Prophets of Mass Innovation: The Gospel According to BAT\textsuperscript{1}

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Abstract:
This article examines the role that the CEOs of China’s tech giants (Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent [BAT]) play as advocates of China’s vision of mass innovation. It seeks, first, to understand what mass innovation is and the conditions for its success and then goes on to divine how the three individuals involved—Jack Ma (Alibaba), Robin Li (Baidu), Ma Huateng (Tencent)—combine the narrative of Silicon Valley individuated cyber-libertarianism and the collectivist socialism of China to convert the grassroots over to the gospel of mass innovation. In doing so, it traces the rise and beliefs of the trio but uses primarily Jack Ma’s and Alibaba’s growing prominence in Southeast Asia as a case in point of BAT’s influence outside of China.

Keywords: Tech Evangelism, Mass Innovation, Indigenous Innovation, Cyber-Libertarianism, Counter-Culture

Introduction
Few aspects of everyday life in China remain untouched by digital technologies. From the social (friendship, networks, marriage, family) and the economic (work, finances, trade, insurance) spheres to the cultural/intellectual (education, entertainment, media, knowledge) and the physical (health, transport, housing, food, disabilities) realms, digitization is deeply embedded in the daily routines and practices of Chinese citizens. This is the case across urban and rural China albeit to different degrees. Three brands dominate the Chinese digital imaginary: Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent (BAT) and their leaders, Robin Li (Baidu), Jack Ma (Alibaba) and Ma Huateng (Tencent) have been valorized as exemplary innovators. The rise of these men from relative obscurity to the heights of fame and fortune has now attained the status of legends in China. This article examines how these three figureheads of China’s
tech giants lend their weight to the advocacy of the Chinese state’s exhortation toward mass innovation.

I argue that the mission thrust upon the BAT chiefs is more appropriately understood as evangelism. This is because, to paraphrase Guy Kawasaki, ultimately what Robin, Jack, and Huateng sell is the Chinese dream and “not a tangible object.” The idea of evangelism is borrowed from Mike Murray of Apple who, according to Kawasaki, used “software evangelism” to describe the use of “fervor and zeal (but never money) to convince software developers to create products for a computer with no installed base . . .” Evangelism is a more appropriate term here because mass innovation—as opposed to mere innovation—is an unlikely objective that requires no less than a leap of faith from the masses of China that will drive broad grassroots participation in innovation.

I begin with a discussion of the notion of mass innovation using the works of Edmund Phelps and Joseph Schumpeter and then conduct a brief survey of the BAT chiefs’ deeds and creeds at home and abroad to illustrate the results of the particular combination of libertarian counter-culture with traditional socialist values. In looking at BAT abroad, I focus primarily on Jack Ma’s and Alibaba’s activities in Southeast Asia. Finally, I conclude with the broader implications of the BAT chiefs’ advocacy for media industries.

To comprehend the influence wielded by the BAT chiefs, we need look no further than the sad case of Wei Zexi. The twenty-one-year old passed away from a rare form of cancer despite undergoing an expensive and experimental treatment advertised on Baidu’s search engine. Before he died, Wei posted a public complaint online against Baidu for “masquerading advertisements as objective information” that was widely distributed across Chinese social media. The tragic circumstances of the young man’s death and the accusation he leveled at Baidu struck a chord with the Chinese public, and the resultant official investigation, drop in share prices, and public outrage that erupted made it necessary for Robin Li to intervene personally. The letter Li addressed to all Baidu employees concerning the issue was later leaked and widely shared online. Urging a return to their “early start-up values and mission,” Li exhorted fellow Baidu employees to “hold fast to our culture of focus on simple reliability” so as to ensure that “later generations will be proud of what we’ve done.” The earnest tone of Li’s plea garnered admiration from some and derision from others. Painted as a lapse, damage from the incident was limited, if not ameliorated, by the figurehead’s reiteration of Baidu culture. Today, although the firm still has its detractors, there seems to be no long-term economic damage done. Following an investigation by the Cyberspace Administration of China and adjustments to how search results are ranked, Baidu’s share price has recovered to be US$250.11 at the time of writing.

To be clear, this article does not employ a political economy framework. Others such as Yu Hong have done an exemplary and detailed analysis of BAT (and other China-based digital firms) using the idea of digital capitalism in China. Lianrui Jia and Dwayne Winseck provide another nuanced argument for the place of structural power in their unpacking of the financialization, concentration, and capitalization of Chinese internet companies. If anything, the approach taken here is best described as media analysis of discursive power after Foucault. However, although much has already been written on China’s pursuit of discursive and soft power, this article offers a brief study of such power as exercised by the BAT bosses. As all three internet companies have gone public, the discourses these three men weave via the
good news they preach is highly influential in how well China and its tech giants are regarded in and outside of China. Finally, considering the digital nature of BAT, it should not be surprising that much of the primary data that I draw on here in my discussion are from media and tech industry, business and mainstream publications of both digitized and printed form.

**The Book of Mass Innovation**

Depending on whom you read, China’s determination to achieve indigenous innovation had its beginnings in the 1950s or can be traced back to the late 1700s when the Qing dynasty was caught unaware by modernizing Western powers and have since had to play “science and technology catch-up with the West.” In 2006, China officially unveiled the indigenous innovation (自主创新) plan, described by McGregor as “a massive and complicated plan to turn the Chinese economy into a technology powerhouse by 2020 and a global leader by 2050.” Premier Li Keqiang spoke of “mass entrepreneurship and innovation” in 2014 and again reiterated that “mass entrepreneurship and innovation is a strong power driving development” during his plenary address to the World Economic Forum in 2015. Since then, the concept of mass innovation (万众创新) has been widely disseminated and supported by the central Chinese government policy in recent years. In fact, in the 219 pages of the Thirteenth Five-Year Plan released in 2016, innovation is mentioned over 150 times, underlining its importance in China’s economic policy. In the current era, mass entrepreneurship and innovation serve as a means to “shift [China’s economy] from the past labor-intensive industries to technology and capital-intensive industries.”

Still, what is mass innovation? In a body of work on the theory of economic development, Schumpeter defines innovation as “new combinations that disturb whatever equilibrium exists in an economic system.” Furthermore, innovations are the outcome of the energetic activities and will of a particular type of “economic agent,” the entrepreneur. For Schumpeter, although the entrepreneur may or may not be the innovator or inventor, he or she is key to economic development because innovations do not initiate economic development but rather, are a consequence of economic development. These developments occur whenever the entrepreneur needs them, and if it were not the case that an entrepreneur, in his particular role as entrepreneur, would already be waiting in order to use any new invention, then these innovations would never be realized in practice.

Schumpeter’s classic work and emphasis on the pivotal role of the individual are today deeply embedded in thinking on innovation and economic policy, so much so that it has largely obscured the fact that Schumpeter’s analysis is based on a study limited to Western economies. This failure to recognize the historic specificity of Schumpeter’s theories persists and has given rise to policy makers and commentators who do not distinguish between the various stages and drives of economies. While there is undoubtedly a need to update how we understand the role of entrepreneurs in connection with innovation in the contemporary era, such is not the goal of this article.

The idea of mass entrepreneurship and innovation is acknowledged by Li Keqiang as drawn, at least in part, from the work of 2006 Nobel Laureate in economics, Edmund Phelps's Mass
Flourishing: How Grassroots Innovation Created Jobs, Challenge, and Change. Phelps writes of mass flourishing as “prosperity on a national scale” and explains innovation as the result of an economy’s dynamism, that is, “the desire and the space to innovate.” For him, a modern economy is simply one with “a considerable degree of dynamism.” Mass innovation is, hence, the “broad involvement of people in the processes of innovation: the conception, development, and spread of new methods and products—indigenous innovation down to the grassroots.”

Where Phelps differs from Schumpeter, although Frank argues differently, is in his argument that dynamism is a product of a system rather than individual activity. By system, Phelps means a complex of human factors and institutional conditions ranging from “innovative people and companies, . . . good prospects for innovation, . . . people with the expertise and experience to judge” whether an idea is worth developing and financing and “end-users, consumers or producers who with the willingness to pioneer the adoption of a new product or methods whose expected value is not knowable beforehand.” In short, it requires a leap of faith.

Toward the end of the twentieth century as personal computers and the internet gripped public imagination, Schumpeter’s view of the individual entrepreneur as economic agent par excellence converged with the romanticized “hi-tech artisan” of the Californian Ideology to bestow the mantle of visionaries on digital entrepreneurs such as Steve Jobs and Jeff Bezos (Amazon founder). Combining the bohemian “free-wheeling spirit of the hippies and the entrepreneurial zeal of the yuppies,” the Californian Ideology came about through “profound faith in the emancipatory potential of the new information technologies.” The figure of the nonconformist maverick as the visionary driving the development of disruptive, breakthrough technologies remains an article of faith with Silicon Valley–type technologists. Industry publications such as Wired (magazine) feed into this discourse by frequently and regularly compiling and publishing lists of top tech visionaries, whereas business magazines such as Forbes continue to track the changing wealth of these magnates as share prices go up and down.

As Chow explains, China’s adoption of the indigenous innovation policy was driven by the belief that “it can never ascend to the leading ranks of industrialized nations if it continues to be a recipient or importer of advanced technologies or IP created by innovator countries.” Hence, the objective of indigenous innovation is to fend off foreign and rival technologies and become independent of access to technology from “the United States, Japan, and western European nations, which now dominate the area of technology innovation.”

This is an understanding that forms the foundation of techno-nationalism, wherein nation-states are seen to be “engaged in a competitive struggle in which technological prowess is crucial.” In other words, the power of the nation vis-à-vis competing nations is entwined and correlated with its technological abilities. Hence, the more advanced a nation’s technological base is, the greater the advantage it can assert over other nations.

Nations have approached the pursuit of greater technological prowess in a number of different ways with varying success. Malaysia, for example, used a combination of concessions and incentives to establish a technopole, that is, the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) in Kuala Lumpur. Scandinavian nations such as Sweden, Finland, and Norway have more holistic approaches that encompass universal free education, relatively open regulatory
environments, and intellectual spaces. In the United States where tertiary education costs are high even at public universities, it was the combination of government funding from the Defense Department, the supply of educated talent from universities in the vicinity, and the "strong entrepreneurial culture that led to the initial establishment of Silicon Valley. Its success as a launchpad of digital enterprise now serves as its main drawing card for would-be venture capitalists, tech founders, entrepreneurs, and institutions. In China, the state facilitates indigenous innovation with various policy and measures, among them the official favoring of "products that embody technology created or owned by Chinese business entities" in all matters of government procurement. This is a substantial incentive as most governments spend about 15–20 percent of their gross domestic product (GDP), which is estimated in China to be somewhere between US$88 and US$200 billion.

At the same time, the zealous guardianship of online media content and a lack of local knowledge have restricted the entry of major digital platforms into China. The absence of eBay, Google, Twitter, and Facebook in China and the large near-captive user-base, for example, has allowed local substitutes of these platforms time and space to develop and flourish. All the BAT firms have benefitted from such policy and leveraged their home advantage to great effect. Having amassed immense fortunes through their proven ability to anticipate technological trends, desires, and demands, the three chiefs of BAT have obtained no less than prophetic status within China. Their repeat appearances at the annual World Internet Conference hosted in Wuzhen are endorsements of the Chinese state’s policies, from its Cybersecurity Law to mass innovation as prescribed by the central government as the pathway to economic prosperity. Part salesman, part ambassador, and part apparatchik, Jack Ma, Robin Li, and Ma Huateng are no less than prophets of mass innovation in China.

The Prophets

Pick up a newspaper or trade magazine in any one of the major cities of Southeast Asia these days and you would be hard put to avoid a mention of one of the triumvirates (Baidu, Alibaba, or Tencent) and the exploits of one of their chairmen. This is especially true of Jack Ma, founder and chairman of Alibaba Group. The legend of Jack Ma's ascent to “godfather of Chinese entrepreneurship” is on public record and often repeated. Born Ma Yuen in 1964, Jack Ma comes from a humble background and after attending university in China became an English teacher. At the lectures he is now invited to deliver at universities, institutions, and events internationally, Ma often mentions being rejected entry into Harvard ten times and his failed attempt to join KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken). Another anecdote Ma often relates is how he discovered the internet in 1995 and how the first online search for “beer” led to his starting China’s first commercial website, China Pages. Considering the internet was only accessible in China from 1994 onward, Ma was definitely a pioneer. In 1999, together with eighteen friends Jack Ma started Alibaba in Hangzhou, China. The subsequent tale of the David and Goliath battle between Taobao (Alibaba’s e-commerce platform) and global e-commerce giant, eBay, is also well documented. The moral drawn from these anecdotes—of persistence despite failure—is one beloved of entrepreneurs and well received by a people immensely fond of folk legends such as the patriotic General Yue Fei and the communist icon Léi Fēng.
Ma’s international profile has rocketed since the highly successful initial public offering (IPO) of Alibaba in 2014 raised US$25 billion, earning the corporation plaudits for being the “the largest IPO of all time” in the New York Stock Exchange. Flushed with cash after the IPO, Alibaba has gone on to invest in businesses and assets overseas. For example, in 2015 Alibaba set up its data center in Singapore and through a mixture of acquisitions and agreements with local firms such as Ascend Money in Thailand and Paytm in India made substantial inroads into fintech (financial technologies). In the following year, Alibaba increased its stake in SingPost to 34 percent and acquired controlling stakes in e-commerce site, Lazada, and online grocer, RedMart. Yet even before the IPO, the Alibaba Group had moved into the digital media content through the acquisition of a controlling stake in China Vision (now Alibaba Pictures) and a share in video streaming site, Youku Tudou and Wasu Media Group.

In the past two years, Jack Ma has also been appointed the e-commerce advisor by the Indonesian government in 2016, digital economy advisor to the Malaysian government in 2017, and most recently launched the country’s Digital Free Trade Zone (DFTZ) on November 3. The list of Ma’s many public appearances is long and ranges from speeches delivered at universities in the Philippines and Vietnam to interviews at the World Economic Forum at Davos. On such occasions, he attracts rock-star-like audiences who await his insights with bated breath. Even his quirky performances at Alibaba’s annual corporate conference—for example, this year as Michael Jackson—are now part of the legend. Footage of these performances is rife on the internet and sits alongside articles and reviews written of Ma’s views on entrepreneurship, innovation, learning, failure, and myriad topics. Small wonder, then, that Jack Ma is described as a larger-than-life figure who has been likened to the godfather of Chinese entrepreneurship and attracted the loyalty of employees and customers alike with a showmanship that sometimes borders on the bizarre.

More recently, Jack Ma has ventured further into show business, casting himself in the short movie Gong Shou Dao and singing the title track Feng Qing Yang in a duet with Chinese singer Faye Wang. The movie is purportedly intended to share Chinese culture and promote the defensive martial art of Tai chi, but as at least one commentator wryly noted, it is also a brilliant exercise in advertising. Jack Ma’s role in financing and corralling some of the biggest Chinese martial names such as Jet Li and Donnie Yen into the movie exemplifies how Ma has stepped out of the technological business world to accrue and wield discursive power. A sample of his now much-quoted homilies on persistence: “[N]ever give up! Today is hard, tomorrow will be worse, but the day after tomorrow will be sunshine. If you give up tomorrow, you will never see the sunshine.” A more recent one on success quips:

[I]f you want to be successful, you should have great EQ (emotional quotient). Because you’d know how to work with people. No matter how smart you are, if you never know how to work with people, you will never be successful.

In comparison with Jack Ma’s glittering and colorful rise, his compatriots Robin Li and Pony Ma have much lower profiles. Baidu’s CEO and founder, Robin Li (or Li Yanhong), was born in Shanxi in 1968 of humble origin. A graduate from the prestigious Peking University, Li
completed his graduate studies in information science at the State University of New York at Buffalo. After some years of working in US firms such as Infoseek and a Dow Jones subsidiary, Li returned to China in 2000 and cofounded Baidu with Eric Xu. A scholarly entrepreneur, Robin Li is a respected figure in the data science industry and holder of the US patent for RankDex, a system of hyperlink analysis. Through a combination of sound engineering and circumstance—Google, the world’s most popular search engine pulled out of the country in April 2010 in protest against censorship—Baidu is today China’s leading search engine.

To date, Baidu has established an office in Silicon Valley and Seattle and a natural language processing laboratory in Singapore. The Baidu search engine has also been introduced in Brazil, Thailand, and Egypt with mixed results. However, acquisitions such as Peixe Urbano, a Brazilian daily deals site, have proven more successful. At the start of 2018, Baidu set up a joint mobility venture fund, Apollo Southeast Asia with Asia Mobility Industries that will be based in Singapore.

Considering the time Li spent in the United States, it is no surprise that Robin Li is foremost among the three BAT chiefs who articulates most clearly a sensibility akin to his Silicon Valley counterparts. In fact, the desired corporate attitude is embedded in Baidu’s internal communication channels. Every new Baidu employee, for example, is given a copy of the Baidu Analects (百度论语). The use of the term, analects, with its association with the Analects of Confucius is no mistake for a slim booklet that spells out Baidu’s culture and values to every newcomer. One former employee describes the booklet’s contents as “anecdote after anecdote of these borderline insubordinate employees who stuck to their ideas in spite of pushback, and the enlightened manager who let them do it, and ultimately, they triumph.”

Distilled into thirty-six pithy sayings on the corporate website, the Baidu Analects exhorts employees, among other things, to “let the best talents come to the fore (让优秀人才脱颖而出)” and “do things to the extreme (把事情做到极致)” and reminds them that “user needs determine everything (用户需求决定一切).” Armed with such a philosophy, Baidu completed its IPO on NASDAQ in 2005 with an initial share price of US$27.

As with Jack Ma, Robin’s insights into talent and success are also regurgitated for the benefit of the masses at home and abroad. Take, for example, this view on individual judgment:

If you can quickly and accurately grasp opportunities in a fast-changing external environment and in a fast-developing industry, then you can avoid risk and achieve success. All of that depends on an individual’s own judgment ability. It doesn’t come from following the herd.

The soft rebellion Li encourages within Baidu is a pale shadow of the anarchy of early internet discourse in the West. Yet, even diluted, Li’s emphasis on a culture of risk-taking and individualism still echoes the romanticized libertarian dissidence of the digital world. Ma Huateng or Pony Ma as he is also known is the youngest of the trio of chairmen and the most reticent. Born in 1971 in Shantou, Guangdong, Ma Huateng is a graduate of Shenzhen University where he was awarded a Bachelor of Science in Computer Science in 1993. He cofounded Tencent in 1998 after a stint at “China Motion Telecom Development Limited, a telecommunications services and products provider in China.” Unlike the flamboyant Jack Ma, Ma Huateng is respected for his engineering expertise and renowned for his
philanthropy. In 2016, for example, he transferred US$2 billion worth of his Tencent shares to the Tencent Foundation he set up in 2007. Tencent is known internationally as the owner of instant messaging (IM) app, WeChat (known as Weixin in China). Some part of WeChat’s success in China is predicated on the immense following of QQ, Tencent’s first IM app, which still draws 60 percent of China’s 731 million. Tencent Games is also a major publisher of online games such as King of Glory and Honor of Kings, which are extremely popular in China. Similar to Baidu and Alibaba, Tencent has, through a number of acquisitions and strategic investments, consolidated its position as one of the most profitable game companies in the world. Tencent's stated vision is to “become the most respected Internet enterprise” and its mission is “to enhance the quality of life through Internet services.” Its business philosophy is equally succinct—“users’ needs are our first priority”—and its values are summed up as “integrity+proactive+collaboration+innovation.” Tencent Holdings went public in 2004, beating Baidu and Alibaba to the market, and share prices have since risen from US$1.18 to US$397.

Unlike his compatriots, Ma Huateng does not enjoy being in the spotlight and keeps his public appearances and statements to a minimum. There is one issue, though, that seems to irk Ma sufficiently to drive him to public comment, that is, the issue of online responsibility. When pushed by a state representative to make a statement about enforcing real-name registration on QQ at an industry meeting in 2012, Ma Huateng irascibly responded, “[w]hen people arrange prostitution over the phone, is that the telecom operator’s responsibility? (有人电话卖淫，云营商也要负责吗?) Yet all online companies, according to Ma, “must abide by a defined set of criteria, and act responsibly.” Ma Huateng is a member of the Shenzhen Municipal People’s Congress and his view on the issue of online censorship (often euphemistically referred to as information security) suitably reflects the government-sanctioned take of the central Chinese government:

[L]ots of people think they can speak out and that they can be irresponsible. I think that’s wrong [. . .] We are a great supporter of the government in terms of the information security. We try to have a better management and control of the Internet.

Perhaps the most controversy Ma Huateng has attracted comes from a recent proposal to establish a “Silicon Valley-like haven for technology and innovation linking Hong Kong and Macau with the southern province of Guangdong, Tencent’s home base.” In an unusual move, Ma convened a summit attended by government officials, business chiefs, and academics to discuss turning the Greater Bay Area that includes Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macao into a “mecca for talent.” The proposal would most certainly suit Tencent as two-thirds of its workforce lives in the area.

Michael Keane and Ying Chen see the three, Robin Li, Jack Ma, and Ma Huateng, as insider-outsiders because they benefit by identifying with a western liberal ethos of individual success, but at the same time they are insiders because they are required to espouse a collectivist national agenda that calls for mass innovation, in which the revitalization of the nation is first and foremost.

If the delicate line between libertarian counter-culture and traditional socialist values that the BAT chiefs tread is stretched along a continuum, Ma Huateng would be closest to the socialist
end and Li closer to the libertarian end. Jack Ma sits between the two polar opposites, mixing, matching, and proselytizing. Yet all three sing from the same hymnal of mass innovation, so to speak. In the next section, using mainly the example of Jack Ma’s growing influence in Malaysia, I elaborate on how, after Keane and Chen, the status of the BAT chief as insider-outsiders enhances their roles as prophets of mass innovation in China.

Jack in Malaysia

Anyone familiar with the technological discourse of Malaysia will recall that in the mid-1990s then Prime Minister Mahathir set out an ambitious plan to establish the MSC mega project. In fact, Jack Ma himself mentions the MSC when he launched the DFTZ. Ma also makes much of the fact that it took a mere ten minutes for him and Malaysia’s current Prime Minister Najib Razak to agree on the DFTZ plan and just four months for the DFTZ to be set up. Regarded primarily as a logistics hub, the DFTZ is notable vis-à-vis the MSC for the lack of conditions attached to its establishment in Malaysia. This contrasts sharply with the substantial bargaining for a change in employment conditions and the enactment of a specific Bill of Guarantees 91 entailed by the foreign partners of the MSC.

At the time of the MSC’s setup in 1996, the internet was still at an early stage of development, and much of the rhetoric was still wrapped up in the potential democratization “the network of networks” and empowerment would bring to the world. Although some would argue that the internet is not solely a product of the United States— the World Wide Web, for example, was the work of British scientist Tim Berners-Lee—the role that US culture played in the invention of and popular imagining of the internet is undeniable. Placed side by side with individualism, liberalism, and the rebellion of the bohemian counter-culture of the 1960s was the dream of a borderless world, free of governments and hierarchy.

To realize the vision of the MSC then, the government of Malaysia was compelled to attract the mainly Western multimedia corporations to participate in the project. In hindsight, among the most crucial demands acceded to was a promise to keep the internet in Malaysia free of censorship. Compared to the many constraints placed on mass communication in the country such as television, radio, newspapers, and print, then and now, the noncensorship was a concession that had far-reaching and unintended consequence. Not least of these were the consequent liberation of personal and organizational communication afforded and the reinvigoration of civil society facilitated by the internet in Malaysia. Although many of the liberties enjoyed in Malaysia since have been curbed through other measures, it is no overstatement to say that the MSC has had an ineradicable effect on the culture of Malaysia.

Compared to Alibaba’s stated intentions with the DFTZ, “to make people respect the other people’s culture,” the seemingly values-neutral and business-only approach Chinese tech giants bring to their investment in the DFTZ is reassuringly benign. Spearheaded by Alibaba, the entry of BAT in Malaysia is off to a good start. Tencent, for example, already has twenty million WeChat users in Malaysia and this Southeast Asian nation is the first country outside China to roll out its WeChat ecosystem. As Baidu’s general manager of International Business Department proudly declares, “[w]hereas in the past we copied technology from abroad, now we are able to export our own product innovation and operational know-how into other countries.”
Of course, the domestic success of BAT owes much to the suite of conditions that prevail in their operating environment: the significant computing hurdle posed by the Chinese language, the advantage of local knowledge they possess, and government support in terms of policies such as those of procurement, censorship, and the captive user-base that created. This is the system a la Phelps\textsuperscript{100} that made BAT the envy of digital media platforms from the West and fuels their global expansion ambitions. By their very achievements, the BAT chiefs apparently validate the Chinese dream, but there is little chance that similar conditions for operation can be engendered outside China. In fact, the domestic environment may well deteriorate as Chinese government pushes for stakes in and seats on the boards of the likes of Alibaba and Tencent as well as some form of ownership through the issue of “special management shares.”\textsuperscript{101} Even as Jack Ma cautions others to “[b]e in love with the governments, but do not marry them,”\textsuperscript{102} BAT must continue to accede to the Chinese state’s encroachment into their corporate structure if they are to survive and thrive.

Finally, aside from Jack Ma’s starring roles, Alibaba Pictures and Alibaba’s ownership of the South China Morning Post, Tencent Music, and Tencent Video, the effect of the BAT chiefs’ evangelism on media industries is not immediately obvious. Unlike Alibaba and Tencent, for example, Baidu has yet to be involved in media content production. Nonetheless, the algorithms of its search engines and its artificial intelligence assistant platform, Duer—to name two of Baidu’s products and services—serve up information on media content, from their availability and reviews to venues and ticketing. Moreover, just as misinformation contributed to Wei Zexi’s death, poor or misdirected information can also obstruct the course of media products and services. Conversely, as the Chinese government realizes, with their immense financial, technological, and reputational capital at their disposal, any mission taken up by BAT and their chiefs can make significant difference to the outcome of any digital venture.

Conclusion

The concept of innovation as “the will to improve” remains the domain of the liberal west because the view that “[t]echnology and the pursuit of improvement are ultimate expressions of freedom; of the capacity of humans to reject the limitations of their past and their experience, to transcend the boundaries of their biological capacities and their social traditions”\textsuperscript{103} still rings true for many in the Western world. For this reason, (mostly Western) experts on China like David L. Shambaugh argue that

\begin{quote}
innovation requires much more than government investment in R&D . . . it fundamentally requires an educational system premised on critical thinking and freedom of exploration. This, in turn, requires a political system that is relatively open and does not permit censorship or “no go zones” in research. Students and intellectuals must be incentivized and rewarded—not persecuted or penalized—for challenging conventional wisdom and making mistakes.\textsuperscript{104}
\end{quote}

In short, Shambaugh argues that the Chinese need to be taught to think critically and explore freely. Even so, educational reform without the liberalization of the media sectors will leave the job half done. To quote Phelps, “[h]igh dynamism in the system requires high dynamism
in all parts. Thorough reform from the educational and media to political systems in China is absolutely necessary if the “Chinese dream of rejuvenating the nation” and building a “moderately prosperous society,” as outlined in China’s Thirteenth Five-Year Plan, is to be realized. Shambaugh insists that without the economic culture, aspiration, curiosity, and self-expression that drive dynamism, China will remain a middle-income country “trying to create a modern economy with a premodern political system.”

Considering the intricate entwinement of technological innovation with liberalism, individual freedom, and capitalism, it seems almost unimaginable that China would beat the odds and initiate mass innovation sufficiently to move its economy forward to the next stage. Even so, the heights achieved by BAT seem to prove otherwise. At the same time, there are some who question whether Chinese indigenous innovation can be properly understood using traditional Western-centric innovation theories and propose instead the possible development of Chinese theories of innovation built around its unique context. Chinese exceptionalists argue that due to its “uniquely continuous history of 5,000 years of civilization . . . outsiders cannot understand China.” The goal of Chinese exceptionalism, according to Ho, is to provide “Chinese policy makers substantial traction in the manner in which they choose to frame China's interactions with the outside world.” There is, in a sense, a general feeling among digital entrepreneurs in China that their moment to shine on the world stage has come. As Tencent’s senior vice president admits, the “ultimate aim” of such global expansion is to “export culture from China to the rest of the world, rather than the other way round.” Whether the message of economic salvation by mass innovation spread by the BAT takes root and bears fruit in China remains to be seen, but the mission of Robin Li, Jack Ma, and Ma Huateng is one of evangelism. Ultimately, in building and wielding the respect and influence they have earned within and outside China, what the BAT prophets seek to do is spread and breathe life into the belief that broad-based grassroots innovation can be achieved in China without ideological reform or the political liberation of the masses.

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2 Susan Leong's research is a cross-disciplinary inquiry into the implications of the interactions and intersections between society and technology. She is the author of New Media and the Nation in Malaysia (2014) and also writes on issues concerning digital media, belonging, and ethno-religious diversity in the Malaysian, Singaporean, and PRC diasporas.


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