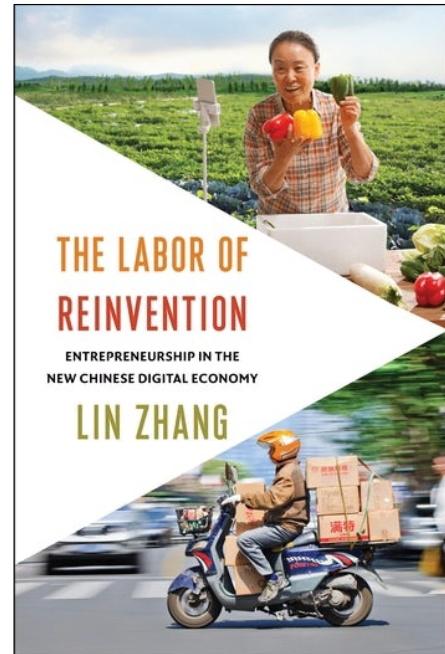


Lin Zhang, **The Labor of Reinvention: Entrepreneurship in the New Chinese Digital Economy**, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2023, 292 pp., \$30.00 (paperback).

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Picture yourself in Beijing, specifically Zhongguancun, China's Silicon Valley, enjoying a coffee in a lively café turned coworking space. Around you, young and ambitious entrepreneurs—mostly men in their twenties—are hard at work on their laptops, coding their latest apps or polishing their presentation decks. Now, let's switch to a peaceful village in the northern Shandong province, where an elderly woman is keeping traditional weaving skills alive by manufacturing bulrush futons in the privacy of her home. Next door, a couple in their thirties is setting up a store on the popular e-commerce platform Taobao to sell the handicrafts created by their senior neighbor. Jump cut to a nondescript suburban area in North America, where a Chinese mother in her thirties, who moved to the United States after marrying a U.S. citizen, shows on WeChat the latest luxury fashion items she purchased during a shopping spree at a local mall. Numerous affluent Chinese customers are joining her livestream, eager to purchase the products she is presenting.



Who are the characters in these three very different stories? What do they have in common? What can their experiences tell us about transformations in Chinese economy and society? In ***The Labor of Reinvention: Entrepreneurship in the New Chinese Digital Economy***, Lin Zhang, associate professor of communication and media studies at the University of New Hampshire, weaves together stories of urban Chinese digital entrepreneurs, rural e-commerce owners, and expat Chinese social media resellers (*daigou*) to discuss the multifaceted, complex, and challenging path that China has embarked on to restructure its economy and further its technonationalist agenda. This is a journey where “global trends like financialization, platformization, and entrepreneurialization” (p. 230) entwine with China's imperial legacy of a centralized, minimalist regime of governance and with the patriarchal family structure of Confucian tradition. Zhang documents this process of reinvention through three main perspectives: the urban, the rural, and the transnational.

At the urban level, Zhang's work discusses how the 2008 global financial crisis represented the nonreturn point for China's investor-led state capitalism. The decline in electronics exports, once the core business of the Zhongguancun tech district, pushed China to embrace entrepreneurialism as an ideology to ease unemployment, redistribute economic opportunities, and even tackle social inequities. The combination of China's technonationalism with financialization and entrepreneurship to drive indigenous innovation in strategic sectors led to outcomes quite similar to those registered across other capitalist

economies: a stratification of the emerging entrepreneurial class. In addition to a meticulous ethnographic inquiry of a popular café and coworking space, the Garage Café—which, in many ways, resembles Walker's Wagon Wheel bar, as chronicled by AnnaLee Saxenian (2000) in *Regional Advantage*—Zhang uses the opening act of the book to trace China's long technonationalist history. Zhang's historical overview is essential for understanding how local conditions and histories articulate the global wave of entrepreneurialism.

In the book's second section, Zhang moves—literally—to the countryside, specifically, to a rural town in the Shandong province. Here, she documents how the emergence of the Taobao village phenomenon has affected rural villages' social fabric and economies. Taobao villages are another example of Chinese labor reinvention, this time occurring at the periphery of the IT sector. Started by Alibaba through its research arm, AliResearch, Taobao villages are a private-state coordinated initiative aimed at reinventing artisanal family-based production and turning it into a new cottage industry that provides handmade products to e-commerce platforms, specifically, to the homonymous Alibaba-owned and rural-oriented e-commerce Taobao. The implication of such reinvention, however, led to analogous stratifications observed in the urban context. Gender and age lines determine who has the right and the skills needed to sit at the computer desk (often young, male, and urban) and who instead remains in the dusty home workshops where artifacts are produced. Zhao argues that the Taobao village production model is not unprecedented in China's history. Akin to petty capitalism in the post-Mao era, Taobao villages rely on family relations to extract value out of the free, or largely undervalued, labor of family members and less educated workers. Rural e-commerce and the popularity of Taobao villages allow Zhang to connect with themes central to current debates about digital platforms, such as platformized labor, platform governance, and the politics of algorithms.

The closing act of Zhang's book unfolds in an entirely different scenario. Readers are catapulted from rural China to the middle-class and wealthy neighborhoods of North America and Europe. The main character of the last section is the daigou, an individual, more often than not a young Chinese woman, who purchases luxury goods overseas and sells them for a profit to wealthy Chinese customers. Part influencer, part entrepreneur, the daigou epitomizes China's convoluted and, at times, paradoxical relationship with digital platforms. Through Chinese platforms such as WeChat, Xiaohongshu, and Ymatou, daigou sell to Chinese audiences luxury commodities produced in China but not purchasable within the country or through official retail channels due to high import tariffs. In Boltanski and Chiapello's (2018) words, daigou are networkers, individuals capable of capitalizing from their privileged position within international trade and social networks. Yet, their work entails much more than just shopping and selling online. It requires an unquantifiable amount of emotional and immaterial labor to attract and nurture a community of followers, besides accepting precarious and flexible working conditions. More than just a job, Zhang discusses the daigou as a new feminine subject in post-2008 China. The daigou, Zhang continues, furthers a conception of femininity unable to challenge the patriarchy of Confucian tradition. It creates a feminine subject that is domestic, relegated to what is conceived as unproductive labor, and ultimately unable to question the social, economic, and technological conditions that created the daigou subject position in the first place.

Overall, Zhang's book is an engaging read for people studying digital platforms and labor. In the interdisciplinary area investigating transnational tech labor, Zhang's book is a relevant contribution alongside works such as Mary L. Gray and Siddharth Suri's (2019) *Ghost Work* and the recently published *Code Work* by Hector Beltrán (2023).

Lastly, it is worth praising Zhang for the effort, time, and energy spent conducting fieldwork. Besides traveling to the places where the labor of reinvention was happening, she also spent an extended amount of time living with the people she was studying, maintained online relationships with the e-commerce entrepreneurs and daigou, and participated actively in their online customer groups. Not only that but between 2014 and 2015, Zhang and a friend ran a daigou business on Taobao. I applaud the author for showing us how these forms of learning by doing can be invaluable in developing critical insights into "the experiences and meanings of other people's lives" (Pink, 2011, p. 270).

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