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China's Digital Economy and Its Place in Socialist History

As Chinese production numbers fell during the aftermath of the world financial crisis of 2008, hopes for sustained economic growth increasingly came to rest in the digital economy. This paper draws on ethnographic research in China's digital economy to explore how the Chinese government envisions digital innovation within its socialist system of government. The success of the digital economy in China points to the Chinese government's ambivalent Internet politics of limiting the freedom of expression online while striving to create a more "open" and "creative" economic environment. Since the late 1970s, China has sought to incorporate developments in Silicon Valley's technology entrepreneurship into its national economy. Most recently, the country was swept up in a project to emulate the Californian model and foster an Internet startup culture capable of innovating the national economy from the bottom up. This paper investigates this development by exploring the recent establishment of a Beijing startup cluster. In the government-backed startup environment, the creative potential of digital media—heavily regulated as the government tries to ban memes, censor social media, and blacklist keywords—reappears as a potential source of economic innovation and development.

The key to unlocking this creative potential and allowing the government to guide it towards national development, in this line of reasoning, is mass entrepreneurship. Created alongside national economic policies of "mass entrepreneurship" and "Internet plus," the cluster materialises a particular vision of Chinese modernity that relies on the promise of the Internet. The innovation strategy "Internet plus" emphasises the Internet's supposed potential to strengthen the national economy and provide Chinese citizens with economic opportunities. The government has made the Internet plus strategy one of the foundations of mass entrepreneurship policy, arguing that Internet technologies can make entrepreneurship popular means of socio-economic mobility. Technologically mediated mass entrepreneurship, the government insists, will create economic opportunities and foster much needed bottom-up innovation, thus supposedly accommodating both the needs of aspiring entrepreneurs as well as those of the national economy. In 2015, the Beijing Municipal Science and Technology Commission officially made the cluster a model space for mass entrepreneurship policy, a move that reflected its ongoing entanglement with Mass Entrepreneurship policy.

This co-production of a startup environment and government policy, I suggest, constitutes an effort to re-articulate developments in China's digital economy as a product of socialist history. Mass Entrepreneurship and Internet Plus policy reconfigure pre-existing developments in China's startup sphere as products of government planning. As a model space for government policy, the startup cluster constitutes an effort to economically and politically align the creative potential of an emergent

technology startup culture with a national project of technological innovation and modernisation. Policy-making around and through the startup cluster, I suggest, is therefore aimed at the maintenance of linearity, understood both as the continuity of government planning as well as the teleological progression of the Chinese nation-state towards modernity. Thus, a closer look at the production of the startup cluster as a new kind of entrepreneurial space makes evident how the Chinese government seeks to align new digital trends with socialist history and teleology. Rather than simply importing neoliberal models of digital capitalism, China's reproduction of Silicon Valley startup culture seeks to situate such trends within a history of mass politics and articulates them as part of a broader, and supposedly social, vision for national development.