'The Will to Power: the BAT in and beyond China

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the imperative for China to compete for international cultural acclaim. The term 'strong cultural power' (wenhua qiangguo), is a slogan institutionalised by the Xi Jinping regime to reclaim China's lost cultural ascendency and normalise operations. What is cultural power and how does Chinese media become powerful? While state media institutions are restrained from creative risk-taking another force is arising, which describe as BAT, an acronym for Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent, China's leading internet companies, which are rapidly establishing global connections and taking Chinese media into new territories, either through co-productions or by buying foreign assets.

INTRODUCTION

The 'will to power' recalls the writings of the German philosopher and iconoclast Frederic Nietzsche, whose influence among China's early reformers at the turn of the 20th century came from his disdain of the weak. China was 'weakened', occupied by foreign imperialists, and in the view of reformers, in urgent need of 'self-strengthening'. Many powerful voices argued that the fledgling nation needed to break away from the heavy weight of Confucian tradition, which was engendering a herd mentality and suffocating the opportunities for social renewal. The writer, Lu Xun, known sometimes as 'China's Nietzsche', was particularly scathing of China's powerless embodied in an ossified and uncreative tradition.[i] Nietzsche, however, was just one of many Western influences that flavoured China's enlightenment, the so-called New Culture Movement.[ii]

In this essay we use the idea of 'will to power' as a provocation to explore China's 'cultural power.' 'Power' manifests against resistances according to Nietzsche and his work has been interpreted in various ways by his followers in China. Nietzsche embraced self-realisation of the 'extraordinary' or 'authentic' individual as a corrective to what he saw as collective stagnation in society at the time. The strong individual was willing to bring about creative change, to take a risk, akin to walking a tightrope, an image that appeared in his well-known concept, the *übermensch* or 'overman' (sometimes erroneously called 'Superman').[iii]

In this chapter we argue that will, and willingness, have a complicated relationship to contemporary power structures. Globally news bulletins are dominated by strongmen (and women)—politicians Xi, Trump, Putin, Kim, Duterte, and Marine LePen. Likewise adulation is afforded to the insights of strong willed Silicon Valley luminaries, Zuckerberg, Musk, Gates, Brin, and the late Steve Jobs. In the current pursuit of cultural power the question is: how far are Chinese digital media entrepreneurs, the contemporary Chinese 'overman', willing to venture under the established cultural hegemony of the Chinese Communist Party? Where is their tightrope?

If Nietzsche could somehow have imagined the internet, perhaps he would have enjoyed the frenzy of appropriation and assimilation that it generates, the challenges to the social order, as well as the possibilities of creative change. He maintained that 'Cultural innovation is the work of the outsider, who does not simply succumb to existing trends but dares to forge a path of his own.'[iv]Noting China's current fascination with the technological sublime, our provocation is pitched in relation to cultural innovation, in so far as the desire to be an 'innovative nation' informs policy formulation at the highest level, the National Five Year Plans.[v] The new generation of digital entrepreneurs in China have dual identities: both outsiders and insiders. They are 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' (*wanzhong chuangxin*), in which the revitalisation of the nation is first and foremost. Their success depends on collaborating with (like-minded) individuals from Silicon Valley, Hollywood, Seoul and Hong Kong, while appeasing conservative apparatchiks in the party machine.

The first section of the paper explores the origins of 'strong cultural power' (*wenhua qiangguo*) and its association with other commonly used rhetorical policy devices, 'soft power' (*ruanshili*), 'cultural self-confidence' (*wenhua zixin*), 'the great revitalisation of the Chinese nation' (*Zhonghua minzu weida fuxing*) and arguably the most pertinent 'will to power' slogan, 'the Chinese Dream' (*Zhongguo meng*). In the second section we provide a brief sketch at the transformation of China's media since the mid-2000s, noting the rapid ascent of online platforms, which unlike traditional media channels have successfully competed with foreign competitors. Lack of space however precludes us from providing a comprehensive account of competition in this sphere. The terms 'digital capitalism'[vi] and 'platform capitalism'[vii] illustrate the potential global scale of developments, particularly as China's digital entrepreneurs have adopted Western approaches to business, in many cases replicating the online platform strategies of foreign players, many of whom are barred from operating directly in the Chinese

market. At the time of writing these foreign entities included Google and YouTube, while Netflix had entered into a content partnership with iQIYI.[viii]

Following this we provide some detail about the 'three kingdoms', Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent, whose online video platforms are providing the digital pathways for China to extend its cultural power to the world, notably the world of Chinese speakers. Finally, the discussion looks at the future challenges facing these platforms reflected in the self-image of the CEOs of these companies.

CULTURAL POWER, SELF CONFIDENCE, AND SOFT POWER

The question of 'cultural power' has resonated in some shape or form within the consciousness of China's revolutionaries and reformers, from Liang Qiqiao, Chen Duxiu, Kang Youwei and Sun Yat-Sen at the turn of the 20th century, to Chairman Mao Zedong in the tumultuous mid-20th century. Mao led the Chinese people during the struggle against the Japanese imperialists and the Guomindang (Nationalists) and he presided over the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, rolling out the first of many Five Year National Social and Economic Plans. Cultural activities fell under the jurisdiction of central authorities. A consumer driven market for culture, such as was forming in the US thanks to the rise of privately owned media corporations, was seen as detrimental to nation building. Capitalists were on the outer —class enemies and reactionaries. The term 'entrepreneur' didn't exist in the lexicon; if it had, it might have been applied to an ambitious Party apparatchik who mimicked Mao's revolutionary rhetoric. The enmity toward capitalism reached a head during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976).

A radical change took place in the early 2000s. Entrepreneurs were rehabilitated into the party[ix] and the new capitalist elite was accorded a leading role in the construction of the Chinese Dream, a vision splendid of China's economic and cultural supremacy that will, according to plans, coincide with the 100th year anniversary of the Founding of the Republic in 2049. Interestingly, many of the capitalist elite are bosses of inefficient state-owned enterprises, in other words, they are 'state-capitalists'. Others speak English and bear degrees from American Ivy League universities. Entrepreneurs with commercial media assets are making use of new technologies to reconnect the Chinese Mainland with the rest of the world, in the process engendering a future brand image of an innovative nation, one in which fast trains

transport people to their destinations and online apps deliver data about people's 'likes' instantaneously to advertisers.

The new entrepreneurs each have their stories, to which we will return below. They are in some senses China's new soft power ambassadors, advancing the idea that China is a technologically advanced nation. The term 'soft power', is usually associated with Joseph Nye. Nye's definition of the intangible aspects of a nation's soft power is often cited as follows: '…its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (where it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (where they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority).[x] Conventionally academic accounts are heavily weighted toward diplomacy and foreign affairs, the kind of elements that index a nation as morally attractive or admirable.[xi] This understanding of soft power, however, does not address the central importance of cultural revitalisation in China and beyond its borders.

Mao's successors Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao have engaged with internal Party debates on China's rising economic power and lack of cultural influence. The charismatic leader most associated with a strong modern China, Xi Jinping, known colloquially as Xi Dada, has made the most recent move to revitalize China in the eyes of the world. Two contributing elements underpin the desire for cultural revitalisation: they are first, the unrelenting 'waves' of 'cool' pop culture from South Korea, Japan and Hollywood that have infiltrated the consciousness of Chinese youth, especially in the first decade of the 21st century; and second, the yearning for China, and Chinese culture, to take its rightful place in the world. Cultural revitalisation entailed boosting national 'cultural self-confidence' (*wenhua zixin*), another term frequently used around in policy circles. The impetus began in earnest in the early 2000s. In November 2003, the Politburo's 9th collective study session convened to examine the history of leading nations since the 15th century. Sensing the mood of the times, a producer working with CCTV, Ren Xuean, proposed a large scale TV documentary series, which was subsequently screened in twelve parts in November 2006 as *The Rise of the Great Powers* (*daguo jueqi*).[xii] In the concluding episode leading scholars advocated greater resources and energy for developing national soft power. Shortly after, the concept was launched.

In his summary report to the nation's Seventeenth National Congress on 15 October 2007 the Chinese President Hu Jintao declared:

> We must stimulate the cultural creativity of the whole nation and
> enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country to better
> guarantee the peoples' basic human rights and interests, enrich the

cultural life in China and inspire the enthusiasm of the people for progress.[xiii]

However, this was not the first time the term 'power' was raised in relation to cultural development. In 1988, two years before Nye's usage came into existence, Zheng Bijian, the leading scholar-consultant in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), the person responsible for the idea 'peaceful rise', advocated that 'cultural power is an important national power and is an important component of comprehensive national power' (CNP) (*zonghe guoli*).[xiv] CNP as was at the time seen as a major initiative for China to develop 'cultural strength while learning lessons from human civilisations elsewhere'.[xv] The CNP debate died down until the early 2000s. Another term that did the policy rounds soon after was 'cultural security' (*wenhua anquan*), which invoked protectionism while making claims for strong cultural industries (*wenhua chanye*) that could resist the forces of globalisation. By the mid-2000s domestic media enterprises were urged to 'go out' (*zou chuqu*) and propagate China's soft power. As Weihong Zhang outlines, the soft power discourse emerged through internal study sessions that involved senior Party affiliated intellectuals in 2005 and 2006. Hu was present in some of these sessions and was particularly interested in how the use of the internet, referred to in internal documents as 'China's network culture', might facilitate national soft power. In recent years the rise of China's digital communications industries has sharpened this point.

In 2012, following 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, the term 'strong cultural nation' (often shortened to 'cultural power') (*wenhua qiangguo*), was relaunched, ostensibly supplementing, and at times displacing 'cultural soft power'. New leaders need new slogans. Within a year Xi Jinping, the newly anointed leader announced the Chinese Dream, which promises to rejuvenate the Chinese nation. In the introduction to a Party text entitled *The Chinese Logic of the Construction of Cultural Power*, the author writes about the auspicious moment in time in which Xi Jinping 'utilised a series of new values, new ideology, new judgements, to further respond to the question confronting the China people at this point in history: why and how to construct a socialist strong cultural power…' [xvi] Significantly, this also marked a period in which China was upgrading its network capabilities, leading to the launch of the Internet+ development blueprint in March 2015 and the inclusion of digital creative industries in the 13th Five Year Plan.[xvii]

Despite the variations around these uses of terminology—soft power, cultural power, self-confidence etc., one fact remains, China's global cultural presence has become more

visible since the government endorsed the escalation of media 'going out'. Presence, however, is not the same as influence. The arena of online video content illustrates the dilemma and shows how China's powerful media are assembling their forces. To the extent that these companies have the capacity to extend China's cultural reach, they remain relatively unhindered by state's scrutiny of the rich and powerful.[xviii]

BAT – The Three Kingdoms

In China today the term BAT is synonymous with Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent, known as the three kingdoms. Baidu is China's equivalent of Google, Alibaba of eBay, while Tencent is a combination of What's App and a number of innovative social media and payment services. These companies have diversified interests that are beyond the scope of this chapter; in recent times they have become dominant content players, engaging in turf battles, fighting for the spoils of the content and communications sectors, and forming collaborations with foreign capitalists. Aside from BAT there are other players, notably Wanda, the film industry behemoth from north-eastern Qingdao, headed up by Wang Jianlin who seems to contest the honour of being China's richest person with Jack Ma of Alibaba. While Wanda has focused on movie production and co-productions, it now has ambitions in the online distribution space.

To understand the emergence of China's dominant online companies and their erstwhile 'leaders', we first consider two explanatory frameworks 'digital capitalism' and 'platform capitalism'. The first, 'digital capitalism', also called 'global digital capitalism' was coined by Dan Schiller[xix]almost two decades ago and has been recently expanded upon by Yu Hong in *Networking China*.[xx] The concept of a networked China, according to Hong is contingent on a state-led model of 'digital capitalism', embodied in the expansion of information and communication technologies (ICTs). The Chinese state model 'contends, collaborates, and overlaps with the US-dominated system of global digital capitalism.' In effect, this is a rather dystopian vision, not from the standpoint of information control by the Chinese government i.e. censorship, surveillance, but from the monopolisation of the communication industry by big business. The main problem with the global digital capitalism thesis, and its extension to China, however, is that it advances a totalising narrative, one that leaves few spaces for alternatives. Is China actually 'capitalist'? Perhaps so, if one ventures down the road of characterising Chinese-style 'varieties of capitalism' such as state capitalism or market

socialism but these terms leave questions unanswered, for instant the pervasive role of social capital (*guanxi*).[xxi] Global digital capitalism, as described by Schiller suggests that the competitive activities of large communication transnationals result in economic stagnation globally with attendant powerful effects on the working classes. The evidence here comes largely from the US and it is questionable if this can be applied so easily to China, where the majority of people still live and work in hard physical (i.e. non-digital) forms of labour but where their mobility has increased because of technologies such as Wechat. The Chinese state is intent on raising the level of GDP through encouraging the digital economy and digital entrepreneurship. It is unclear how this paradigm fits.

A different perspective comes from elite theory, which argues that coalitions of elite players across business, government and the military, have undue influence. Such a perspective we believe has a better fit with Chinese realities. For instance, any film industry professional from outside China realises that success is contingent on good relationships with officials, which might even extend to procuring investment from the People's Liberation Army (PLA). In this vein Carsten Hermann-Pillath coins the description 'Chinese economic style',[xxii]which straddles totalising theory and Chinese exceptionalism, and in doing so offers a way to think about the changing relations between state, market and grassroots actors. Economic style shows how decisions made by actors are constrained by 'rituals'; many of these rituals illustrate path dependencies that function to maintain social capital among players and stakeholders. Whereas digital capitalism seems to eschew cultural variables, economic style shows that many decisions are contingent on culture. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate on social relationships we do offer some observations below as to how the cultural ambitions of the digital elite are connected with the economic concerns of the political elite.

Another way of understanding the environment is 'platform capitalism'. At the simplest level, according to Nick Srnicek, platforms are digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact, for instance Facebook, Uber.[xxiii] Platforms are therefore more than internet companies or tech companies: they can operate wherever digital interaction takes place. So the BAT (Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent) are not platforms in and of themselves but platform owners. Platform capitalism illustrates how big data and algorithms allow companies like Baidu to understand peoples' desires, to monitor cultural consumption, and to offer services that people probably don't really need. Data is king. In the culture-services-knowledge heuristic referred to above, this is the domain of knowledge. As Srnicek writes, the 'generalised de-industrialisation of the high end economies means that *the product of work becomes increasingly immaterial*: cultural content, knowledge, affects and services'[xxiv] The rise of

platforms is not only driven by the large amount of mobile users, their interest in screen content, but is also facilitated by financial and technical support provided to participating enterprises by these companies. Alibaba, the A in BAT, operates in the entertainment industries, as well in e-commerce and fin-tech but according to Jack Ma it is at heart a big data company. This ultimately raises questions about its ownership of data. When a person uses Youku Tuduo to watch, and then share a video, the data is being collected. The same applies to Baidu's search engine and Tencent's Wechat service.

The intervention of these platforms into sectors once monopolised by traditional media is the story of our times. To better comprehend the role BAT has played, and continues to play in the entertainment sectors, it is essential to take a closer look at the composition of China's online media space. In 2015, China's online video platform space was dominated by five major players, accounting for 79.1% of market share; they are Youku (21.3%), Tencent video (20.2%), iQIYI (19%), LeTV (11.9%) and SOHU (6.7%). Youku mainly focuses on UGC and amateur-professionalized content;[xxv] Tencent video's emphasis is on becoming a super platform which provides audiences with the most comprehensive content, including exclusive copyright content from industry-leading companies like HBO and Time Warner; iQIYI is well known for its Professionally Generated Content (PGC) and high premium self-made content, while LeTV is deploying a unique ecosystem with its prominent self-made content. SOHU is the least competitive one according to market share. All of these players form part of the expanding digital ecosystem in China. However, in the following summary we look at the activities of those players caught up in the BAT group of enterprises.

Baidu and iQIYI

The brand positioning of iQIYI emphasises 'high premium quality'; recently, branding itself as 'a luxurious way of life', pitching to subscribers by promoting a new screen service lifestyle, where 'luxury' refers to user experience – high definition viewing and premium content quality. An entertainment distribution platform that mainly focused on building a reputation for its 'self-made' productions before 2013, after merging with PPS and being acquired by Baidu in 2013, iQIYI's landscape began to expand. Acquisition by Baidu granted iQIYI full access to search data collected by the biggest search engine company in China, and with the advantage of big data, iQIYI developed other services to elevate user experience. The first move was to

add voice search as its feature service in 2014; this technique is owned and provided only by iQIYI so far.

Like other platforms, iQIYI provides users with direct portals to all video programs available on the Internet. Based on the big data provided by Baidu, iQIYI has built a 'video search brain' system that interprets searching behaviour and video data; the data can assist content production, marketing strategies and by knowing the purchasing habits of users provide recommendations. This may sound like a copycat of Netflix's recommendation system, but actually, it is a 'watch and buy' service, with iQIYI being the electronic business provider. Although the service is not widely promoted, it has the potential of becoming a unique ecology considering iQIYI's ability on high premium content production. IQIYI is focusing its next step on forming a video business chain, in which everything appearing in the video will be available to purchase within one click. While this has a huge business potential, in the meantime it can be comprehended as an attempt to break the traditional profit model whereby online streaming services relies mainly on advertising and subscription fees.

Alibaba and Youku Tudou

As the dominant player and pioneer in the online video sphere in China, Youku Tudou represents a combination of PGC, UGC and self-made content. The company is the combination of two market forces, Youku and Tudou. The latter, formed by Gary Wang and Dutchman Marc van der Chijs in 2005 used to be a direct competitor of Youku in the online video space. After acquisition of its majority shareholding by the Alibaba group in 2012, Youku Tudou was able to integrate enormous online resources to a single platform, and set up the biggest video search engine - Souku, while having China's largest e-commerce company as its parent company. As copycats of YouTube, both Youku and Tudou used to focus on user-generated content; however, in order to survive the fierce and intricate competition of streaming services in China, they have had to innovate into something more than just a Chinese YouTube. The distinct difference between Youku Tudou today and other platforms is that it is the biggest amateur-professionalization curator in China and is now fostering numerous Internet influencers (*wang hong*). However, a recent financial deficit forced Youku to adopt a new development strategy – reinforcing 'self-made' production, introducing a Hollywood production team and seeking its electronic business potential with Alibaba.

Tencent: Tencent video

As the last major player to enter into the online video industry, Tencent video is not a frontrunner…yet. Nevertheless, with eight hundred million monthly active users from Wechat and QQ, not to mention its penetration rate of over 90% of internet users, it is hard to believe that it won't succeed. Tencent video is initially famous for video news programs, most of which are linked directly to services in Wechat and QQ; consequently, users can watch video news on Tencent video. With support from the parent company and the Tencent ecology (QQ, Wechat, Tencent news, etc.), this internet giant is now aiming at becoming the biggest high premium content provider and 'self-made' content provider in China. Judging from its scale in overseas collaborative partnerships with HBO, Time Warner, and Paramount, it is establishing a super media platform that will lead it to the top of the pyramid. Being the only platform where the American show, *Game of Thrones* is available, rendering personalized promotion service on its social platforms, and having the ability to connect its video platform to social media directly and in doing so form interactions between different screens and various parties, the ultimate goal of Tencent video is to become the biggest content provider across all categories, news, sports and entertainment.

Whereas both iQIYI, and Youku Tudou have already joined the e-commerce model, Tencent video has the potential of turning cultural productions into e-commerce, but currently there is no evidence to suggest such a move. All the services of the BAT enabled video platforms have their own market niche, each carries the most obvious attribute of their parent company, and even their e-commerce behaviour differs. IQIYI stands for high-premium quality, its video search brain is composed of search behaviour collected from Baidu, arguably providing its audience with the most accurate recommendations. Youku is a platform with PGC and UGC; in addition to its role as amateur-professionalization curator, its adoption of Alibaba's e-commerce mode has unlimited potential. As the most comprehensive video platform in China, Tencent video has harnessed its social attributes to fully develop its community, sharing features and various forms of cultural consumption.

Walking the tightrope, talking the talk

The BAT and their platforms have made the move into culture, not because it is innately profitable—in fact it is highly risky business, but because it enables them to build more collaborations with other rising creative enterprises, including foreigners, and in doing service

their users with differentiated content. In addition they can shine in the reflected glory of Chinese cultural power as more and more foreign investment is attracted to the sector. The rise …and future prospects of the BAT therefore needs to be put into a political context. They are not state-owned enterprises, nor are they companies that have relied excessively on the dispensations of government Five Year Plans, although their success within China to date has been facilitated by protectionist policies that have made it difficult for international competitors to gain a footing, forcing the latter to desist from China strategies or purchase limited equity in the Chinese companies (e.g. Uber in Didi). For foreign participants the relationship of BAT to the government must at times seem secretive. Certainly the leaders of China's digital companies are 'close' to government, providing their advice into how to develop the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution.[xxvi] In addition, the government's early hand-off approach to the digital communication industries, including online video, allowed them to build their war chests, and amass their legions of followers. In this sense they are quite distinct from the previous wave of state-supported ICT industries.[xxvii]

To understand this we need to examine China's emerging media ecology more holistically than is generally the case. In China three layers of activity pertain in relation to the communications and media industry: *government institutions*, *digital platforms*, and most significantly *users*, the 700 plus million people online—and the many millions of Chinese using these platforms globally. Most studies tend to focus on one of these layers, for instance, users. Of course, while these layers are a crude simplification of a complex political economy they suffice to capture the key point of our argument. Government institutions makes the rules and set the Five Year Plans targets: they include state regulatory agencies, ministries, departments, and think tanks such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress (CPPCC). This layer also include state-owned media institutions such as CCTV, China Global TV (CGTV), which purport to reach out to all Chinese, even those overseas. The top layer propagates the slogans that purportedly harmonize the internet in the name of the people (*renmin de mingyi*). For instance, *The Chinese Logic of the Construction of Cultural Power* authorises five 'new' values related to the internet: they are innovation (*chuangxin*), coordination (*xietiao*), greening (*lvse*), openness (*kaifang*) and sharing (*gongxiang*).[xxviii]As noted earlier innovation is particularly relevant to the 'strong cultural power' cause; this part manual specifies the importance of technological innovation (science and technology), concept innovation (for instance the sharing economy) and innovation in content ('positive internet culture'). Notably innovation in content is tied to a sense of responsibility for public morals.

Technically all the television sector and some of the print media belong to the state. In reality, much of it is commercial, with links to the digital platforms, a good example being Hunan Satellite TV and its online platform Mango TV.[xxix] The digital platforms are represented primarily by the 'Three Kingdoms'; as noted above, these kingdoms are busy cannibalising social-networking firms, game developers, online-video portals, logistics, and apps to strengthen their market position and compete with each other for the spoils of war.[xxx]Platforms are the prototype capitalist communication media of our times. China's platforms imitate and at the same time transcend the scale of international competitors. They do it because they have the market at their disposal and the government to protect them from outright direct competition, when it is in the government's interest to do so.

In the triadic structure *users* connect to the platforms, engage with symbolic forms, produce and share content, often amateur. Some online participants have become celebrities, 'influencers' in their own right. Moreover, the user layer thrives on a culture of contention.[xxxi] While many are patriotic, many others are hostile; indeed, many rely on messages 'going out' to the world to underpin civil society activism. The tension between government, business and users characterises the complex nature of China's nascent platform capitalism. Creative content drives hits, and hits bring more data for the companies to harvest and sell to advertisers. If digital platforms act overtly as 'carriers' of propaganda or 'emissaries' of the state, they will jeopardise profitability; and if they follow a pure commercial route (by encouraging contention) they will come into conflict with regulators. So herein we see the tightrope.

What distinguishes the Three Kingdoms from previous ICT developments however is the commercial internet, the platforms that now deliver services and content to almost a billion people. The success—and reputation of these platforms reaches outside China. Significantly, these platforms reconnect persons of Chinese heritage to the mainland, offering opportunities for them to become entrepreneurs, traders, consumers, content makers and contributors to the Chinese Dream of national revitalisation. The positioning of BAT in the development of the online media distribution ecosystem is a therefore challenge to our understanding of how Chinese media operates. All three online giants have faced challenges over the years; they have been rewarded in a way that is certainly beyond everyone's imagination. The description 'three kingdoms' is arguably well deserved. That being said, the lack of state intervention in the sector seen in the early years has now turned to close scrutiny. The state's July 2017 regulation closing down social media accounts on Wechat (the private social platform in China, which belongs to Tencent) underlies the ambiguous relationship between online companies and the state. The

secret ties between BAT and the state are no longer assumptions after this incident, which will complicate business strategies and online content productions.

Conclusion: going out to collaborate

The pithy soundbites of Alibaba's fonder Jack Ma (Ma Yun), emanate from airport terminal bookshops where his DVDs and books are best sellers. The business advice of 'chairman' Ma draw more international attention these days than the sayings of Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping or Xi Jinping combined. Ma radiates a certain Daoist simplicity. The leader of the kingdom of Alibaba says: "Why can Alibaba survive? The first is because I have no money, the second is I do not understand the internet, the third is I think like a fool." His namesake Pony Ma (Ma Huateng) of Tencent is less prone to self-deprecation and allusions. He advises: 'Be innovative… Over the past decade, China's Internet had used local advantages successfully to resist the attack from international giants, but the real life or death moments of China's Internet lies in the next decade.' The third member of the BAT oligopoly Robin Li, the co-founder of Baidu, is attributed as saying, 'Life is about creating yourself.'[xxxii] Elsewhere he says that his ambition is 'to improve information accessibility for the human society; it has not changed, not even until this day.'

Challenges lie ahead for these heroes of the digital revolution. With whom should they collaborate in building their empires internationally? Collaborating with influential persons of Chinese heritage, the so-called 'hidden dragons, may yet be the best way forward. The ethnic Chinese, resident outside the mainland, often harbor a commitment to developing China, their ancestral homeland. As in the examples we see from the film industries the bulk of the development, financial, investment and human capital, will come from the East Asian region.

Already Alibaba has set up branch offices in overseas locations, appointing foreigners as managers, and recruiting the best bilingual talent, while promising overseas governments that they will be good contributors to their hosts' economies. Compromises must be made to do business globally and representing national dreams of more than one nation is fraught with tension when the Chinese Dream bumps up against geo-politics. Promises of helping to 'make America great', such as that made by Jack Ma to Donald Trump in their first meeting after

Trump took power, did not endear Ma to many in Beijing's corridors of power. Ma claims that he is doing business and creating new markets for Chinese traders.

This is the nature of the tightrope.

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[i] See Leonardo Vittorio Arena, Nietzsche in China in the 20th Century, 2012.

[ii] The New Culture Movement refers to the period from 1910 to 1930 when intellectuals in the Treaty Ports of China challenged the orthodoxy of the Confucian system and assimilated ideas such as evolution and Marxism.

[iii] Froese. Katrin Nietzsche, *Heidegger, and Daoist Thought: Crossing Paths In-Between*

[iv] Froese 2291-2292

[v] The term innovative nation (*chuangxin xing guojia*) was unveiled in 2006 by Premier Hu Jintao.

[vi] Dan Schiller 2000; Yu Hong 2017.

vii See Nick Srnicek, Platform Capitalism. London, Polity, 2016

viii Princesses in the Palace is the retitled name of Zhen Huan Zhuan, originally 80 episodes, cut down to 6 for Netflix

ix November 2002

x See Nye 1990

xi Nye 1990; Rawnsley 2016

xii Zhu 2012

xiii Hu Jintao The 16th CPC Central Committee, English version of Report to the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China on Oct. 15, 2007 [online].

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                 english/congress/229611.htm] Accessed 30 April 2014.

xiv Ni 2007; cited in Zhang 2010.

xv Zhang 2010

xvi Shen Zhuanghai, *The Cultural Logic of the Construction of Cultural Power*, 2017

xvii For China's Five Year Plan see

http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201612/P020161207645765233498.pdf

xviii The crackdown on the rich and powerful has intensified since Xi Jinping took office. Even the activities of Wang Jianlin, head of the powerful media kingdom, Dalian Wanda, have come under investigation in 2017. The exception are the BAT, which according to one commentator 'whose leaders are the poster boys of the powers-that-be…', Rowan Callick, 2017.

xix See Schiller 2000

xx Yu Hong

xxi Zhang and Peck

xxii Carsten Hermann-Pillath (2017)

xxiii Nick, Srnicek. *Platform Capitalism*, p. 44.

xxiv Srnicek, p. 38

xxv Cunningham et al, 2016

xxvi ADD

xxvii In the 1990s and 2000s China's ICT development path was based on attempts to replicate the kinds of industrial clusters found in Taiwan (e.g. Hsinchu Park) and Silicon Valley as well as provide processing sites for components of products made by foreign companies, for instance the Foxconn plants in south China that produce components for iPhones. The IT industry developed in Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen; software industries followed in Guangdong, Shanghai, and Dalian. Government sponsored hi-tech parks were part of this equation.

xxviii The Chinese Logic of the Construction of Cultural Power *wenhua qiangguo jianshe de Zhongguo luoji*: (Beijing: Peoples Publishing House)

xxix See Keane 2015

xxx Mian 2015

xxxi Guobin Yang 2014

xxxii https://successstory.com/people/robin-li