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## **The Labor of Reinvention: Entrepreneurship in the New Chinese Digital Economy**

**Lin ZHANG**

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Lin Zhang's new book examines entrepreneurship and its promise and disappointment in a digitalizing China. After the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, the party-state called for "mass entrepreneurship" to attempt to address the growing employment challenges. Between 2011 and 2019, Zhang conducted multi-sited interviews and observation to assess how the changing cultural political economy has affected people's lives. The author found that many aspirants in urban and rural areas, as well as those in the diaspora, responded to the call by grasping new opportunities that emerged in the internet-based working world. The results of China's "regime of entrepreneurial labour" are varied, as narrated in the three main parts as follows.

Part one traces the historical background of socialist modernization and techno-nationalism in Beijing's Zhongguancun, known as Silicon Valley. As the capital of the People's Republic of China, Beijing mobilized scientists and engineers in leading universities and government research centres to cultivate science and technological capabilities in the Zhongguancun district. In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), when the Chinese higher education system was gradually rebuilt, researchers and academics increasingly partnered with private-sector information technology (IT) institutions to boost GDP growth. A nascent class of "elite entrepreneurs" with prestigious university educations and strong relations with the government steered corporate strategies for economic development. In contrast, "grassroots entrepreneurs," in the absence of political ties and education credentials, struggled to secure investment funds or government clients in the competitive market.

Land and real estate property prices have gone up in megacities like Beijing. "To get rich," the mantra of state planners and Big Tech firms, has yet to be realized and for most remains far out of reach. In fact, low-end, cash-strapped rural–urban migrant entrepreneurs are squeezed out of high-end technological parks at the city centre. Moreover, female tech founders, despite acquiring communicative skills and specialized knowledge about digital platforms, are often subordinated in a male-dominated computer and internet sector. "The limits of entrepreneurialism as a governing ideology for empowering the less privileged," in Zhang's analysis, are all too clear (p. 66).

Part two follows the author's return to her hometown and to neighbouring e-commerce villages in northern Shandong. By the early 2010s, Alibaba, benefiting from the national infrastructure of telecommunications networks, had already extended its trading and logistics networks to the countryside. Tech-savvy migrant returnees from cities, along with family members and relatives, could set up online stores to produce and sell various commodities through Alibaba's Taobao e-marketplace. The alleviation of extreme poverty and the revitalization of a family-based rural economy are to some extent made possible by digital-platform based micro-entrepreneurship. The integration of the spheres of production and social reproduction is taking place through the platformization of the Chinese countryside.

Rural women workers are drawn into the bottom rung of e-commerce production chains as outsourced labour, where they can earn some money while taking care of small children and the elderly. This informal home-based work is embedded in traditional gender relations, hence often inhibiting women's career progression. Moreover, the remuneration of the "manual labour" of handicraft makers is far less than that of "mental labour" of e-marketing. Socio-economic differentiation between ordinary villagers and e-commerce managers has widened within rural communities.

Part three explores the self-branding of resellers in the terrain of social media. Female entrepreneurs – young, urban, and well-educated – leverage their transnational mobility to buy foreign luxury goods and then sell them at a markup to customers in China, taking advantage of the Chinese tax and customs laws. The reseller informants are studying abroad or residing in the US, Europe, Japan, South Korea and Dubai, while keeping in touch with family and friends back in China. For a subset of married women, they perform affective labour by delivering motherly advice to build rapport with their fans via major social media platforms such as Douyin (the Chinese version of Tiktok), Bilibili and Xiaohongshu. The internet opens not only a socializing avenue but also a virtual space for achieving newfound freedom and economic independence.

The social construction of ideal “enterprising femininities” among the top resellers, however, conforms to the prevailing norms of heterosexuality and essentialized beauty standards in society. “The business,” as the author succinctly points out, “supports individualistic pursuits of self-expression, consumption, and looking good” (p. 210). Simultaneously, older and lower-class women are excluded from the “she economy.”

Overall, the reinvention of one’s identity and subjectivity to become an entrepreneur through harnessing new technologies is highly uncertain and often disappointing. Zhang unveils the profound contradictions in China’s digital transformation. It is widely recognized that small-scale entry-level entrepreneurship opportunities are abundant. Further along the entrepreneurial journey, however, precariousness is a recurrent theme in the fierce market. Female workers and entrepreneurs, in particular, express frustrations in fulfilling multiple roles in “preexisting systems of differentiation and inequalities” (p. 179).

*The Labor of Reinvention* will inspire research on digital entrepreneurialism and labour studies. Amid geopolitical tensions, analysts have focused on the dynamism of the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area as a strategic tech hub in global capitalism. Young graduates from Hong Kong, for a notable example, are urged to contribute to the national quest for greater technological self-reliance. Echoing Zhang, I find it more important for critical social scientists to promote human progress through sustainable science and technology in China and far beyond.