarters in Hangzhou for the training. The Human Resources Supervisor and AGD Program Manager consented to my use of such data for future academic research and publication (e.g. sharing by and discussions with Alibaba's senior managers and trainers).

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