

A social reproductive perspective into rural e-commerce and internet history in China

Communication and the Public
1–5

© The Author(s) 2024

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/20570473241267946

journals.sagepub.com/home/ctp

Lin Zhang

University of New Hampshire, USA

Abstract

The history of the internet, whether in China or elsewhere in the world, is often told through the stories of successful and often publicly listed companies, state policy initiatives and chronology, or prominent individuals and groups such as tech company founders and influential social and political activists. This short essay tells a different story of the Chinese internet history in the past 30 years from a social reproductive perspective, centering on rural e-commerce and families caught in between the rural-urban divide, against the wider currents of the state's rural informatization campaign, Chinese Big Techs' expansion into the countryside, and ongoing transformation in urbanization and rural-urban conversion. The goal is to move beyond a techno-determinist, individualized, and male-centric framework of analyzing digital media and the internet to adopt a materialist, feminist, and substantivist approach.

Keywords

E-commerce, internet history, platform, rural, social reproduction

The history of the internet, whether in China or elsewhere in the world, are often told through the stories of successful and often publicly listed companies, state policy initiatives and chronology, or prominent individuals and groups such as tech company founders and influential social and political activists. In this short essay, I intend to tell a different story of the Chinese internet history in the past 30 years from a social reproductive perspective, centering on rural e-commerce and families caught in-between the rural-urban divide, against the wider currents of the state's rural informatization campaign, Chinese Big Techs' expansion into the countryside, and ongoing transformation in urbanization and rural-urban conversion. The goal is to move beyond a techno-determinist, individualized, and male-centric framework

of analyzing digital media and the internet to adopt a materialist and substantivist approach (Bhattacharya, 2017; Polanyi, 2001).

Informatization, migration, and rural reproduction

For much of its history, China remained a densely populated agrarian society. The era of Maoist China from 1949 to 1976 witnessed socialist mass mobilization, the collectivization of rural labor and land,

Corresponding author:

Lin Zhang, University of New Hampshire, 20 Academic Way,
Durham, NH 03824, USA.Email: Lin.zhang@unh.edu

Creative Commons Non Commercial CC BY-NC: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>) which permits non-commercial use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

and the establishment of strict controls over population mobility through the hukou system. These efforts fueled urban industrialization but also entrenched disparities between rural and urban areas (Lin, 2006; Wen et al., 2021). The return to market-oriented and family-based production, coupled with the lingering legacy of rural collective enterprises, had temporarily narrowed the gap (Huang, 2008). Since the early 1990s, however, the deepening of state-led integration into the global capitalist regime of accumulation had resulted in a large exodus of rural-born migrant workers into the city for jobs in export-oriented factories, urban service sector, and on construction sites (Pun, 2005; Yan, 2008).

These migrants sought employment in export-oriented factories, the urban service sector, and construction sites (Pun, 2005; Yan, 2008). Similar translocal and transnational workers in other parts of the world, many Chinese migrant laborers left their elderly parents and children behind in rural areas, resulting in a significant shift of reproductive labor responsibilities. The unique hukou system barring rural migrants from enjoying the same social benefits as urban Chinese together with the collective ownership of land preserving the basis of rural subsistence living for the migrants have rendered this pattern of “semi-proletarianization” more salient in China’s mixed and dual-structure economy (Pun & Lu, 2010; Qi, 2019).

Since the early 2000s, the plight of Chinese villages and the peasant class has prompted the party state to redress the rural-urban gap. In addition to a nationwide removal of agricultural taxes in 2006, the state invested into building rural “hard infrastructures” like running water, electricity, telephone, cable TV, and high-speed internet (Wen et al., 2021) and “soft infrastructures” like basic medical insurance, pension, and welfare payments (Jacka, 2018). Notably, the expansion of internet in rural China was built on the earlier “Village Access Projects” (VAPs) initiated in the early 1990s by the Ministry of Information Industry and the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television, which brought telephones and televisions into Chinese villages (Oreglia, 2015; Xia, 2010). By 2006, the previous projects and concerns about digital divide were rolled into the “Village Informatization Program” (VIP) as part of the national informatization

campaign to “bring broadband to the village and information services to the household” (Xia, 2010, p. 188). In comparison to the later years of rural platformization championed by homegrown Chinese Big Techs, this earlier phase of rural internet expansion in the form of village informatization was mostly state-led and subsidized.

Throughout the 2000s and 2010s, China continued to play a pivotal role as the “factory of the world,” thanks to the labor contributions of rural migrant workers. Despite the state’s promotion of rural development, rural China remained burdened by the responsibility of global labor reproduction, without receiving commensurate social benefits to sustain this crucial role. In response, nuclear and extended families, although split by rural-to-urban migration, emerged as vital sources of support, serving as buffers against the alienation and challenges posed by global capitalism.

Platformization, reverse migration, and rural family e-commerce

The global capitalist crisis of 2008, however, brought translocal family and the internet together in facilitating the new parallel trends of reverse migration to the countryside and rural platformization in the form of family e-commerce. Many rural migrants who had previously sought opportunities in urban areas, along with a smaller number of urban residents, initiated this shift. The initial impetus for this reverse migration can be traced to the closure of export-focused factories along the eastern coast. These individuals returned to their rural roots in search of alternative economic prospects and to fulfill caregiving responsibilities for elderly family members and children (Wallis, 2015; Yu & Cui, 2019).

This return to the countryside coincided with the rise of homegrown private technology giants such as Alibaba, JD, Pingduoduo, Bytedance, and Kuaishou. These companies, buoyed by a surge in post-crisis liquidity and substantial support from both global and Chinese venture capital, seized upon the reverse migration trend. They harnessed the momentum to drive the rapid platformization of rural China throughout the 2010s. In addition, factors like the competitive dynamics between the United States and

China, the relocation of manufacturing away from China, the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, the subsequent economic downturn, and elevated youth unemployment have further contributed to the influx of returning migrants.

For these migrant returnees and their families, family e-commerce has played a pivotal role in reconnecting previously detached realms of production and reproduction within the village household. This reintegration aims to mitigate the emotional and financial burdens associated with China's dual-structured economy. Paradoxically, the convergence of people, capital, technologies, and state policies, all seeking solutions to the persistent challenges posed by an urban-centric capitalist system, has reshaped the Chinese countryside into a new frontier of digital capitalist accumulation. This transformation occurs within the broader context of China's mixed economy undergoing significant restructuring.

In my visits to e-commerce villages, I observed how these communities either introduced new industries or adapted existing, often export-oriented, production systems to cater to the demands of e-commerce consumption. Consequently, a novel division of labor emerged within these villages, which reflects and contributes to the emergence of new family relationships and evolving gender roles and identities. Here, I borrow anthropologist Yunxiang Yan's concept of "descending familism," characterized by family resources flowing downward and a shift in the focus of existential meaning from ancestors to grandchildren, to help us understand the reconfiguration of power concerning new labor skills across generations (Yan, 2016, p. 245).

My primary research site, W, is a village in East China renowned as a Taobao or e-commerce village, a typical family e-commerce venture that comprised a younger couple, typically ranging from their late twenties to early forties, whose backgrounds varied in terms of urban migrant labor experience. As I documented in my book *The Labor of Reinvention* (Zhang, 2023), the division of labor within couples depended on various factors such as skills, personal preferences, personality traits, health conditions, and life stages. For instance, while women were generally perceived as better at customer service due to their communication skills, some husbands dedicated equal or even more time to responding

to customer inquiries when their wives excelled in photography, managing relationships with weavers, or were occupied with newborns or ill family members. With a significant portion of businesses conducted online in shared accounts, traditional boundaries between private and public spheres blurred, challenging gendered taboos against women participating in work outside the family. In fact, village women I connected with on social media tended to be more active in promoting their products and family businesses virtually.

In addition, these businesses often included their parents, and the most successful of these businesses often grew from pre-existing export-oriented handicraft enterprises owned by the parents. In most families, grandparents in good health worked harder than ever before, often without receiving due recognition, in exchange for their children's emotional companionship and financial support to their children. Fit seniors typically engaged in offline and less technically demanding tasks for the family business, such as collecting, storing, packing, and shipping products. Businesses also sourced products from village weavers, compensating them based on piece rates. These weavers were primarily village women in their late forties or older, residing in the numerous villages scattered along the same riverbank as W. They combined their weaving responsibilities with domestic tasks such as child-rearing, elderly care, cooking, and various household chores.

The future of Chinese villages and rural e-commerce

As rural living standard improves and demographic changes, different models of rural-urban integration are emerging, prompting debates about the future of the Chinese villages, rural residents, and migrant workers, as well as for the purpose of our discussion here, the future of rural e-commerce and platformized family production (Chen & Wen, 2022).

Just to provide one perspective, the ongoing transformation in the e-commerce village W paints a mixed picture. While the number of e-commerce entrepreneurs stabilized after the boom subsided in late 2010s. The workforce of home-based weavers—consisted mainly of grandmothers who wove out of necessity to make ends meet or because they desired

economic self-sufficiency—are shrinking. Younger women, despite learning how to weave from older family members, often dismissed the idea of becoming professional weavers, viewing the labor as physically demanding and culturally inferior to jobs in the e-commerce sector or even urban service work.

While e-commerce helped enhance rural living standards and re-establish links between productive and reproductive labor, fueling the aspirations of rural Chinese for a brighter future (Jacka, 2018), as family resources and the search for a meaningful life trajectory increasingly focus on the well-being of children, the aspirations once exclusive to middle-class urban and overseas Chinese to “raise the perfect child” have begun to permeate rural families. This descending familism is exacerbated by the intensified commodification of rural land, housing, and education since the mid-2010s, driven by the state policy objective of relocating rural residents to nearby county seats (Xiancheng) (Liu, 2023).

Starting from the early 2010s, the central state began redirecting educational resources from townships to county seats in a bid to consolidate limited resources. Local county governments, heavily reliant on real estate development and property values for revenue, introduced policies linking county public school admission to school district homeownership and the location of children’s hukou registration, particularly since the mid-2010s (Liu, 2023). To secure improved educational opportunities for their children, parents in W village were compelled to invest in county apartments within sought-after school districts. This shift led to a real estate boom in the county seat, mirroring developments in many other small towns across China. However, this intensified commodification of essential institutions such as schools and housing has entangled these families in debt, compelled younger generations to relinquish their village land entitlement, and contributed to the growing disconnect between grandparents, who typically opt to stay in their traditional village homes and their children living in county apartments.

During my recent visit to the W village in the summer of 2023, I observed a significant exacerbation of the weaver shortage. Many grandmothers found themselves stretched thin as they juggled responsibilities between their village homes and their children’s county apartments, where they

assisted with child-rearing. Some attempted to continue their weaving activities in urban apartments but found it cumbersome to transport raw materials and products, resulting in challenges in maintaining cleanliness and organization. Mothers with school-age children became less involved in village-based family e-commerce businesses, and some sought alternative career opportunities in the county seat, primarily in the service sector. Those who ventured into moving their family e-commerce businesses to the county seat experienced a sharp rise in costs as they navigated the challenges of renting new office spaces and hiring employees. This ultimately led many to exit the business due to fierce competition and a general economic downturn.

As the real estate-driven urbanization expands apace with a deaccelerated population growth, rural China’s capacity for labor reproduction is weakened, along with the sustainability of family-based e-commerce in gradually fading Chinese villages. The story of W village and rural e-commerce, I hope, has offered us a grounded view of the transformation of the Chinese internet in the past 30 years, captured not only through big internet companies and state policies but also through the lived experiences of ordinary rural families. This story builds on previous research situated at the intersection of rural societies and digital technologies and the internet in China (Oreglia, 2015; Wallis, 2015; Yu & Cui, 2019). However, it brings the latest transformations in rural internet and digital technologies into conversation with literature on social reproduction as an attempt to de-essentialize the Chinese rural experiences, and thus to better historicize and theorize rural Chinese societies’ engagement with digital technologies and internet at this critical conjuncture.

ORCID iD

Lin Zhang  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6967-2759>

References

- Bhattacharya, T. (Ed.). (2017). *Social reproduction theory: Remapping class, recentring oppression*. Pluto Press.
- Chen, G., & Wen, T. (2022). *Rural revitalization: Eleven thoughts on the Chinese path to rural modernization*. Chongqing Publishing House.

- Huang, Y. (2008). *Capitalism with Chinese characteristics: Entrepreneurship and the state* (1st ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Jacka, T. (2018). Translocal family reproduction and agrarian change in China: A new analytical framework. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 45(7), 1341–1359. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2017.1314267>
- Lin, C. (2006). *The transformation of Chinese socialism*. Duke University Press Books.
- Liu, T. (2023). Real-estate boom, commodification and crises of social reproductive institutions in rural China. *Development and Change*, 54(3), 543–569. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12769>
- Oreglia, E. (2015). The “Sent-Down” Internet: Using information and communication technologies in rural China. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 8(1), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2015.991369>
- Polanyi, K. (2001). *The great transformation: The political and economic origins of our time* (2nd ed.). Beacon Press.
- Pun, N. (2005). *Made in China: Women factory workers in a global workplace* [Revised ed.]. Duke University Press.
- Pun, N., & Lu, H. (2010). Unfinished proletarianization: Self, anger, and class action among the second generation of peasant-workers in present-day China. *Modern China*, 36(5), 493–519.
- Qi, H. (2019). Semi-proletarianization in a dual economy: The case of China. *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 51(4), 553–561. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0486613419853876>
- Wallis, C. (2015). Micro-entrepreneurship, new media technologies, and the reproduction and reconfiguration of gender in rural China. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 8(1), 42–58.
- Wen, T., Lau, K. C., & Sit, T. (2021). *Ten crises: The political economy of China's development* (1st ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Xia, J. (2010). Linking ICTs to rural development: China's rural information policy. *Government Information Quarterly*, 27(2), 187–195. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2009.10.005>
- Yan, H. (2008). *New masters, new servants: Migration, development, and women workers in China*. Duke University Press Books.
- Yan, Y. (2016). Intergenerational intimacy and descending familism in rural North China: Intergenerational intimacy and descending familism in rural North China. *American Anthropologist*, 118(2), 244–257. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.12527>
- Yu, H., & Cui, L. (2019). China's e-commerce: Empowering rural women? *The China Quarterly*, 238, 418–437.
- Zhang, L. (2023). *The labor of reinvention: Entrepreneurship in the new Chinese digital economy*. Columbia University Press.

Author biography

Lin Zhang is an associate professor of Communication and the University of New Hampshire. Her research centers on critical innovation studies, focusing on China and ethnic Asian people in a global and comparative context. She is the author of *The Labor of Reinvention: Entrepreneurship in the New Chinese Digital Economy* (Columbia University Press, 2023). <https://linzhangweb.org/>