

When Platform Capitalism Meets Petty Capitalism in China: Alibaba and an Integrated Approach to Platformization

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Combining platform studies with insights from research on petty capitalism and the political economy of the Chinese Internet, this article takes an integrated approach to analyze key moments in the historical evolution of the Chinese e-commerce monopoly Alibaba since 1999. It argues for a dynamic model of technological and cultural transformations that treats platformization as a set of historically and culturally specific processes and relations constituted by constantly shifting and interacting forces. It finds that in the early days, Alibaba deployed platform mechanisms of participation and commodification to position itself as a democratic and participatory platform contra the deficient infrastructure of the state, while relying on foreign venture capital to keep the tensions of commodification at bay to prioritize market expansion. After Alibaba had achieved monopoly after the 2008 global crisis, it has formed more symbiotic relations with the state, ramping up mechanisms of datafication, selection, and commodification to more effectively extract the surplus value generated through the labor of platform-based petty capitalists. Platform-labor tensions intensified as Alibaba's profit imperatives began to override its earlier promises of universal access and democratic participation.

Keywords: platform, infrastructure, e-commerce, China, digital labor

Crocodile in the Yangtze, a documentary about Alibaba's history, contains rare footage of the Chinese e-commerce giant's CEO, Jack Ma, taken from 1995, when he was still an obscure English teacher turned Internet-start-up entrepreneur. It captures his frustrating and embarrassing experience of trying to promote his new venture, "China Pages"—an online English directory for Chinese international trading businesses—to government agencies in Beijing. In the scene, the 30-something Ma knocks on the doors of several government units to seek support, painstakingly explaining to them why the Internet and e-commerce is important to China, only to be ignored by indifferent government officials.

Almost two decades later, following Alibaba's 2014 Nasdaq IPO, *The New York Times* quotes Duncan Clark, the chairman of the Beijing-based consulting firm BDA China, referring to Ma as "a politician with a small 'p'" who "effectively represents millions of people who now depend on Alibaba for their livelihood" (Gough & Stevenson, 2014, p. 1). In the same month, Ma was interviewed by the *60 Minutes* correspondent Lara Logan. When asked about Alibaba's relationship with the Chinese government, he declared that "they

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[Chinese politicians] care that I can stabilize the country. I told the government, 'If people have no jobs, you are in trouble—the government will be in trouble.' My job is to help more people have jobs" (CBS News, September 28, 2014, p.1).

These two publicized moments about the Chinese e-commerce behemoth Alibaba, two decades apart, emblemize the story that this article recounts about the platform ecosystem's evolving position in relation to the Chinese government and the petty-capitalist entrepreneurs using it. During its early years, between 1999 and 2007, Alibaba deployed platform mechanisms to increase participation and to incentivize and monetize the labor of its petty-capitalist shop owners. The company distinguished itself discursively as a democratic and participatory platform contra the deficient infrastructure of the state. Meanwhile, it had to rely on foreign venture capital to keep the tensions of commodification at bay to prioritize market expansion.

In the years following the 2008 global crisis, when Alibaba had secured its monopoly, its earlier discursive positioning against the state gradually gave way to a more symbiotic relationship. Although the earlier successful mechanism of participation is still in place, the corporation has ramped up mechanisms of datafication, selection, and commodification to more effectively extract the surplus value of the platform-based petty-capitalists' labor. Tensions intensified as Alibaba's profit imperatives began to override the company's discursive positioning as a democratic and participatory platform. Petty-capitalist shop owners, feeling betrayed and marginalized by Alibaba's prioritization of established and branded businesses, hijacked the platform's selection/ranking machines to momentarily disrupt its smooth operation to voice their discontent, demanding that the state exercise paternalistic protection against corporate exploitation.

Alibaba's two-decade history, from a start-up to a monopoly platform ecosystem, I argue, is a distinct Chinese version of the larger story about global digital platforms. It is a story about the convergence between platform capitalism and petty capitalism, or small-scale and family-based flexible regimes of production in China.

Platform studies emerged from the field of media and communication studies as an interdisciplinary body of scholarship with different foci. Some emphasized the computational and technical aspect of platforms, calling for a shift to object-oriented ontology in our analysis of new media (Bogost & Montfort, 2009; Langlois & Elmer, 2013). Others highlighted the discursive and rhetorical construction of "platforms" as business and political strategies (Gillespie, 2010). A growing number of recent studies have taken a more integrated approach to technical, commercial, and discursive mechanisms of platforms (Nieborg & Helmond, 2019; Nieborg & Poell, 2018; van Dijck & Poell, 2013).

Taken together, these studies have generated enormous insights into the technocommercial and cultural mechanisms underlying contemporary digital platforms and the technology-mediated power negotiations that result from platformization. However, their emphasis on the novelty of platform mechanisms and almost exclusive focus on North American and European societies come with spatiotemporal constraints. On one hand, their focus on ruptures and new platform-based mechanisms, while significant and valuable in its own way, often prevents them from better situating the contemporary moment of digital platforms in the longer historical patterns of capitalism as a global system. On the other hand, the North American and, to a lesser extent, European centrism in existing research on digital platforms

tends to cloud the fact that the process of platformization is shaped by the mutual constitution between platform mechanisms and the specificities of the societies in which they are situated. As a result, it remains underexplored and undertheorized how platformization is transforming capitalism on a global scale, especially how digital platforms are being embedded into and are reshaping and being shaped by non-Western societies like China.

As the world's largest e-commerce company and retailer, Alibaba has garnered enormous media attention, especially after its high-profile NYSE IPO in 2014. Although the English-speaking media have been obsessed with the company's legendary CEO and its stock market performance, the majority of academic literature published in English on Alibaba or Chinese e-commerce in general is in business management or economics. Scant attention is devoted to unpacking Alibaba's enormous and growing technological, social, and political significance as a platform ecosystem.

To address these theoretical and empirical blind spots, this article takes an integrated approach to analyzing the historical transformations of Alibaba's e-commerce branch, focusing on key moments such as the battle between Taobao and eBay, the company's rural expansion, and the anti-Taobao movement. Theoretically, I bring platform studies into conversation with literature on Chinese petty capitalism and the political economy of the Chinese Internet. I situate this research among recent scholarly efforts to underline the historical and social dimensions of platformization beyond the microfocus on novel platform mechanisms. Prominent among them are Nick Srnicek's (2016) historicizing of "platform capitalism" in the U.S. context; van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal's (2018) multilevel analysis of a "platform society" that combines microlevel platform mechanisms and macrolevel platform geopolitics; and the bifocal perspective that brings sociohistorical sensitive infrastructure studies into dialogue with platform studies' emphasis on commercial mechanisms and technological affordances (Chen & Qiu, 2019; Parks & Starosielski, 2015; Plantin, 2017; Plantin & de Seta, 2019; Plantin, Lagoze, Edwards, & Sandvig, 2018; Plantin & Punathambekar, 2019).

I ask how do digital platform mechanisms articulate residual and emerging political economic forces in transforming relations among the government, businesses, venture capital, and labor in contemporary China? How do Chinese experiences with platformization contribute to a reconceptualization of both platform studies and the political economy of the Internet?

Methodologically, I weave together materials about Alibaba and Chinese e-commerce collected between 2009 and 2017, drawing from industry reports, business case studies, and media coverage about Alibaba and Ma. The focus of the article is on the history of the company, but the historical account is informed by several ethnographic trips to a Taobao entrepreneur summer training class in Hangzhou, two Taobao villages in Shandong and Zhejiang provinces, and one Taobao village summit in Zhejiang.

In the following pages, I will trace and analyze, through the case of Alibaba, how the convergence of specific platform mechanisms and changing political and economic forces is shaping Chinese experiences of platformization in our current historical moment. In doing so, I highlight the culturally/nationally specific experiences of technological transformation without essentializing culture or falling into the technodeterminist trap. I depict how the platform economy both continues from and reinvents China's petty entrepreneurial tradition of family-based small businesses. Furthermore, I demonstrate how Chinese

platform companies rely on global venture capital, digital economy rhetoric, and platform algorithms to form various discursive, commercial, and technical strategies to navigate relations with platform-based petty capitalists and the Chinese state. Ultimately, I argue for a dynamic and integrated model of technological and cultural transformations that treats platformization as historically and culturally specific processes and relations constituted by constantly shifting and interacting heterogeneous forces.

An Integrated Approach to Platformization: When Platform Capitalism Meets Petty Capitalism in China

Taking an integrated approach to platformization, this article both builds on and intervenes into platform studies by highlighting platform mechanisms' articulation to specific sociohistorical dynamics as constituting a broader shift in contemporary capitalism. In my analysis, I make this intervention by bringing research on platform mechanisms into conversation with existing critical political, economic research on the Chinese Internet (Chen, 2018; Hong, 2017; Jia & Winseck, 2018; Shen, 2016; Tai & Hu, 2018; G. Zhang & Hjorth, 2017; L. Zhang, 2017; Y. Zhao, 2010) and the analytic of petty capitalism in historical anthropology (Gates, 1996; Smart & Smart, 2005).

Traditionally, the strength of political economists lies in their analyses of the complex state-platform-capital nexus. The political economists of the Chinese Internet have unpacked, for instance, how the Chinese state's informationalization initiative laid the infrastructural foundation for private monopoly digital platforms like Alibaba, while exercising direct and indirect control over digital platforms through censorship and regulation (Hong, 2017; Shen, 2016; Weber & Jia, 2007; Y. Zhao, 2010). The state's information and communication-driven restructuring following the 2008 global crisis, they argued, has strengthened government collaboration with Internet companies (Hong, 2017; Shen, 2016). Meanwhile, from their genesis, Chinese Internet platforms have been highly financialized capitalist enterprises, firmly embedded into, and, to a large extent, dictated by the global network of international investment banks, venture capital funds, and other foreign investors (Jia & Winseck, 2018). These intersecting political economic forces constitute part of the shifting assemblage of platform capitalism in China, rendering state-platform and platform-capital relations highly contingent and contradictory (Peck & Zhang, 2013).

This macro, top-down perspective of the Chinese Internet has recently been supplemented by a more micropolitical economic focus on platform-based digital labor (Chen, 2018; Tai & Hu, 2018; L. Zhang, 2017; E. J. Zhao, 2019). These emerging studies of platformization and digital labor in China represent important scholarly efforts to explore how culturally and nationally specific socioeconomic dynamics work together with platform mechanisms in constituting user experiences and social changes. However, with some notable exceptions, such as Chen's (2018) analysis of how the ride-hailing platform Didi transformed the traditional taxi industry, and L. Zhang's (2017, 2018) study of the ways in which changing gendered labor practices led to platform-based e-commerce as "women's work," research on digital labor in China tends to take an ahistorical perspective and emphasizes the novelty of digital platforms and labor.

Here, the analytic of "petty capitalism" becomes useful in historicizing Chinese experiences of platformization. Smart and Smart (2005) defined petty capitalists as "individuals or households who employ a small number of workers but are themselves actively involved in the labor process" (p. 3). E-commerce

businesses on Alibaba's platforms typify this petty-capitalist organization of labor as the majority of them are small or medium-sized businesses employing few, if any, employees beyond relatives and friends. If anything, the distinctions between petty entrepreneurs and laborers are often murky in the small family-based e-shops that I encountered during my fieldwork. Historical anthropologist Hill Gates (1996) argued that the dialectic between a petty-capitalist and a tributary mode of production has served as the motor of China's economic development for thousands of years since the Song Dynasty (960–1279). Historically, petty capitalism, taking the form of small-scale and family-based flexible regimes of production, was both exploited and protected by the tributary state to reproduce the hegemonic domination of patriarchal, imperial, and political elites. For Gates, this regime of production was predominant in China until socialist nationalization in the 1950s. Although in post-Mao China, the transnational capitalists and party cadres have become the new ruling class, petty-capitalist dynamism has remained a strong engine of the Chinese economy, manifested either in the boom of township and village enterprises (TVEs) in the 1980s and early 1990s, or the postmillennial explosion in platform-based self-employment and microentrepreneurship, as seen in emerging industries like e-commerce, on-demand services (e.g., ride hailing; Chen, 2018), labor-intensive digital workshops (e.g., gold farming; Tai & Hu, 2018), or live-streaming (G. Zhang & Hjorth, 2017).

The analytic of petty capitalism nicely supplements existing political economic accounts of the Chinese Internet. It functions not only to bridge the macro- and microapproaches, linking platform, microentrepreneurs to state and capital, but also to historicize their complex interaction in shaping the platformization of contemporary Chinese society. It sheds light on the historical continuities of the state's heavy involvement in the economy and the seemingly contradictory relations between the state and petty capitalists. That is, the state can be either extractive or paternalistic under different circumstances, depending on which position better serves its ultimate purpose of maintaining hegemonic domination. As Gates (1996) argued, "China's economic expansion was moved by the motor of petty capitalism but guided by state-minded rulers who were as engaged with making productivity serve the state as with repelling barbarians" (p. 41). Alibaba, as I will show, had to navigate this dynamic state–petty-capitalist relation, capitalizing on petty-capitalist dissatisfaction toward the state to mobilize their entrepreneurial labor, but responding to the state's paternalistic intervention when petty capitalists appealed to the state to resolve platform–entrepreneur conflict. The concept of petty capitalism also helps to explain how the petty capitalist's tactical, emotional, and morality-based resistance against a monopolized digital platform—in contrast to the industrialized model of union-based organization of labor protests—has its historical roots in the petty-capitalist structure of economy and feeling of an agrarian society (Gates, 1996, p. 199; Scott, 2008).

Admittedly, petty capitalists can play the role of the exploiters themselves within their small unit of businesses, although they are simultaneously being exploited by the platform as active participants in the labor process (Gates, 1996; Smart & Smart, 2005). Because the current research focuses mainly on the platform's evolution in relation to the state- and platform-based petty shop owners, I choose not to analyze labor relations within petty-capitalist e-commerce firms, which is a topic that deserves a full-length article of its own. That is, in this article, by platform-based petty-capitalist labor, I am referring to owners of small and medium-sized shops on Alibaba's platforms, while acknowledging that the lines between employment and self-employment and between entrepreneur and workers are often blurred. In the following pages, I will combine insights from platform studies with the political economy of the Chinese Internet and literature on petty capitalism to form an integrated approach to platformization in China. I deploy this approach to

analyze how a platform’s technical, commercial, and discursive mechanisms intersect with residual economic and social traditions and shifting political economic forces in constituting locally specific practices of state–platform–capital relations. In doing so, I bring the political economic focus on state–capital relations, and the anthropological emphasis on history and cultural/national specificities to bear on platform studies’ attention to the computational, commercial, and discursive mechanisms of platforms.

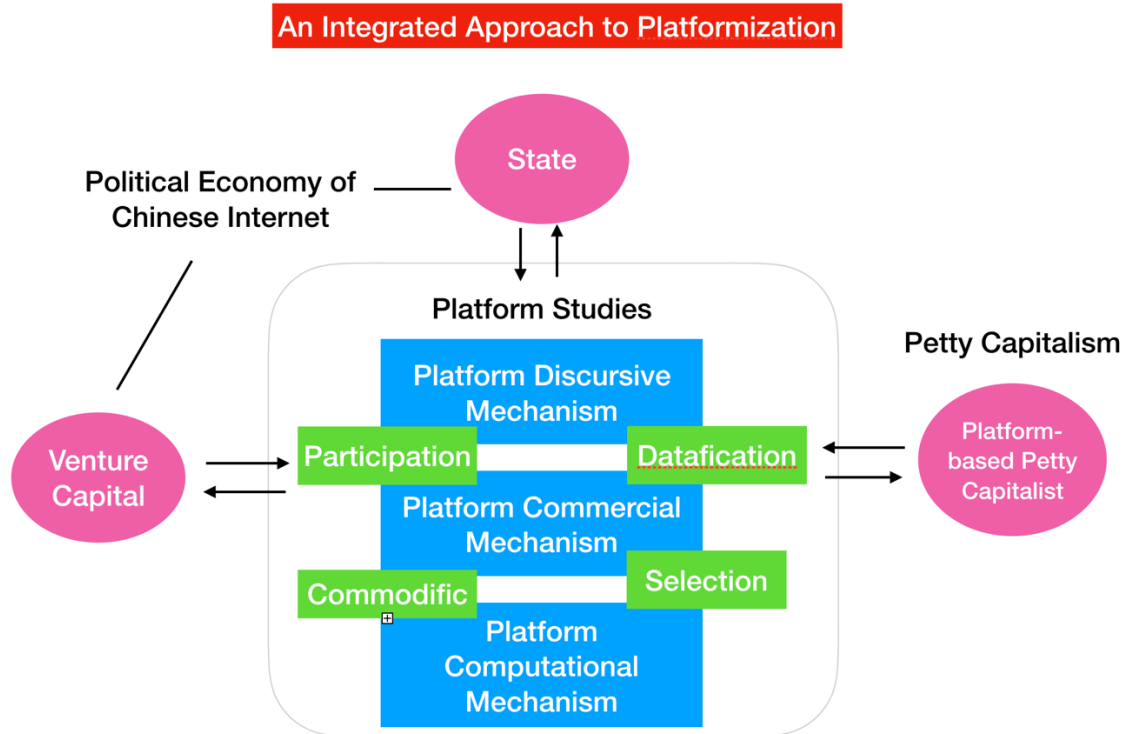


Figure 1. An integrated approach to platformization.

If we examine Alibaba’s historical evolution through an integrated approach since the founding of the company in 1999 until 2019, we could identify two distinct phases in these years marked by major shifts in terms of platform–state–venture-capital relations, main platform mechanisms deployed, and the company’s relationship with platform-based petty-capitalist labor. The first phase was bookended by the genesis of Alibaba’s business-to-business (B-to-B) e-commerce platform Alibaba.com in 1999 and the market domination achieved by its customer-to-customer (C-to-C) platform Taobao.com in 2007. In this first phase of development, Alibaba successfully deployed the platform mechanisms of participation and commodification and transnational venture capital to ride on China’s petty-capitalist tradition and mobilize platform-based petty-capitalist labor. Prioritizing market expansion and user growth in the early days, Alibaba was mostly able to keep at bay the tensions resulting from its commodification of petty capitalist participation through a combination of venture capital support and branding strategies. In the face of the

state's laissez-faire approach to digital platforms, Alibaba capitalized on the petty-capitalist versus tributary-state tension and presented itself discursively as a more participatory and efficient alternative platform to existing government infrastructure in commerce.

After Alibaba had achieved a monopoly over the domestic Chinese e-commerce market, its relationship with different levels of the Chinese government grew more symbiotic. The 2008 global financial crisis had only strengthened Alibaba's monopoly status. The sudden contraction in exports forced China's existing manufacturing businesses, many of which are small-scale petty-capitalist firms, to look inward toward the country's expanding domestic consumer market. A dismal job market, meanwhile, had led many people to seek alternative or supplemental employment or self-employment opportunities in the rapidly expanding e-commerce industry. The convergence of these two petty capitalist forces led to an e-commerce boom, making Alibaba increasingly indispensable to the Chinese state's economic restructuring initiative.

As the state became more reliant on Alibaba, it also began to exercise more political clout over the company. This was especially true when the company's relation with its shop owners, in particular the small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) on its platforms, became strained. As the date of Alibaba's IPO approached, the corporate goal of profit maximization became increasingly imperative. Consequently, Alibaba amplified its datafication and selection mechanisms to extract more surplus value from platform-based petty-capitalist labor while becoming more biased against small and medium-sized sellers on the platform. When conflicts flared up during the anti-Taobao movement, the tributary state reacted by taking a paternalistic stance, pressuring Alibaba to accommodate some of the demands made by the petty-capitalist protestors. These changing state-business, business-venture capital, and platform-labor relations, as I will show, worked together with amplified platform mechanisms of datafication and selection to constitute a new stage of Alibaba's evolution since 2008.

Reinventing Petty Capitalism: Alibaba's Path to Monopoly (1999–2007)

Within a decade of the launch of Alibaba's B-to-B e-commerce platform Alibaba.com in 1999, the company had driven out its fierce capital-rich global competitor eBay and firmly secured monopoly status in the Chinese domestic market in 2007. This success, I argue, was built on a marriage between the Chinese petty-capitalist tradition and platform mechanisms, as Alibaba positioned itself as a more participatory platform against government infrastructure to mobilize platform-based petty-capitalist labor in this early phase of development.

The founding of Alibaba.com directly answered the need of an earlier batch of Chinese petty capitalists. Many of them were export-driven small manufacturers seeking to expand their businesses by breaking free from the bureaucratic straitjacket of a tributary postsocialist state. Although the Chinese state's export-oriented developmental policies had unleashed the energy of Chinese petty capitalists since the 1980s, governmental bureaucracy still stood as an impediment to the further liberalization of the market (Huang, 2008). SMEs often had limited means to secure export deals and expand production because they lacked the scale and connections to trade through state-owned export middlemen and found it costly and inconvenient to travel to trade shows like the Canton Fair (Clark, 2016).

Jack Ma, an English teacher turned entrepreneur, who was born and raised in China's most entrepreneurial province, Zhejiang, knew from personal experience the immense business potential that lay in capitalizing on Chinese petty-capitalists' frustration with state governance. One of his failed business enterprises—an English directory for Chinese small businesses called "China Pages"—was acquired by a state-owned company affiliated with the powerful Zhejiang Telecom, and the latter eventually squeezed Ma out of his own company through bureaucratic clout in 1996. Before launching Alibaba in 1999, Ma's brief stint working for the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation, in Beijing, to establish a government-sponsored e-commerce platform, further convinced him of the government's inability to compete with private Internet entrepreneurs in the e-commerce industry (Clark, 2016).

These early experiences with e-commerce, as both a petty capitalist himself and a government employee, motivated Ma to strategically position Alibaba.com as a privately owned trading platform for Chinese petty capitalists to bypass state-owned middlemen and to directly seek overseas outlets for their products. This strategy of digital platforms to pit their bottom-up and "user-empowering" services against top-down big government is certainly not new nor unique to China or Alibaba. Van Dijck and colleagues (2018) noted how the deliberate self-positioning of platform companies like Uber and Airbnb as a better promoter of public value than the "inefficient and cumbersome" government "reflects a neoliberal articulation of the state as the enemy of private individuals and businesses" (p. 23). However, this conflicted state-business/labor relation that Alibaba harnessed—petty capitalist versus tributary state dynamics—had long preceded the contemporary neoliberal moment. Capitalizing on these tensions, Alibaba aligned with Chinese petty capitalists in the early days of its business against the bureaucracy of the tributary state to promote Alibaba.com as a more democratic, accessible, and participatory alternative to state infrastructures.

Alibaba's C-to-C site Taobao.com continued from the B-to-B platform Alibaba.com's positioning as an empowering platform for petty entrepreneurs. However, instead of merely serving existing export-oriented SMEs, Taobao trumped up its function as a job creator and a provider of alternative self-employment opportunities to appeal to a younger generation of e-commerce entrepreneurs who did not necessarily have connections to China's manufacturing sector. Although Taobao still prided itself on its brand image as a superior, privately owned challenge to the state-owned sector, its role in digitalizing China's existing manufacturing base, and driving domestic consumption and entrepreneurial endeavors aligned with the Chinese state's post-WTO ambition to boost domestic consumption and expand digital and cultural industries (Hong, 2017). These new dynamics also coincided with the global venture capital's post-dot-com bubble optimism about the nascent Chinese Internet industry as a new and exciting site of investment, which translated into a constant flow of venture capital money into Chinese tech companies like Alibaba (Clark, 2016; Jia & Winseck, 2018; Y. Zhao, 2010).

Amid these shifting political economic forces, Taobao adopted a series of technical, commercial, and discursive strategies to drive user participation (Plantin, 2017) and commodification (van Dijck et al., 2018), which nonetheless tapped into the Chinese petty-capitalist structures of economy and feeling.

One central technical innovation that Taobao implemented to stimulate and channel seller and consumer participation and free labor is AliWangWang—the embedded IM system that allowed shoppers and shop owners to virtually replicate the bazaar-style haggle and banter typical of the petty-capitalist informal

market. Although virtual chatting compromised the immediacy and transparency of face-to-face contact, AliWangWang created a set of expressive built-in emoticons to partially make up for this loss. This technical innovation not only helped establish “swift trust” in an unfamiliar virtual market perceived by many Chinese at that time as risky, it also functioned to improve the platform’s “stickiness.”



Figure 2. Taobao’s imbedded IM tool AliWangWang.

In addition to the technical mechanisms to incentivize participation and drive commodification, Taobao also adopted the commercial strategy of playing the “nonfee” card in the early stage of competition to outcompete other C-to-C platforms, especially its biggest rival, eBay China. When Taobao went online in 2003, it was free for sellers to register, list, and sell products on the platform. In contrast, its major competitor, eBay China, instituted eBay’s global “formula” with “insertion fees, final-value fees, and features fees” (“Online Extra,” 2004, p. 1). This fee-based model of e-commerce monetization prevailed in eBay’s North American–European market at that time. However, the situation on the ground in China was quite different.

Taobao’s free model turned out to be an irresistible attraction to Chinese petty sellers who usually had little, if any, start-up investment to begin with. Many of the early Taobao sellers I encountered during my fieldwork were young people from ordinary, if not disadvantaged, family backgrounds, whose lack of personal connection and/or educational credentials made them less competitive in the formal white-collar job market. It was typical for an entrepreneurial young couple/family or two friends to get started by moonlighting on Taobao in addition to their day jobs or education. Many of them would source commodities from local wholesale markets during the weekend and drop off packages on their way to work in the morning. As business expanded and became steadier, some sellers might quit their formal jobs to become full-time small-business owners (Clark, 2016; G. Zhang, 2009).

Through the implementation of technical innovations like AliWangWang and the free model, Taobao married Chinese petty-capitalist dynamics with what economists would call a “multisided market”: digital platforms functioning as intermediaries linking different user groups, advertisers, and service providers to save costs and decrease barriers of entry for all parties involved (Nieborg & Helmond, 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018). The free model had offered a low-cost platform for petty entrepreneurs with little start-up capital

to sell their wares. The IM system of AliWangWang served as a crucial technical device through which the petty-capitalist sellers' services were exchanged with e-commerce consumers' purchasing power.

However, as van Dijck and associates (2018) and Plantin (2017) pointed out, such commodification of users' participation, though democratizing the market and making microentrepreneurship more accessible, also exploits the immaterial labor of users, creates precariousness, and ultimately shifts economic power from traditional institutions (in this case government trading infrastructure and off-line malls and markets) to digital platforms. My conversations with the e-commerce shop owners substantiated these critical analyses, for they reported that they had to invest considerable mental and affective labor into customer service via AliWangWang because of the expectation created by the instantaneity of IM communication and the norms of the seller community on Taobao.

These tensions inherent to the commodification of user participation nevertheless were temporarily kept at bay in these early days of Taobao's expansion by the venture-capital-endorsed "growth-before-profit" strategy (Srnicsek, 2016). Among all of Alibaba's investors, the Japanese firm Softbank played a crucial role by injecting several rounds of capital into Taobao during its prolonged battle with eBay to sustain Taobao's operation when the platform was unable to generate profit. This constant inflow of venture capital money allowed Taobao to prioritize the expansion of the platform's user base and to cultivate user-platform relations. Boosted by venture capital money, Taobao triumphed over eBay China in 2005 with a market share of 67% (vs. eBay's 29%). By the year 2006, Taobao became a monopoly over China's e-commerce market by driving eBay out of China almost entirely (Liu, 2012).

In addition to venture capital endorsement, these tensions were also assuaged by Alibaba's discursive mechanism, which positioned the company culturally as a privately owned but public-serving platform and a champion of petty capitalists' interests. Although Taobao's expansion coincided with the Chinese government's post-WTO (World Trade Organization) promotion of information and cultural industries, the central government had largely taken a laissez-faire approach to Alibaba in those early years. Nonetheless, Alibaba's discursive positioning, while avoiding any direct antagonism toward the state, led the company to assert many quasigovernmental ambitions, such as poverty reduction, economic redistribution, job creation, public infrastructure and values building. Such positioning was apparent from the numerous speeches that Ma delivered over the years. For example, he once said,

If you divide enterprises into rich people and poor people, the Internet is a realm for poor people . . . the price for a web page is basically the same. I want to enable poor people to use this tool to rise in a kind of revolution. (Liu & Avery, 2009, p. 21)

By emphasizing Alibaba's public service function, Ma was intentionally vague about its profit motive. If anything, he abstained from talking about profits when he commented in an interview with China Central Television that "no matter what you are doing, material gain should not be your main motivation" (Liu & Avery, 2009, p. 22). Speaking at a 2005 economic forum in Shanghai, Ma justified Taobao's free model, saying that his purpose for doing business was not to beat the competition, but rather to "create social value" (Jin, 2013). He was also quoted later in a 2008 speech explaining why Taobao stuck to its no-fee model; according to him, Alibaba's "mission" was not to "make some money," but to "create one million job opportunities and change the fate of numerous people" (Alibaba, 2010, p. 3).

Alibaba's reliance on global venture capital and its quasigovernmental positioning as a privately owned but public-serving participatory platform vis-à-vis state infrastructure resembles those Silicon Valley digital platforms documented by van Dijck and colleagues (2018) and Gillespie (2010). According to them, platform companies' deliberate equation of their role as a creator of economic value with "the creation of public value toward the common good" (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 23) helped them reconcile competing financial, cultural, and regulatory demands (Gillespie, 2010, p. 348). However, Alibaba's grafting of platform mechanisms like AliWangWang and the free model onto Chinese petty-capitalist structures of economy and feeling uniquely positioned the company to more effectively meet the demands of, and tap into the labor of, petty entrepreneurs than its capital-rich Silicon Valley competitor eBay. Nevertheless, as I will show in the following section, Alibaba's alternative positioning vis-à-vis state infrastructure and its quasigovernmental public-serving façade started to reverse after the corporation achieved a monopoly in China in 2008.

Post-2008 Shifting Platform–State/Petty-Capitalist Relations: Taobao Villages and the Anti-Taobao Movement

Following the 2008 global financial crisis, a sudden contraction in overseas demand for made-in-China commodities forced export-oriented businesses to look inward toward China's own rapidly expanding domestic consumer market to ease the pressure of overproduction. The Chinese state ramped up its new millennial ambition to restructure the export-oriented developmental model. Technological innovation, creativity, and entrepreneurship emerged as the new visions through which the nation reimagined itself in the post-2008 global world (Hong, 2017). Despite its efforts, the central government found it hard to overcome the inertia of an old economic model built on export and fixed asset investment. As the pressure of unemployment and underemployment ran high, Alibaba became one of the biggest beneficiaries of the crisis. Between 2007 and 2014, the company's annual revenue skyrocketed from USD\$0.29 billion to USD\$8.05 billion, leading to its high-profile IPO in 2014 at the New York Stock Exchange (Date-Shappard, 2015). Not only did Alibaba serve as a bridge between factories seeking new outlets for their products and a growing number of domestic e-commerce consumers, it also helped generate employment and self-employment opportunities to absorb surplus labor from traditional industries. Alibaba's increasingly important role in post-2008 China's state-championed economic restructuring contributed to the consolidation of its status as an e-commerce monopoly and infrastructuralized platform (Plantin & Punathambekar, 2019).

In this new phase of Alibaba's evolution, the company's positioning in relation to the state and platform-based petty capitalists gradually shifted. A deepened collaboration between Alibaba and the various levels of government in China led to a more symbiotic and collaborative platform-state relationship, which helped to expand Alibaba's reach into rural China, but the central government appeared to become more interventionist. As tensions between Alibaba's profit drive and its earlier promises of democratic participation, universal access, and public service intensified, the government took a paternalistic stance to protect the small and medium-sized sellers on Alibaba's platforms. Although the earlier mechanisms of participation and commodification persisted, the platform ramped up mechanisms of datafication and selection to facilitate its post-2008 monetization and market expansion.

In contrast to Alibaba's earlier strategy to capitalize on the petty-capitalists-versus-tributary-state tension, the company adjusted its positioning to ride on the post-2008 state's policies to promote informationalization and digital entrepreneurship in rural China and collaborated with both central and local governments in advancing its rural campaign. The rural campaign was waged on both discursive and technical fronts. Discursively, Aliresearch, the e-commerce research institute directly serving the interests of the Alibaba Group, played an instrumental role in weaving together a web of governmental agencies, state-owned research institutes and universities, media, and peasant entrepreneurs to create the so-called Taobao Village phenomenon. Table 2 maps the key events orchestrated by Aliresearch to solicit state endorsement of its rural campaign and the impact of its public relations maneuvering on state policies. Particularly relevant to our analysis is the report drafted by the state-owned Center for Information Study, which compared the Taobao Village Shaji to Xiaogang village, known as the birthplace of postsocialist TVEs and the poster child of the state's success in reenergizing Chinese petty-capitalist tradition through economic liberalization (Aliresearch, 2010).

Table 1. The Making of the "Taobao Village Phenomenon" and State-Alibaba Collaboration.

Mid-2010	Aliresearch coined the concept of "Taobao Villages"
	Large number of media stories about the "Taobao Village Phenomenon" emerging
September, 2010	Alibaba Group crowned Shaji village as the "Best Cradle for Rural E-commerce"
December, 2010	Research team from state-owned Center for Information Study visited Shaji and released a report on Aliresearch's website titled "Shaji Model and its Significance"
December 18, 2010	A group of "high level experts" from governmental and academic institutions convened in shanji to "discuss the significance of the Shaji model" as "a new path for rural development"

Between 2010 and 2015, Alibaba's lobbying efforts materialized into many proposals conceived by various parliamentary representatives calling on the Chinese state to spearhead rural e-commerce at annual parliamentary sessions, which led the state to issue a series of documents to encourage rural e-commerce.

On the technical front, Alibaba cultivated Taobao villages and peasant entrepreneurs through a combination of datafication strategy and media management. I learned in my fieldwork that Alibaba's big data team generated visualization of e-commerce businesses on its platform by tracking shop owner's IP addresses. Once they identified a heavy concentration of businesses in one rural area, they would dispatch a team of Alibaba employees to cultivate relations with the local municipal, township, and village governments and peasant shop owners. To bring visibility to the selected village, the company would invite journalists from various media outlets to carry reports on the village and peasant entrepreneurs. These

efforts were usually met with enthusiasm by local cadres because they served as propaganda for their political achievement.

The deployment of platform datafication and selection mechanisms, when supplemented by media publicity, ran counter to Alibaba's promises of universal access and democratic participation. To attract more peasants to e-commerce, Alibaba often picked peasant representatives inside selected Taobao villages to create "success stories." This was often done by channeling more advertising traffic to the chosen peasant entrepreneurs' e-shops by bumping up their product listing rankings and offering them more opportunities to participate in various promotional activities hosted by the platforms. This algorithmic promotional cherry-picking strategy was usually supplemented with media publicity about the entrepreneur to spread his or her success stories for others to emulate.

Alibaba's rural campaign serves as a compelling example of how the platform, once it had achieved monopoly, shifted its earlier positioning as a private alternative to failing governmental infrastructure, to leverage its monopoly power in cultivating ties with the government to further its market expansion and realize platform monetization. In comparison, the platform's earlier democratic and participatory public-serving promises to the petty capitalists sounded increasingly hollow. As I will soon show with the anti-Taobao campaign, the platform's deployment of datafication mechanisms (or the capturing and rendering of Taobao shops' locations and activities into information that informs business strategies) and selection mechanisms (or the manipulation of rural e-commerce shops' reputation rankings to promote certain entrepreneurs) reflects a larger shift in the platform's relations with petty-capitalist users. Once Alibaba had secured monopoly status, it became increasingly exploitative and extractive, especially with regard to small and medium-sized sellers.

The platform's ramping up of datafication and selection mechanisms, as I have shown, did not unfold in a social vacuum, but rather was deeply enmeshed in China's existing regime of governance and relations, and intersected with Alibaba's post-2008 positioning in relation to the state and petty capitalist entrepreneurs. However, this new platform-state affinity could be precarious, just as Alibaba's monopoly power over petty capitalist users could be challenged. As we will see with the anti-Taobao campaign in 2011, the government intervened in platform-labor relations when it feared that the petty capitalists' growing discontent toward Alibaba's monopoly would disrupt social stability.

Taobao's "free model," while crucial to its rapid market expansion in the early days and its triumph over eBay, turned into a liability after the corporation achieved monopoly status. By 2007, Taobao was still unable to turn a profit for Alibaba despite its high transaction volume. Pressure from the company's venture capital investors was escalating for Jack Ma as the date of Alibaba's global IPO approached. Ma decided to implement a series of commercial strategies and technical mechanisms to boost revenue. His first move was to launch a fee-based B-to-C site, Tmall.com, in 2008, as a premium site affiliated with Taobao.com, and to encourage more established businesses on Taobao to migrate to Tmall. To incentivize migration, Tmall shops received preferential treatment, which ranged from better customer service to free advertising traffic. This move, although rendering the new Taobao/Tmall platform ecosystem immediately profitable in 2009, created dissatisfaction among owners of small and medium-sized shops who felt discriminated against and disadvantaged by the new "freemium model" (Liu, 2012; van Dijck et al., 2018).

The most profitable, but notorious, technical mechanism, known among shop owners as the “blood-sucking” Zhitongche, is a paid search ranking system that charged shop owners a per-click fee to help them improve their product listing ranking on Taobao and Tmall. Applications like Zhitongche, along with the new freemium model, tilted the platform in favor of big sellers while making it increasingly costly for small shops to stay profitable. Additionally, Alibaba decided to push the monetization process even harder on October 10, 2011, by significantly increasing Tmall’s security deposit charge and annual technology and service fees, immediately causing an uproar among the small and medium-sized shop owners.

On hearing the new policy, disaffected shop owners gathered through the group chat function of AliWangWang and posted comments on Taobao’s internal forum to express their anger. That night, a small group gathered in a virtual chatroom on YY—a popular Chinese audio-based social networking platform—to avoid being monitored by Alibaba. In the following day, anger escalated as the size of the group quickly ballooned from a few dozen to more than 50 thousand people (Liu, 2012). Participants queued up in the chatroom to vent their frustration, some broke into tears while recollecting how hard they and their family had worked to make a living on Taobao, and others called on the participants to launch virtual attacks at big sellers on Taobao to disrupt the operation of the platform.¹ Figure 2 captures two of the numerous comments posted by anti-Taobao protestors in online forums (Liu, 2012).

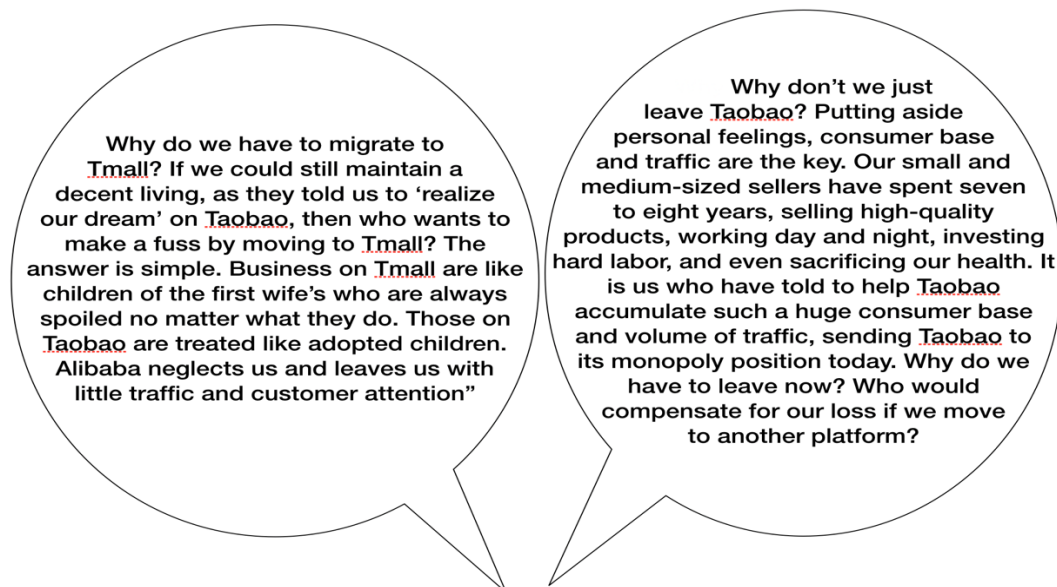


Figure 3. Comments posted by anti-Taobao protestors online.

¹ I learned about this through interviews with anonymous activists who participated in the online protest. The interviews were conducted in June 2013.

These comments revealed the petty capitalist shop owners' frustration toward Taobao's extractive strategies and the exploitative nature of Alibaba's relationships with platform-based small entrepreneurs. The sharp discrepancy in Alibaba's treatment of SMEs between the early days driven by market expansion and the present moment of profit maximization left the petty capitalists feeling betrayed. They were infuriated by the platform's growing algorithmic-driven inequalities that pitted big sellers against small and medium sellers. To voice their anger, they decided to give Alibaba a taste of its own medicine and appropriated Taobao's technical/commercial and discursive platform mechanisms to fight back at Alibaba.

The night following the release of the new policy, protestors from the YY chatroom begun launching a series of organized attacks at big Tmall shops. They swarmed into the online stores of a few targeted big sellers, placed a large number of orders, left negative ratings and comments, but refused to finalize the payment process. They gamed the platform's algorithm to paralyze the operation of the targeted big sellers. By October 16, one week after the announcement of the new policy, 112 big Tmall shops had been attacked by 5,599 participants, and 7,230 null orders had been placed, causing about USD\$14 million in losses (Liu, 2012).

Discursively, the protestors also hijacked Alibaba's brand image and Jack Ma's personal brand as a representative and supporter of petty entrepreneurs. They held up the slogan of "ants eating up the elephant," a play on Taobao's brand mascot "Taotao the ant." Taobao created the cute, hard-working ant mascot when it was locked in a platform war with eBay, conveying its corporate culture as a local Chinese Internet start-up relying on the support and persistence of numerous petty entrepreneurs to challenge the monopoly status of a global e-commerce like eBay. Only this time, these small "ants" were united for a different cause—protesting against Alibaba. The protestors adopted this slogan to remind Alibaba that the company was built on the hard labor of the small platform-based entrepreneurs, and it would be immoral for it to turn its back on them once it had become a monopoly. Meanwhile, the YY-based anti-Taobao coalition donated money to send a group of representatives to protest in Hong Kong's Times Square. During the protest, a theatrical moment struck when the protesters set up a "mourning hall" for the very-much alive Ma to express their disappointment in this cultural icon of grassroots IT entrepreneurship.



Figure 4. Mourning hall for Jack Ma set up by the anti-Taobao coalition in Hong Kong.

The anti-Taobao movement managed to get a hearing from the Chinese government and in the end pushed Alibaba to make some concessions. The Ministry of Commerce stepped in as an arbitrator between Alibaba and the protesting businesses on October 17, 2011. On the same day, Ma announced publicly the plan to spend 1.8 billion RMB (about USD\$2.68 billion) to subsidize qualified small businesses on Tmall and help smooth the migration from Taobao to Tmall. However, unable to form any long-lasting organization to protect the rights of the platform entrepreneurs, the anti-Taobao coalition quickly disbanded after the movement (Liu, 2012).

The protesting entrepreneurs had appropriated the platform's technical, commercial, and discursive mechanisms to give Alibaba a taste of its own medicine. However, these platform-based resistance strategies and the state's reaction were also informed by petty capitalist values. In lieu of a well-established labor union tradition, the petty entrepreneurs, like their forefathers in China's thousands of years of history in peasant unrest, had resorted to informal tactics that combined emotional and moral appeals/attacks with algorithmic activism (Gates, 1996, p. 199). Despite its reliance on Alibaba for economic restructuring, the state's Confucian paternalistic stance prevailed when its concern with social stability and continued hegemony overshadowed its desire for economic efficiency and growth (Gates, 1996, p. 7). As I have shown with Alibaba's rural expansion and the anti-Taobao campaign, the working together of residual cultural economic inertia, changing political economic forces, and novel platform mechanisms constituted the shifting platform-state/labor dynamics in Alibaba's post-2008 evolution.

Conclusion

Taking an integrated approach to unpacking Alibaba's historical transformation, this article depicted how the platformization of Chinese society is constituted by the articulation of the platforms' evolving

technical, business, and discursive mechanisms and the evolution of Chinese capitalism as part of the global capitalist system. In doing so, the article attempts to make some modest contribution to the broader ongoing scholarly project that reconceptualizes the worldwide unfolding of platformization as an assemblage of global technocommercial trends and historically and culturally specific processes (Chen & Qiu, 2019; Latour, 2005; Parks & Starosielski, 2015; Plantin & de Seta, 2019; Plantin & Punathambekar, 2019; Poell, De Kloet, & Zeng, 2014; Srnicek, 2016; van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Alibaba's story has implications for both platform studies and the political economy of the Chinese Internet.

The model sheds light on how the Chinese process of platformization both resembles and differs from Western experiences, while also historicizing these similarities and differences. Although Alibaba has adopted similar platform mechanisms to encourage user participation, drive commodification, achieve datafication, and promote market expansion before realizing monetization—similar to Facebook (Nieborg & Helmond, 2018) and Google (Plantin, 2018; Plantin et al., 2018)—these mechanisms are firmly embedded in China's petty capitalist tradition and the changing political economic configuration of the contemporary Chinese society. The dynamic interplay among platform companies, different levels of the Chinese state, platform-based petty-capitalist entrepreneurs, and global venture capital intersect with platform mechanisms in shaping the platformization of Chinese society today.

The model helps to explain, for example, how the technological affordances of the instant messaging customer service app AliWangWang were made possible and necessary by the informal labor and consumer practices of China's petty capitalist tradition; why the venture-capital-backed "free model" was particularly attractive to Chinese small e-commerce shop owners; and how these platform mechanisms were grafted onto the petty-capitalists-versus-tributary-state structures of economy and feeling in consolidating Alibaba's monopoly status. It also provides a better understanding of the specific unfolding of Alibaba's data-driven cherry picking of Taobao village model entrepreneurs in relation to the off-line construction of a network of governmental, media, and scholarly agents to motivate user participation and canvass political support at both the central and local levels—and how this new round of corporate expansion to integrate rural petty-capitalist entrepreneurs worked in tandem with the Chinese state's post-2008 economic restructuring campaign. Furthermore, it addresses the historical continuity in the state's paternalistic intervention into platform-petty-capitalist conflicts for fear of social instability, and why platform-based petty capitalists, instead of forming into labor unions and resorting to the legal procedure of collective bargaining, chose the informal tactics of algorithmic activism, moral attacks, and appeal to the paternalistic state. Such tactics, as I have shown, are typical of the moral economy of petty capitalism when unequal and exploitative labor conditions are present.

Bridging the traditional political economic focus on state-capital relations and emerging scholarship on digital labor in China with the analytic of petty capitalism, the integrated model also brings to our attention the challenges posed by monopoly digital platforms to state governance as well as platform mechanisms' crucial role in reshaping state-corporate-capital-labor relations in contemporary China (Chen & Qiu, 2019; Plantin & de Seta, 2019; Poell et al., 2014). Monopoly digital platforms, because of their prominence in the operation of the economy and society today, have achieved infrastructural scale and significance (Plantin et al., 2018; Plantin & Punathambekar, 2019). These dual processes of the "platformization of infrastructure" and the "infrastructuralization of platforms" are particularly challenging

to the Chinese state. Historically, the Chinese state, in continuation from its imperial tributary and socialist tradition, had always maintained monopoly over China's "pillar industries" and the construction and management of infrastructures (Hong, 2017; Y. Zhao, 2010). Digital platforms like Alibaba, by marrying platform mechanisms with petty-capitalist dynamics under the global venture capital regime, have become more effective in facilitating economic and social restructuring and generating new employment/self-employment opportunities. This is why the post-2008 Chinese state reacted by working more closely with Alibaba in promoting its own economic and social reform agenda.

However, the growing platform-mechanisms-mediated symbiosis among Alibaba, government institutions, and platform-based petty capitalist entrepreneurs has tilted the power balance in favor of the monopoly digital platform (Hong, 2017; Shen, 2016). The increasingly unequal profit-driven and algorithm-mediated distribution of resources on Alibaba's platforms and the deployment of user data and manipulation of rankings to serve corporate expansion are disconcerting. This is particularly worrisome given the direct or indirect roles that governments, state-owned media, and academic institutions play in the expansion of platform-based regime of accumulation in post-2008 China.

In the case of the anti-Taobao movement, the resistance staged and disruptions generated by technically equipped petty entrepreneurs provided glimpses into how platform-based resistance might play out—its historical continuance from the petty-capitalist tradition and its effective hijacking of platform mechanisms (Chen, 2018; Chen & Qiu, 2019; Plantin & de Seta, 2019). The central state's interventionist stance in protection of petty entrepreneurs speaks to the persistence of the state's paternalistic power—a tributary and socialist legacy—in the political governance of digital platforms today (Gates, 1996). But there is no clear vision whether and how these emerging dynamics will be formalized given the digital platform company's constantly shifting position in relation to state and platform petty capitalists and the state's "conflicting regulatory tendencies" (E. J. Zhao, 2019). As E. J. Zhao (2019) put it that state-platform-capital-labor relations in China are currently characterized by "complexity, contingencies and constant power negotiations" (p. 138). This integrated model to platformization, I would argue, has broader application beyond the case of Alibaba and China. I hope that I have demonstrated, through my engagement with previously separated lines of thinking, the theoretical and empirical necessity and value of grounding the recent "material turn" in social sciences in historical, cultural, and national specificities. Doing so will enable a more dynamic understanding of platform capitalism as both a continuity and rupture in our global capitalist system.

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