

THE EMERGENCE OF SELF-ORGANIZING E-COMMERCE ECOSYSTEMS IN REMOTE VILLAGES OF CHINA: A TALE OF DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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Appendix

Methodology

This study examines an emerging, significant, yet rare, phenomenon with regard to the social consequences of ICT (Majchrzak et al. 2013). In this regard, a qualitative, case study research methodology is adopted because it is appropriate for such exploratory research (Siggelkow 2007) and allows us to unearth the answer to our “how” question in a context-rich environment (Pan and Tan 2011; Walsham 1995). Our choice of case study methodology is also supported by the common use of such contextually anchored methods in the field of ICT for development (ICT4D) (Walsham and Sahay 2006), a field that emphasizes the “goals of relevance” (Burrell and Toyama 2009, p. 86). Given the nascent state of knowledge on our topic of interest, we adopt an interpretive approach (Klein and Myers 1999; Walsham 1995). By using the existing knowledge of the empowerment perspective as a theoretical lens that serves as a “sensitizing device to view the world in a certain way” (Klein and Myers 1999, p. 75), this interpretive approach not only allows us to conduct the study and data analysis with certain expectations based on prior theory, but also allows new, unexpected findings that are not identifiable at the outset of the inquiry to emerge from the data (e.g., Ravishankar et al. 2011; Tan et al. 2015). Accordingly, the theoretical lens of empowerment serves as an initial guide to design and data collection, and is involved as part of an iterative process of data collection and analysis (Walsham 1995).

To enhance the reliability of our exploratory findings, two villages in Zhejiang Province—Suichang and Jinyun—were selected from the 21 Taobao Villages identified by Alibaba. The two villages share some commonalities and differences. They have similar economic woes, ICT, critical actors, and impacts of ICT on economic performance, based on our preliminary analysis. However, they have different e-commerce product offerings and different approaches to ICT-enabled development. Besides location, the 21 villages are different in terms of their product dependency on the natural advantage of the villages. While some rely heavily on the conducive natural environment in producing quality agricultural products for e-commerce sales (e.g., Suichang villages), some leverage on the traditional or cultural skills of the villagers (e.g., Wantou village that sells straw-made hand-woven craft) and other villages depend on their geographical advantage (e.g., Qingyanliu village, which is near a famous wholesale city of China). At the same time, there are also villages that offer products without leveraging natural resource or environment (e.g., Jinyun that sell outdoor equipment). Suichang and Jinyun villages form a good contrast of such dependency

within the same province (i.e., the cultivator-based product of Suichang and the non-cultivator-based outdoor equipment of Jinyun). In addition, they demonstrate differences in the approaches of their ICT-enabled development: in Suichang, the development is driven by the systematic and planned actions by a grassroots association, while the development in Jinyun is driven through a process of discovery and learning by the pioneer e-tailer.

Data Collection

Our data were collected from two primary sources: interviews and archival data. At the end of April 2013, we read about news regarding Taobao Villages in “weibo,” China’s most popular Twitter-like microblog. After contacting key leaders and government officials of Suichang and Jinyun counties, we visited the villages in July and August 2013, and conducted semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews. During the trip, we traveled more than 700 km by land after we had arrived in Yiwu airport in Zhejiang to visit the homes, farms, offices, warehouses, and factories of online sellers in the villages. In total, 63 villagers and administrators were interviewed, including the grassroots leaders of e-commerce, e-tailers, e-commerce service providers, telecommunication companies, and government officials (see Table A1). The interviewees were primarily identified by the grassroots leaders and officials, such as the head of the county, after understanding our research purpose. The interviews were led by one lead interviewer who was a native speaker in the local language. Whenever the interviews were conducted in focus groups, the interviewer would ensure that everyone expressed their views, to avoid dominance of particular individuals (David and Sutton 2011) and group conformity (Babbie 2007). All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed, amounting to 199 pages of transcripts and more than 1,000 photos.

Additionally, we collected archival data such as online articles, news, reports, and videos. Table A2 summarizes the sources of secondary data. We relied on the Internet and weibo as primary channels, and we searched for archival data dated from January 2006 to September 2014, primarily with the search term “Suichang Taobao Village” and “Jinyun Taobao Village.” We attempted to look for archival data as early as in 2006, because the e-commerce adoption in one of the villages (Suichang) began then, according to the interviewees. Nonetheless, most of the archival data was published in 2013 and 2014 after the Taobao Village took shape, and the Ali Research Center, which was operated by Alibaba, published a report that populated the concept of Taobao Village in late 2013 (i.e., “Taobao Village Investigation Report” in Table A2). In particular, the archival data were included in our analysis only when it was relevant to the development of Taobao Village as a general phenomenon, or when it was relevant to the development of Suichang and Jinyun villages. In total, 352 pages of archival data were collected. Additionally, we participated in the first Taobao Village Forum organized by Alibaba in Zhejiang on December 27, 2013, to exchange views with representatives from other Taobao Villages, China experts in rural development, and government representatives. We further reviewed top IS and sociology journals for relevant constructs and arguments that could form the “sensitizing device” (Klein and Myers 1999) with reference to the phenomenon of interest in this study.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began during the data collection (Eisenhardt 1989; Pan and Tan 2011). The empowerment literature sensitized us to the related information regarding the three dimensions of empowerment—structural, psychological, and capability empowerment (Jacques 1996; Lee and Koh 2001; Spreitzer and Doneson 2005)—which correspond to different aspects of challenge in rural development. We summarized in tabular form the relevant information on the actions taken by the community with respect to the development of the two villages and the changes that have occurred over time. Using the summary table as the primary corpus of data, we proceeded to identify the critical actors across three stages of ecosystem development of Suichang and Jinyun villages: birth, expansion, and self-renewal (Moore 1993). Subsequently, we ask specific guiding questions in deriving our findings: how ICT elevates the person’s role in the community or how ICT makes certain people, who previously were not critical to the community, critical actors in the emerging ecosystem, and what behaviors have been changed as a result of ICT use. In doing so, we derive tentative concepts that could provide an encompassing explanation to affordances of ICT in a rural community. This was done independently for each village, with the three dimensions of the empowerment serving the categories of analysis. In doing so, we attempted to search for and explicate the new “regularities in social life” (Babbie 2007, p. 11) from an emerging phenomenon, along the lines of enquiry offered by our sensitizing concepts.

Next, in order to examine and identify the “underlying coherence” (Taylor 1976, p. 153) through our interpretation, we juxtaposed tentative explanations for each village, in preparation for further “abstraction” of tentative concepts that might explain overall the actors of the ecosystem, and the empowerment enabled by ICT. The integrated analysis allowed us to derive concepts that were closely related to the context of the village. An example of the abstraction was the identification of grassroots leaders as a key ecosystem actor that exists in both villages (i.e., the association established by natives of Suichang, and Mr. Lv in Jinyun). A further illustration was the conceptualization of the affordance of ICT in allowing for substitutability of product. This was evident through the success of selling both the cultivator-based product of Suichang

Table A1. List of Interviewees			
Government Unit/Company/Association	Position, Name (Pseudonym)	Number of Interviewees	Remarks
Lishui (Number of interviewees: 32)			
Suichang Online Shop Association	Chairman, Mr. Pan	1	The association is established by the natives to promote e-commerce.
Suichang Online Shop Association	Deputy Chairman, Mr. Yue	1	
Suichang Online Shop Association	Project Manager	1	
Taobao online store	Owner	3	
Taobao online store	Manager	1	
Taobao online store	Owner and Head of operations	2	
Taobao online store	Staff	1	
Third-party operation service provider	Founder	1	
Yunda Logistics company	Employee, Mr. Wang	1	
Suichang WangCunKou Town Wuchu Village Rural Post Station	Staff	2	The e-commerce service stations are established by Suichang Online Shop Association to help villagers with online purchasing.
Suichang WangCunKou Town ZhongGen Village Rural Post Station	Staff	1	
Villager	NA	1	Villager who use the services at the e-commerce service stations.
Lishui Rural E-Commerce Service Center	Director	1	This center offers training, technical support, marketing advice relevant to e-commerce
Lishui Municipal Committee of the Communist Youth League	Secretary	1	
Lishui Municipal Committee of the Communist Youth League	Deputy Secretary	1	
Lishui Administration for Industry and Commerce	Director of Marketing Division	1	
Lishui Municipal Human Resources and Social Security Bureau	Employment Secretary	1	
Lishui Municipal Commission of Economy and Informatization	Assistant Director	1	
Lishui Municipal Commission of Commerce	Representative	1	
Lishui Municipal Bureau of Agriculture	Deputy Director of the Agricultural Marketing Center	1	
Lishui Municipal Office of Agriculture and Rural Work	Deputy Director of Department of Economic Development	1	
Lishui Municipal Finance Bureau	Representative	1	
People's Bank of China Lishui	Representative	1	
China Unicom Lishui	Representative	1	Telecommunication Company
China Mobile	Representative	1	Telecommunication Company
Suichang Administration	Head of Suichang County	1	
Suichang Administration of Quality Supervision	Director	1	
Suichang Bureau of Agriculture	Deputy Director	1	

Table A1. List of Interviewees (Continued)			
Government Unit/Company/Association	Position, Name (Pseudonym)	Number of Interviewees	Remarks
Jinyun (Number of interviewees: 31)			
Taobao online store - BSWolf Outdoor Products Co., Ltd. (outdoor equipment)	Owner, Mr. Lv	1	The grassroots leader who started the online business of outdoor equipment; main seller of outdoor equipment
Taobao online store (an agent of BSWolf selling outdoor equipment)	Owner and 3 staff	4	The owner is the younger brother of Mr. Lv
Taobao online store (an agent of BSWolf selling outdoor equipment)	Owner	2	
Taobao online store (an agent of BSWolf selling outdoor equipment)	Owner and 2 staff	3	
Taobao online store (an agent of BSWolf selling outdoor equipment)	Owner and staff	2	
Taobao online store (car accessories)	Owner, Mr. Fu, CEO, and staff	3	Seller and distributor of car accessories
Taobao online store (car accessories)	Owner, Mr. Jie	1	
Taobao online store (female shoe)	Owner	1	
Taobao online store (rack)	Owner, Mr. Rui	1	
Taobao online store (electrical appliances)	Manager and staff	2	
E-commerce training center	Founder	1	
Jinyun County Committee the Communist Youth League	Secretary	1	
Jinyun County Committee the Communist Youth League	Deputy Secretary	1	
Party Committee of Huzhen Town	Member	1	
Huzhen Town Commission of Commerce (E-commerce)	Director	1	
Huzhen Town Administration for Industry and Commerce (E-commerce)	Supervisor	1	
Jinyun Online Shop Association	Chairman	1	
Jinyun Online Shop Association	Deputy Chairman	1	
Jinyun Online Shop Association	Secretary	1	
Jinyun Online Shop Association	Member	2	
Total number of interviewees		63	

and the non-cultivator-based outdoor equipment of Jinyun via e-commerce. As we proceeded, each cycle of the abstraction and visitation of the empirical data improved the clarity of explanations as a better understanding of the data and the theory was developed in this inductive reasoning process. The cycle was reiterated until all of the tentative explanations were accounted for, and a temporal internal agreement was achieved.

With the emergence of our findings, we consistently ensured the alignment between data, theory, and findings (Klein and Myers 1999) until the findings were finalized. To ensure the convergence of interpretations by interviewees, the rule of triangulation (Dubé and Paré 2003) was applied: multiple data sources (interviews, focus groups, and archival data) were used to filter “false preconceptions” of interviewees and researchers; this ensured consistency of data. Throughout the data collection and analysis, we applied Klein and Myers’s (1999) principles to conduct interpretive work.

Table A2. Archival Data	
Category	Details
Municipal Government's Website	<p>Report of Lishui Municipal Committee of the Communist Youth League (Special issue of E-Commerce in Rural Areas) http://www.lsh4.gov.cn/tkjb.asp</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issue 2013, 23 Apr • Issue 2013, 10 Jul • Issue 2013, 22 Aug • Issue 2013, 1 Nov • Issue 2014, 20 Jan <p>Huzhen Town's Website (2012, 2 Mar). Huzhen Town: The Rise of E-Commerce, http://www.jinyun.gov.cn/xz/hzz/dzxx/t20120302_796826.htm</p> <p>The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (SCIO) (2012, 9 May). Press Conference: Poverty Alleviation and Development in Zhejiang Province, http://www.scio.gov.cn/xwfbh/gssxwfbh/xwfbh/zhejiang/Document/1154922/1154922.htm</p>
News/ Magazine Articles	<p>JY News (2011, 17 Jul). Jinyun Push Forward Projects for Low-income Farm Households, Retrieved 28 Jan, 2014 from http://jynews.zjol.com.cn/jynews/system/2011/06/17/013881971.shtml</p> <p>GBTimes Online Radio (2012, 2 Oct). Suichang strives for e-commerce success, Retrieved 27 Jan, 2014 from http://gbtimes.com/business/suichang-strives-e-commerce-success</p> <p>Shanghai Financial News (2012, 30 Oct). 27 Crown Store Hidden in A Small Village, Retrieved 28 Jan, 2014 from http://www.shfinancialnews.com/xww/2009jrb/node5019/node5051/tzbw/userobject1ai102193.html</p> <p>Qingnian Shibao (2012, 5 Nov). 65 Taobao Online Stores in A Village, Led by A Clay Oven Bread Seller, Retrieved 25 Jan, 2014 from http://zj.sina.com.cn/news/d/2012-11-05/075930661.html</p> <p>JieFang Daily (2012, 8 Nov). Taobao Stores Hidden in the Villages, Retrieved 25 Jan, 2014 from http://newspaper.jfdaily.com/jfrb/html/2012-11/08/content_915560.htm</p> <p>HuaShangWang.cn (2013, 21 Mar). "Farming" with Computer, Retrieved 4 Mar, 2014 from http://hsb.hsw.cn/2013-03/21/content_8489901.htm</p> <p>People.com (2013, 17 Apr). The Pig Famers Challenge the "Order-based" Selling Online, Retrieved 4 Mar, 2014 from http://zj.people.com.cn/n/2013/0426/c351153-18548585.html</p> <p>People.com (2013, 24 Apr). The Boss of Delivery Company, Retrieved 7 Mar, 2014 from http://zj.people.com.cn/n/2013/0424/c351153-18534705.html</p> <p>People.com (2013, 24 Apr). The Boss of Agricultural Cooperative, Retrieved 7 Mar, 2014 from http://zj.people.com.cn/n/2013/0424/c351153-18534704.html</p> <p>Hangzhou Daily (2013, 24 Apr). The Return of the Young to Sell Sweet Potato, Retrieved 7 Mar, 2014 from http://hzdaily.hangzhou.com.cn/dskb/html/2013-04/24/content_1481664.htm?jdfwkey=cvgr2</p> <p>People.com (2013, 24 Apr). Easy to Get an Order, Difficult to Develop, Retrieved 7 Mar, 2014 from http://zj.people.com.cn/n/2013/0424/c351153-18534767.html</p> <p>Caixin Century (2013, 5 May). Zhejiang Resolving the Issues of Agriculture, Farmer and Rural Area, Retrieved 28 Jan, 2014 from http://magapp.caixin.com/2013-05-05/100523608.html</p>

Category	Details
	<p>CEOCIO.com (2013, 20 May). Zhejiang Suichang: A New Way, A New Model, Retrieved 25 Jan, 2014 from http://www.ceocio.com.cn/magazine/it/2013/364/2013-05-20/135424.html</p> <p>Guangzhou Daily (2013, 4 Jun). Online Stores in the Most Beautiful Villages, Retrieved 25 Jan, 2014 from http://gzdaily.dayoo.com/html/2013-06/04/content_2271214.htm</p> <p>People.com (2013, 21 Jul). Online Sales Improves the Incomes of Suichang's Farmers, Retrieved 28 Jan, 2014 from http://www.people.com.cn/24hour/n/2013/0721/c25408-22265342.html#</p> <p>ChinaNews.com (2013, 7 Aug). "Clay Oven Bread Village" to "Taobao Village" A Legend of Lishui Jinyun E-commerce, Retrieved 25 Jan, 2014 from http://finance.chinanews.com/it/2013/08-07/5133722.shtml</p> <p>Zhengquan Daily (2013, 14 Aug). 14 Taobao Villages in China: The Emergence of New Town, Retrieved 23 Sep, 2013 from www.p5w.net/news/gncj/201308/t20130814_266449.htm</p> <p>People.com (2013, 19 Aug). Zhejiang Jinyun's Four Models of Seizing the Online Market, Retrieved 27 Jan, 2014 from http://zj.people.com.cn/n/2013/0819/c186959-19340103.html#</p> <p>XinhuaNet.com (2013, 20 Aug). Xinhua Insight: "Taobao Villages" Spark China's Rural Economy, Retrieved 24 Jan, 2014 from http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/indepth/2013-08/20/c_132646753.htm</p> <p>BusinessDay Live (2013, 4 Sep). Letter from China: The Internet's Role in Uplifting Rural China, Retrieved 24 Jan, 2014 from http://www.bdlive.co.za/world/asia/2013/09/04/letter-from-china-the-internets-role-in-uplifting-rural-china</p> <p>Bloomberg Businessweek (2013, 9 Sep). When Dong Yong Meets Ma Yun, Retrieved 23 Sep, 2013 from http://read.bbwc.cn/jdazly.html</p> <p>Zhejiang Online (2013, 17 Sep). The Emergence of Online Stores in a Mountain Village: 17 Measures to Support the Online Sellers, Retrieved 27 Jan, 2014 from http://zjnews.zjol.com.cn/system/2013/09/17/019598720.shtml</p> <p>Bloomberg Businessweek (2013, 7 Nov). Why Xi Jinping Is Visiting Poor Farmers, Retrieved 22 Feb, 2014 from http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2013-11-07/why-xi-jinping-is-visiting-poor-farmers</p> <p>Youth.cn (2013, 21 Dec). A New Development for the Village Leveraging Taobao, Retrieved 25 Jan, 2014 from http://news.youth.cn/wzt/201312/t20131221_4416559.htm</p> <p>Zhejiang Online (2013, 23 Dec). A "Clay Oven Bread Village" to "Taobao village," Retrieved 25 Jan, 2014 from http://zjnews.zjol.com.cn/system/2013/12/23/019771954.shtml</p> <p>ifeng.com (2014, 17 Jan). Taobao Village: E-commerce Promoting the Rural Economic Transformation, Retrieved 24 Jan, 2014 from http://city.ifeng.com/cskx/20140117/403975.shtml</p> <p>WantChinaTimes (2014, 23 Jan). Taobao Fosters E-Commerce Villages across China, Retrieved 22 Feb, 2014 from http://www.wantchinatimes.com/news-subclass-cnt.aspx?id=20140123000054&cid=1206</p> <p>Bloomberg Businessweek (2014, 13 Feb). E-Commerce Gives a Lift to China's Rural Farmers, Retrieved 22 Feb, 2014 from http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2014-02-13/e-commerce-gives-a-lift-to-chinas-rural-farmers</p>

Table A2. Archival Data (Continued)

Category	Details
	<p>Financial Times (2014, 16 Feb). Alibaba Opens Ecommerce Door for Chinese Villagers, Retrieved 22 Feb, 2014 from http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/9a2bd6ca-96f4-11e3-809f-00144feab7de.html#axzz2u0rqF5Ql</p> <p>The Economist (2014, 24 May). "Cash cow, Taobao," Retrieved 28 May, 2014 from http://www.economist.com/news/china/21602755-one-small-hamlet-teaching-people-how-sell-online-cash-cow-taobao</p> <p>Ali Research Center (2014, 24 Jul). "E-commerce in Suichang," Retrieved 3 Sep, 2014 from http://www.aliresearch.com/?spm=a2z07.1192159.0.0.P9BKGP&m-cms-q-view-id-76750.html</p> <p>Zhejiang Daily (2014, 11 Aug). Interview with Pan Dongming – The Explorer of Rural E-commerce, Retrieved 14 Sep, 2014 from http://zjrb.zjol.com.cn/html/2014-08/11/content_2780434.htm?div=-1</p> <p>Guardian Weekly (2014, 25 Aug). "Alibaba Delivers Benefits of a New Digital Economy to Remotest China," Retrieved 14 Sep, 2014 from http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/aug/25/china-taobao-ecommerce-alibaba-rural-china</p>
Reports	<p>Ali Research Center. 2013. "Taobao Village Investigation Report," http://i.aliresearch.com/attachment/cms_article/Mon_1312/1_1649f0dafa3ffc6.pdf</p> <p>Ali Research Center. 2013. "Suichang Mode Research Report – A Service-driven Rural E-commerce Development," http://i.aliresearch.com/file/20131030/%E9%81%82%E6%98%8C%E6%A8%A1%E5%BC%8F%E7%A0%94%E7%A9%B6%E6%8A%A5%E5%91%8APDF%E7%89%88%E6%9C%AC.pdf</p> <p>Ali Research Center. 2012. "White Paper on Agricultural E-commerce," http://i.aliresearch.com/attachment/cms_article/Mon_1301/113_5e51aa81f4a892c.pdf</p>
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