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Moral diversification and moral agency: contesting business ethics among Chinese e-commerce traders

Linliang Qian

Correspondence: qianlinliang@163.com; qianlinliang@gmail.com
Department of Sociology, School of Humanities, Southeast University of China, Room 517, Building of Humanities, Jiangning District, Nanjing City, Jiangsu Province, China

Abstract

Scholarship on morality in contemporary Chinese society is divided. Some studies concur with the public discourse that a moral crisis is occurring. Others argue that there has been a continuity or revival of morality. By examining the divergent ethical trajectories of Chinese e-commerce traders in their business encounters, this study identifies more complicated moral states in these business people, who join a newly emerging industry but are undifferentiated from other ordinary Chinese people in terms of their political, social, and cultural backgrounds. The coexistence of moral, immoral, and morally divided personhoods indicates the diversification of the understandings and practices of morality in Chinese society. This article suggests that this diversification has roots in the moral agency of Chinese individuals, which comes into being in a relatively free space that has been created both by China's changing sociopolitical structure and by people's strategies and tactics in everyday life.

Keywords: Business ethics, Morality, Moral agency, E-commerce, Anthropology of morality

Introduction: moral diversification and the micro politics of moral agency

In the past two decades, scholars have shown a growing interest in studying morality (*daode*) and ethics (*lunli*) in Chinese society [1]. Some have observed varying degrees of moral decline in local areas. For example, Xin Liu found that immoral acts have been on the increase in rural Shaanxi Province since the early 1980s. He observed that dishonesty inside a local community had generated broad distrust among lineage members and fellow villagers. Within families, the younger generation paid little respect to deceased elders and ancestors (Liu 2000). In a village in northeastern China, Yunxiang Yan observed that filial piety was in crisis and that the young generation often mistreated their parents. Since the youths tend to emphasize individual rights and interests while downplaying their obligations to the community and other individuals, Yan portrayed them as “uncivil individuals” (Yan 2003: 16). In urban areas, Liu and Yan also observed immoral behavior, such as business bribery, exploitation of those in good faith (*peng ci*), and production and distribution of poisonous food (Liu

2002; Yan 2009, 2012). Similar observations are widely reported by the mass media, which generates a public discourse on China being beset by a moral crisis.

However, other scholars identified a continuity or revival of morality in Chinese society in rural and urban areas (Ku 2003; Roberts 2013; Santos 2013; Zhang J 2017; Zhang L 2017). For instance, according to Ellen Oxfeld (2010, 2017), the concept of “*liangxin*” (conscience) occupied a central place in her informants’ sense of themselves. Whether migrating to cities or staying behind in their village in south China, people attached substantial importance to family relations and to the mutual responsibilities between family members and between village members. Outside the family and local community, many scholars have also examined the rise of philanthropy and volunteerism, in which they identified universalistic moral values that contribute to the making of a Chinese civil society (e.g., Laliberté et al. 2011; Luova 2017). While others dispute this claim (Chong 2017; Hoffman 2013; Zhan 2020), Yunxiang Yan (2009: 19–20) may support it as he asserts that the post-1980s generation holds a less particularistic morality compared to the older generations [2]. This moral continuity/revival literature sheds new light on the Chinese public discourse regarding a moral crisis and on the previous scholarly writings on the moral decline in Chinese society. However, this literature also generates puzzles regarding whether China is undergoing moral decay or not.

By researching e-commerce traders’ business ethics, I found evidence that could be used to support both arguments. This seemed to demonstrate that neither of the arguments provided an adequate explanation of the morality of Chinese individuals. Although joining a newly emerging industry, these e-traders are ordinary members of Chinese society in terms of their political, social, and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, I believe their moral values and practices mirror the larger picture of Chinese individuals’ moral choices. Some informants adhere strictly to business integrity as advocated by the state and the mass media. But there are also e-traders who choose to behave in ways that even they themselves consider immoral. In between these two positions, more people struggle to live moral lives but sometimes consciously retreat from their moral ideals, and this results in a morally “divided self” (Kleinman 2011: 5). These people engage with moral challenges reflectively in their everyday lives and business encounters. Some may form a “community of complicity” in which they can maintain a low profile and adopt immoral tactics to realize their objectives (Steinmüller 2013: 217). When exposed, they justify their actions by emphasizing the difficult situations they face. Some may also negotiate and manipulate the meanings of specific moral values to legitimize their actions.

Thus, the moral diversification among Chinese e-traders calls into question the totalizing descriptions of moral decay or revival in China. This is also implied by the current literature. While some have the ambition to examine the moral landscape in Chinese society in general, most researchers conduct local case studies. Their findings about ostensibly similar subjects, such as villagers or young people, often differ, sometimes radically [3]. Some of the literature reveals differences in moral perceptions between rural and urban residents (Avenarius and Zhao 2012) and in the moral imaginations of various occupational groups (Jankowiak 2004). Recent ethnographic research further indicates that individuals with different class backgrounds may invoke different moral discourses to justify their moral choices (Osburg 2013). Therefore, it seems impossible to establish a claim regarding a unified pattern of Chinese morality.

Why is this so? The work of anthropologist Xin Liu provides clues. To explain the moral vacuum in rural Shaanxi Province, Liu argued that the Communist revolution removed the dominant local authority that could secure social and moral order at the grassroots level. With the withdrawal of state power and the entry of market forces in the post-reform period, villagers were left in an uncertain situation. While Liu expressed pessimism regarding the consequences of the revolution and reform on their moral values, he observed that ordinary villagers had taken the initiative to (re)define the meaning and significance of social and cultural activities, which used to be controlled by the gentry class in traditional Chinese society and by local cadres during the revolutionary years (Liu 2000: 155–156). This autonomy also enables people to exercise their own moral agency in a way that is relatively free from state, familial, and communal pressures [4]. The ethical agents might behave immorally as Liu described, but they also have opportunities to act as moral subjects under different moral frameworks or even to produce new moral explanations (Dong 2018). Similar to Liu's Shaanxi Village, I argue that the presence of a relaxed space has enabled e-traders at my field site to make their own ethical choices and that this relative freedom has led to moral diversification.⁵

Freedom and agency are key concepts in the anthropology of morality, and I believe they are also crucial for understanding diversities in moral values and practices among Chinese e-traders as in other societies (Dyring 2018; Laidlaw 2014) [6]. Anthropologist Jarrett Zigon (2010) has examined multiple moral frameworks that are held and practiced by Russian individuals in their everyday experiences, through which he argues against the totalizing claims of any unified Soviet or post-Soviet moralities. Especially in the post-Soviet period, while state power is still present, various religions and global capitalism have provided citizens with alternative moral resources for self-fashioning. Joel Robbins (2007) has also demonstrated that in facing radical cultural change, the Urapmin people in Papua New Guinea negotiate moral principles that differ among situations. Cheryl Mattingly and Jason Throop (Mattingly and Throop 2018) define the studies of individual moral experiences as a phenomenological anthropology of morality/ethics, which highlights human beings as relational subjects who are heavily intertwined with others (e.g., other humans, objects, events, and the world). The multiplicities and complexities of these others require individuals to be more responsive and flexible in making moral choices. In moments of moral questioning, the agentive individuals work on themselves through conscious reflections and dialogues with their own moral dispositions and external moral discourses (Zigon 2010: 23–27; Ivry and Teman 2019: 859). The resulting moral decisions are often diverse because not only do individuals have unique personal experiences based on which they construct their moral worlds, but also the contexts in which they reason and work on moral selfhood vary (Zigon 2010: 31). When many members in a society embrace distinct moral values and behave in accordance with their wills, which have been crafted in a distinctive local sociocultural environment, that society will appear to be morally diverse.

In particular, individual moral agency is manifested in people's innovative readings of various social contexts and their personal experiences. Zigon (2009) and Mattingly (2013) are correct in presenting the two as the sources for building people's moral worlds. I will further add that contexts are not simply given and understandings of life experiences are not rigid. When contexts and experiences affect on people's ethical

subjectivity, they are first subject to individual interpretations. If individuals want to act morally under the moral framework they choose, oftentimes they will emphasize aspects of the context and personal experiences that support their moral choices—even at the risk of the loss of immediate benefits that the opposite choices may bring. If they choose immoral options, they may select other parts of contexts and experiences that help them justify their choices despite moral censure from others. Other possibilities include that people legitimize their actions by redefining right or wrong through reinterpreting specific contexts and their own experiences. The cases that I will describe cover the full spectrum of these possibilities. At the heart of all of these possibilities is the freedom of the subjects to (re)compose narratives about contexts and individual experiences in ways that can serve their choices. Instead of focusing on measuring how much freedom Chinese citizens actually enjoy, as many political scientists and sociologists often do, this article examines the subjective dimension of freedom in the citizens' minds. I suggest that we should not only consider freedom in terms of an objective condition in which individuals face no coercion (even though, in practice, they still live according to the constraints of their social world), but also consider whether they *feel* subjectively less constrained or unconstrained to reason and behave according to their own will. With this consciousness, individuals may appropriate different resources from available moral frameworks to construct their ethical selfhood, or they might even initiate new moral explanations.

Studying Chinese e-commerce traders and their business ethics

In 2013, China surpassed the USA to become the world's largest e-commerce market. The booming e-commerce industry has fostered the e-trading profession. In 2018, a total of 47 million people had joined the industry (Ministry of Commerce 2019). Researchers find that e-businesses have reduced poverty in the countryside and empowered rural migrants in the cities (Alibaba Group 2015; Liu 2020; Qian 2018). Along with the improvement in material conditions, e-traders' social values have also undergone profound changes. An increasing sense of market competition, a desire for a modern lifestyle, and the abandonment of traditional daily routines have become part of their everyday lives (Lin et al. 2016; Qian 2020).

Among all the value changes, e-traders' business ethics have attracted most public attention. Mass media have widely reported the e-traders' abuse of consumer rights and that has made a substantial impact in shaping negative images of the e-trading industry, individual e-platforms, and the e-trader profession. I have also met customers who had negative online shopping experiences and, as a result, believed Chinese e-platforms were full of inferior goods and were run by morally deficient sellers. Some disgruntled customers even saw this as another sign of moral crisis in the country. Outside China, the controversies over counterfeits and fake transactions have blemished the reputations of publicly listed Chinese e-commerce companies (Chu 2015). Nevertheless, except for the cases that the media have exposed and the customers have experienced, we know little about the moral state of these people who are involved in e-business. Are they all as morally dubious as the media and customers described? How do they understand and respond to the criticisms of their moral values and practices?

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted for 13 months during 2015 and 2016 in Yiwu City of Zhejiang Province for this study. The city is internationally renowned for

hosting the largest wholesale marketplace in the world. Thanks to the supply advantages that have arisen from the marketplace, Yiwu has also developed into the main e-commerce hub in China. By the end of 2013, there were more than 200,000 e-traders in the city, and they produced a total transaction volume of 85.6 billion yuan (\$14.3 billion) (Lin 2014). Due to the high concentration of e-traders in this city, Yiwu is an ideal place to study the diversities and complexities of the e-traders' sociocultural values and daily practices.

The large concentration of e-traders has also generated many e-commerce clusters in the city [7]. The most famous locale is *Qingyanliu*, which is a suburban village that has been honored as "the first e-commerce village in China" by Prime Minister Li Keqiang. I lived in two such e-commerce clusters and found my informants by developing neighborhood and community relationships and by attending e-commerce training institutions and start-up forums. During the fieldwork, issues regarding morality and ethics came up frequently in many of my informants' daily conversations. The state narrative about promoting business integrity and the exposure of immoral acts by the media has created an atmosphere that is conducive to discussions and reflections. Media reports on counterfeits, shoddy goods, and poor service in the online market have led some e-traders to examine their own ways of doing business. When they shopped online, some had also encountered the same problems that their customers had experienced with them. During a time when Chinese society was said to be undergoing a moral crisis, as ordinary citizens they too faced moral challenges in their everyday lives. For instance, many e-traders originated from rural areas and had been targeted for deception by unscrupulous urbanites when they had first arrived in a city. Some of them were wary about the trustworthiness of urban strangers, and they tended to socialize more with their relatives, friends, and fellow villagers and relied on these people for mutual support and assistance (Zavoretti 2017; Zhang 2001). However, their companionship often ended when they started to conduct business together. Some of my informants recounted how their relatives, friends, and fellow villagers became calculating and greedy in the course of conducting business, and this eventually damaged their partnerships. A common conclusion they drew was "money turned people bad."

Despite their frequent discussions on everyday morality and ethics, this article narrows its focus on the e-traders' understandings and practices of morality and ethics in business encounters by offering three representative cases. I will begin with Mr. Wang's experience of seeking to be a moral entrepreneur in an immoral business world. The second is Mr. Zhou, who dismisses morality and stresses that to make money people can and should try every means. The final case is Mr. Huang, who describes himself as an absolute moralist but sometimes deliberately deviates in his daily practices. By looking at moral diversities among these Chinese e-traders, this article sheds light on the role of moral agency in negotiating individual narratives of moral experiences and constructing multiple ethical subjectivities.

Being moral is important, especially when everyone else is not

Born in a mountainous district of Chongqing City, Mr. Wang migrated to the coastal provinces after graduation from high school. He had worked as a factory worker in Wuxi and as a sales agent in Hangzhou. In 2008, he moved to Yiwu and set up his e-business by retailing the products from the wholesale marketplace. His business grew

rapidly in the following years, and in 2014, his annual sales reached 3 million yuan (US\$ 450,000), which established his fame in the local e-traders' circle. Besides, Wang was regarded as a moral model among his friends. Business ethics was always a key word in our interviews and daily conversations. In addition to guaranteeing the quality of goods and providing satisfactory services, Wang stressed that he did not get involved in fake transactions, or *shua dan*, which refers to e-traders getting others (e.g., relatives, friends, or professionals) to place orders at their e-shops and write positive reviews. Usually, e-traders will deliver parcels that are empty or contain junk, but sometimes they include low-cost gifts. While the fake shoppers may receive a bonus, other relatives and friends may not. The objective of *shua dan* is to increase the sales volume and ratings. These increases help the e-shops move up in search results and, therefore, generate more traffic. Fake good reviews also attract real customers. For these reasons, *shua dan* was regarded as an important strategy or even the core strategy for conducting e-business.

While almost all other e-traders got involved in fake transactions to promote their businesses, Wang stood out as an unusual case. Wang believed that *shua dan* violated business ethics, as it not only harmed consumers' rights but also generated malignant competition among e-traders, which ultimately would result in market disruption. Wang's friends were sympathetic with his view. Nevertheless, they felt that when faced with survival in a selfish society, personal interests were more important than public morality (*gongde*). I heard one of Wang's friends defend himself by arguing that "All people are faking sales. If I don't, I'll have no business. How can I speak about morality when I have nothing to eat?"

Facing this common response, Wang would give his second reason for abandoning *shua dan*: e-traders would be punished by the e-platforms or even penalized by the government if they were discovered, because the actions had been defined as illegal by the authorities. Wang's claim was supported by campaigns that were initiated by the e-platforms to curb fake transactions and by increasing news reports about the imprisonment of e-traders and professionals who were involved in *shua dan*. These measures indeed intimidated some e-traders. However, most people carried on, even though they might reduce the frequency and conduct the practice more carefully. They believed that when the campaigns came to an end, everything would return to normal, and that the e-platforms' and government's actions were strategic responses to domestic and international critics rather than permanent bans. One e-trader estimated that one third of the annual sales volume on platform X (a pseudonym for one of China's largest retail e-platforms) were the result of *shua dan*. This inflated sales volume not only creates an image of prosperity and attracts more customers to shop at that e-platform but also produces tremendous profits for the e-platform company. Similarly, they told me, the Chinese government would not thoroughly prohibit *shua dan* because it needed impressive economic figures to maintain citizens' confidence in the national economy.⁸ This led them to believe that they shared common interests with the e-platforms and the government, and that as long as they were careful not to go too far, *shua dan* would be tolerated. In this context, they imagined a relatively free space for the adoption of illegal methods for business promotion.

If it is true that *shua dan* has become a very common component of running an e-shop, how can Mr. Wang maintain his e-business without faking transactions? This

was a question that substantially interested Wang's friends. According to Wang, *shua dan* was a short-term method for inflating sales figures and collecting positive reviews, which supposedly would increase an e-shop's visibility in online marketplaces. However, from a long-term perspective, whether a business could survive market competition depended essentially on the quality of its goods and services. Whenever Wang's friends asked him for the secret of his success, he spent hours introducing the selection of products for sale, the design of packages, the design of an e-shop's website, the writing of customer-friendly descriptions of goods, the improvement of customer service, the offering of business promotions through channels that are provided by the e-platforms, and the management of customer relations. Wang's friends always showed an appreciation for his wisdom in conducting e-business after the lesson. Yet, they also found his model difficult to follow because it demanded huge efforts and a deep understanding of every step in running an e-business. They often backed off and returned to instituting fake transactions. Wang was disappointed. To him, the rejection of his moral model of e-business had another important moral implication. He complained that, "People are too restless today; they always expect quick success but never want to put in the effort."

From not faking sales to researching the sustainable model of e-business, Wang understood what he did as building moral selfhood. The motivations behind his pursuit of morality included natural kindness for fellow human beings and the influence of the social environment. Wang often criticized selfishness and moral decay among Chinese citizens in the present day and lamented that even relatives and friends fight against each other for personal interests. As he put it,

Society is so polluted that people have no virtue at all, only personal interests. But I think a normal society and a normal people should not be like this. I want to be a normal person. Being moral is important, especially when others are not. Only by being moral can a person embrace his true self, which matches human beings' natural kindness. This self should be free from a polluted society. When I behave in accordance with my moral standard, I feel good about myself.

Apart from considering his personal feeling of being good and pursuing his "true self," Wang's moral actions had a dimension of altruism too; he hoped to spread his moral ideas to others; and to do so, he might even expose his business secrets. But Wang believed it was worth a try. He noted,

First of all, I think people should not live just for their own interests. It's good if I can help others to make money and at the same time purify the moral atmosphere in the market and society. Second, if others succeed by applying my model, they help me prove its wide validity; and the competition they create will also drive me to update and innovate my methods. If they really grasp the moral spirit in my model, they will share their ideas with me and other peers, and that will benefit both my business and the whole e-commerce industry.

Closely examining Wang's narratives, one can easily identify his appropriation of certain contexts and personal experiences to support his moral claim, such as the moral

discourses of the state and of the public against fake transactions on e-commerce platforms. Considering other people's immorality as a reference, he regarded being moral as a means for searching for his "true self", which was the ultimate objective of Confucian moral cultivation (Tu 1985). His reflective evaluation of the negative moral situation in Chinese society and the subsequent reversed self-fashioning as a distinctive moral person differ significantly from those of the majority of e-traders I have met.

Nevertheless, although Wang had described to his friends many alternative methods through which he had made his e-business successful in a moral way, he never mentioned that there was no need to use fake sales to promote one's goods when he opened his first e-shop in 2008. My interviews with many other e-traders who started their careers prior to 2009 indicate that e-business operation was much simpler in those days, when the online market was not as competitive as today. At that time, a new e-trader could just go to the wholesale marketplace, take photos, put them online and wait for customers. He did not need to store goods or offer promotions. The first deal would usually come within two days. Once the e-shop had sales, other customers would follow. When asked about fake sales, my informants stressed that they only started hearing the term at the end of 2009. However, by then, Wang's e-business had almost matured. His conscious or unconscious avoidance of mentioning this context contributed to his self-representation as a moral entrepreneur who was always decisive about not engaging in fake sales.

When others are all immoral, you will lose the game if you choose to be moral

In Mr. Wang's account, we can easily capture the importance of the "immoral others" in shaping his pursuit of a moral true self. By contrast, Wang's friends often regarded the same "immoral others" as role models for survival in a corrupt society. Their conscious choice to act immorally challenges some assumptions in the anthropology of moralities drawn from other cultures and societies. For instance, Zigon remarks that most people in Moscow "consider others and themselves moral most of the time, and for this reason it is rarely considered or consciously thought about"; it is only in the moments of moral questioning that they will "consciously consider or reason about what one must do" (Zigon 2007: 133). However, many Chinese e-traders whom I have met are clearly aware that their thoughts and behavior are inappropriate under the orthodox moral framework that is approved by the state and the public and may even violate the law [9]. But they simply do not care substantially about the consequences. By explaining why they think in this way, this article will be in line with the recent scholarly endeavor of approaching the anthropology of morality through people's immorality (Rajkovic 2018; Yan 2009).

Mr. Zhou is a typical case. Originally from Putian City of Fujian Province, this 26-year-old man is known in e-traders' circles for being "smart." Many people admire his capacity to capture business opportunities. However, in Mr. Wang's eyes, Zhou has become an "immoral opportunist." Zhou was said to have sold fakes on several e-platforms, run a business team that provided *shua dan* service, and served as a football betting broker since his arrival in Yiwu in 2011. "He tries to make money by every means." Wang attributed Zhou's opportunism to his identity as a Fujianese, a group that is known for adventurous practices. "Fujianese are experts on smuggling and

producing fakes; their private hospitals and sport shoes top the industry of counterfeit production in China.” Wang commented with disdain. But others found competence and efficiency in Zhou. Zhou knew people held various views about him, but he said, “People can say whatever they like about me. I would not lose any sleep over it. What should I care?”

During my fieldwork, one of Zhou’s e-shops was shut down by platform X for selling fake Mentholatum products. When I visited his office, he jokingly asked me if I wanted some. When asked if the counterfeits had side effects, Zhou responded that he would not dare take them himself. Afterwards, I inquired about the financial loss that was caused by the incident. He said it was small because the costs of the counterfeits were low. Moreover, since he had anticipated that the e-shop would be shut down sooner or later, he maintained a light stock. For these reasons, Zhou had no regrets about the case: “after all, I have already earned money from it.” Our conversation went well, and I felt I might raise several sensitive questions.

Q: When you decided to sell counterfeits, did you worry that others would censure you for violating business ethics?

A: (Laugh) To do business is just to make money, why should we talk about morality?

Q: But some people will say selling counterfeits is immoral.

A: So what? So many people are selling counterfeits online. I’ll tell you one market principle: When others are all immoral, you will lose the game if you choose to be moral.

Q: How about the law? Will you worry other people report you to the authorities?

A: Of course. My e-shop is closed because some customers reported it to the e-platform. But I think shutting down an e-shop is the severest penalty that is carried out. It is only in rare cases that people are sued and punished by the government. There are millions of e-shops on X platform and many of them sell fakes. How can the e-platform keep an eye on so many e-shops? So basically it relies on reports from customers. If you can handle the customers, you can minimize the risk of exposure. The worst situation is you get caught and the government intervenes. In that case, you can only blame your bad luck. It’s the risk of doing business.

Since he viewed state enforcement of the law as a business risk, Zhou might hesitate to sell counterfeits for a moment. But business ethics made no sense to him. Neither would it have any restrictive power. Once, I asked Zhou about the general moral state in Chinese society. Zhou burst into laughter: “You scholars just read too much; don’t think about empty things.” He preferred discussing business, including urging me to become his purchasing agent for foreign luxury goods. Reducing costs and avoiding customs were the issues that concerned him most. When I asked if paying custom fees was an obligation of citizens, Zhou laughed again. He claimed it was a tradition for Chinese merchants to evade taxes. As he put it, “It’s better to keep the money in my own pocket than give it to the government, where eventually it ends up in the pockets of corrupt officials.” Zhou used this logic to explain a recent new tax on the resale of foreign products (*haiwai daigou*; for detailed information on *daigou* practices, see Xie 2018; Zhang L 2017). From his perspective, corrupt officials identified the potential for

profits in the transnational business and, thus, initiated a new tax. He applied the same rationale to e-platforms, as these large companies opened their subsidiary e-shops and gave them more traffic and privileges than small individual e-shops. He said,

Powerful people are greedy. They use their powers to take most of the cake, leaving only a little for small e-traders. To cover up their shabby tricks, they often talk about morality. Corrupt officials say paying taxes is an obligation of citizens. E-platforms say they aim at cracking down on counterfeits and providing customers with better foreign goods. However, in the end, they are all seeking profits.

By portraying officials and e-platforms as self-interested profit seekers and himself as one of the suppressed small e-traders struggling for life, Zhou seemed to borrow Chairman Mao's class theory to construct a moral foundation for his unethical business practices: When the rulers were immoral, repressive, and exploitative, the ruled had to try every means in order to survive (Perry 2008). He stressed,

When you become wealthy, you can *choose* to be a moral person... I have seen many successful businessmen who fill their mouths with moral words, but you never know how many dirty things they have done before. They talk about morality because first they want to settle their hearts, and second, they want to place obstacles for newcomers so that the latter will have a hard time catching up with them. To be a moral person without money in an immoral society, you will starve to death.

Understanding morality from an instrumentalist perspective, Mr. Zhou's narrative negated Mr. Wang's naturalist position. To Zhou, moral concepts were not born with a person but shaped by his economic condition: when he was poor, he could and should try every possible means to survive; only when he became rich might he need to consider whether his way of making a living was consistent with the moral standards of his society. In his ethnography on Chinese officials and businessmen, Xin Liu found a similar assumption in his interlocutors and suggested that it reflected Confucian moral philosophy, according to which morality came after the provision of food and clothing (Liu 2002: 14). Zhou's narrative resembled Liu's explanation to a large extent. However, I want to highlight the term "choose" that he used. By using this word, he indicated that a person might not necessarily be moral even after he became rich and that even if he *chose* to be moral, the motivations behind his choice might be deeply immoral: perhaps he just attempted to comfort himself rather than confess his sins, or he simply found an excuse to make trouble for his competitors. In this regard, Zhou seemed to imagine a free space for the rich in which they could make moral choices largely based on their own wills, while external forces, including the state, all became less relevant.

With a self-reported annual income of 200,000 yuan (US\$ 30,000), Zhou definitely should not be considered poor, even though he kept portraying himself as a pitiful small e-trader who was struggling to get by. By identifying with the poor in the class-based moral framework, Zhou granted himself the right to make money through any means without becoming trapped in moral constraints. This was the logic he often used to convince me and his friends of his "morality." However, as discussed above, in

Zhou's imagination, there were no moral constraints on the rich either. The only possible structural constraints for his business practices were e-platforms' regulations and the law, and the law and its enforcers (officials) were believed to stand far away and intervened only when they found opportunities for rent-seeking. In other words, if he could avoid punishments from e-platforms, he could free himself from all constraints.

Being unconstrained by external forces and sticking to his own will were indeed what Zhou desired. Once, I heard him discuss with his friend a Chinese actress's romantic affairs with powerful men. That friend criticized the actress for being shameless and immoral, but Zhou defended her by stressing "What is morality? Doing whatever she wants without any constraints from others is the true morality!" From then on, I started to believe that this egoistic moral framework was the actual framework that Zhou initiated to guide his actions in practice.

So how did Zhou expand his freedom to the adoption of business practices that were immoral in the public eyes but moral in his own perception? It had much to do with the e-platforms. Taking platform X as an example, although the platform may punish e-shops that are involved in dishonest business practices, such as faking sales, selling counterfeits, and making exaggerated advertisements, the measures it adopts are flexible. With regard to fake sales, the first and second times that an e-shop is discovered by the platform to have engaged in fake transactions, if the total fake sales volumes are below 96 deals, the e-shop will receive no formal penalty, only a warning notice. Literally speaking, this means that the platform gives e-traders two chances to correct their wrongdoing. However, people like Zhou interpret the policy in an opposite direction as follows: e-traders can enjoy at least two chances of faking transactions without being punished, and each time they can fake up to 96 deals. This may be regarded as an encouragement by the platform to fake sales. The minimum number of deals for punishment is also interpreted as an encouragement. Once, when we discussed the platform's regulations, Zhou suggested that "if platform X does want to crack down on *shua dan*, it will punish an e-shop that has made only one fake deal. Why does it start with 96 deals? I think it is telling us 'fake your sales, but not too many.'" Consequently, many e-traders like Zhou believed that as long as they did not go too far, they were granted freedom to *shua dan*. This belief was further reinforced by the observation that many e-shops that faked large amounts of sales were still alive and enjoying heavy traffic. In consideration of all these factors, the freedom to engage in immoral business practices was imagined, practiced, felt, and embedded in e-traders like Zhou through an innovative interpretation of e-commerce ecology, e-platforms' regulations, and their own business experiences.

Zhou also actively expanded his freedom by developing various business strategies and tactics. As discussed, to sell counterfeits online, Zhou maintained only a light stock to reduce the cost, but his profits were high because he sold the counterfeits at the prices of the real items. Whenever the mass media reported fake sales on e-platforms, Zhou would reduce the frequency and number of fake transactions by his e-shops to survive in the upcoming campaigns. This had become part of his risk management strategy. When customers complained about the quality of his goods or reported counterfeits to the e-platform, he always tried to solve the problem with bribes, and this tactic was largely successful. The amount to bribe depended on the severity of the case. If customers only complained about quality, Zhou would give them some money to

ensure that their feedback was positive. In most cases, he still earned a profit due to the low cost of the counterfeits. As Zhou explained his tactic,

Any problem that can be solved by money is not a real problem. One characteristic of Chinese customers is they are keen on getting petty advantages. If you give them some money, they will write good reviews for you even if they're dissatisfied with your products. They won't care whether others will end up buying counterfeits because of their reviews.

Despite this, reports to platform X from customers who were concerned about his business ethics led to the closing of Zhou's e-shop. However, Zhou soon reopened another e-shop that sold the same products. By faking several hundred sales in one month with the help of fake shoppers who cooperated with his *shua dan* business, the new shop was visible to customers again.¹⁰

Being moral is an ideal lifestyle

Between the two extremes that are represented by Wang and Zhou, more e-traders whom I have met tend to identify with moral business codes while conducting their everyday practices in accordance with their individual will. If their will matches the codes, they comply with their moral dispositions. However, if it does not, they might adopt immoral tactics and justify their actions as a "choiceless choice", or they might manipulate the meanings of specific moral values to legitimize their actions.

Mr. Huang presents such a case. Huang is a teacher at a local e-commerce training institution. To teach students practical knowledge and to make more money, in 2011, the then- 35-year-old man started his own e-shop on platform X by selling snacks. In 2015, his major e-shop had an annual sales of at least 4 million yuan (US\$ 600,000) and a reputation as a "gold crown seller," namely more than five-hundred thousand customers had rated his snacks as "good." Since Huang was the only gold crown e-shop owner at the e-commerce training institution, he became the most famous start-up mentor there.

Huang always attributed his business success primarily to his ethics as an entrepreneur and secondarily to his e-commerce skills. To him, entrepreneurial ethics, such as integrity, industriousness, self-discipline, and social responsibility, are the *Dao*, or principles, of business and all other aspects of life. By contrast, e-commerce skills are only the *Shu*, or techniques, of managing an e-business. An e-trader who holds the *Dao* will eventually succeed because he has grasped the correct way of being in the world and doing business—the *Shu* can be learned afterwards. However, an e-trader who is familiar with techniques but lacking in the *Dao* will end in failure since he does not have the correct guidance. At other times, Huang represented himself as a Confucian entrepreneur (*rushang*) who did business by emphasizing a balance between *yi* (obligations to social interests) and *li* (personal interests). He believed that practicing *yi* was the foundation for gaining *li* in the form of customer loyalty, which was crucial for sustaining development.

Huang attempted to promote his ideas using every strategy. Every year, in his first lecture to new students, Huang spent hours teaching entrepreneurial ethics. They were told "to do business, one shall first learn how to be a moral person," and "to become a

successful entrepreneur, you should have a desire to serve customers and society, not just to make money for your own greed.” On his WeChat Moments, students could also find many critiques regarding morality in Chinese society, such as the following: “Many e-traders on platform X, including our students, are just selling rubbish,” and “Chinese society is distorted; Chinese people are becoming more selfish and morally corrupt.” To diagnose the above “social ills,” Huang suggested that people should not rely on the state’s enforcement of the law and moral codes but start with themselves by learning self-discipline and virtues. The reason for not depending on the state was twofold: first, “China is too big with too large a population for the government to manage. Hence, it can only concentrate on issues with serious consequences, such as poisoned milk powders.” Second, Huang stressed,

To purify society and build a healthy market economy, we cannot rely on the government. This is not only because it is oftentimes bureaucratic and corrupt, but also because it bears the risk of bringing back the interventionist state before the economic reform. That’s very dangerous.

While believing in Confucian morality, Huang sometimes claimed that he was a liberal Confucian. By “liberal”, he referred to his critical position toward the Chinese government. This attitude was also reflected in his narrative of the negative effect of the state on the Chinese moral landscape. In Huang’s view, the imagined distance between the state and individual life, along with the intentional refusal of state intervention, prevented Chinese people from government-enforced morality and gave them freedom to learn and practice self-conscious ethics. Once learned, individuals who have an ethical consciousness should spread their moral ideas to other unenlightened social members by every means. He elaborated on this in his lecture on entrepreneurial ethics.

I think one way to practice entrepreneurial ethics is to highlight the importance of virtue in all kinds of social interactions. If you are an investor, give your money only to those with virtue. If you are an employer, hire people who have virtue and kick out these who do not. If you are a customer, buy from truly well-reputed shops. In this way, people will know that being moral is encouraged and rewarded.

Huang applied this principle in his recruitment of employees. During our conversation, he told me that he paid special attention to applicants’ virtue in the interviews. Before formal appointment, he took another month to observe the character of each of his employees. To ensure the quality of the business team, this type of observation persisted even after that period, and people who were considered selfish, evil-minded, arrogant, pompous, hypocritical, or disloyal would be fired. Huang regarded this practice as a strategy of human resource management and as a sign of his high moral standards, and he shared it on his WeChat Moments so that everyone who knew him would see it. In addition, he often posted items that reflected his business vision and praise from customers. Similar posts also appeared in his e-shop in response to customers’ comments. These would promote his shop as a socially responsible and trustful business.

Huang appeared to me an absolute moralist until I joined his team as an unpaid helper. From my observation, the routine of daily business operation appeared to be consistent with Huang's projected image as a moral person. However, incidents soon emerged that portrayed a different persona. Once a customer bought snacks from Huang's e-shop and wrote a negative review. Huang discovered that this person was also an e-trader who was selling similar snacks and, therefore, regarded this case as a tactic by his peer to tarnish his reputation in the market. That night, he asked 10 friends who were living in different cities to buy snacks from that e-shop; afterwards, all left negative reviews. The e-trader was horrified. He called Huang to apologize and promised that he would delete his negative comment with a wish that Huang would do so as well. Huang rebuked his competitor for his immoral and unlawful act, but made no mention of his own. He told his team members that he intended to keep those bad reviews to teach the trader a lesson. When I asked Huang if he worried that his competitor would report him to platform X, he responded that "he had neither the courage nor the evidence, because I have never admitted what I did." Neither did he regard his reaction as immoral or unlawful. Instead, he justified his actions by defining them as a way of paying somebody back with his own coin. "It is reasonable and totally moral to fight back when others harm you. To be a successful entrepreneur, you should never intend to do harm to others, but should always guard against the harm others might do to you."

Huang was defensive of his e-business and frequently fought against his critics. Although he always claimed to provide satisfactory services to customers, I found that he reserved his kindness for only those who gave him positive feedback. Those who did not would be cursed and might even be scolded online or on the phone. When asked whether this was inconsistent with his philosophy of customer service, Huang responded by complaining about his difficulties in dealing with immoral customers.

I indeed had no other choice. Some customers were really disgusting. I encountered one person who wanted to return his snack because he thought it didn't taste good. I asked him "do you know packaged snacks are not subject to return service on platform X once they are opened?" But he insisted and threatened me if I disagreed he would give me a negative review. Some customers asked for monetary rewards for positive reviews; some might even demand a big reward, otherwise they would say bad words. There were also people who were simply stupid. For example, I had a customer who wrote a negative review because my ginger tea "tasted too much like ginger." I said, "If you want ones that have less taste, go to e-shops that sell cheap products. Those chemicals will fit your needs." What could you do with these greedy and stupid customers? Their immorality harmed honest sellers. There were too many cases like this. Have you read the news that some frauds took advantage of e-platforms' return service by replacing luxury goods with counterfeits? Also, I know someone bought a suit and a shirt to attend a wedding, and returned them after use by creating some "quality problems", such as a hole on the clothes. In this way, the user used the clothes for free, while the sellers would have to pay for the round-way shipping fees and bear the loss of "faulty goods." You never know how vicious a person can be!

Highlighting these awful personal experiences and information from news reports, Huang felt no regret about scolding customers whom he judged as immoral. To him, punishing immoral peers and customers was *per se* a moral act. Whenever he had solid evidence, he would also report the cases to e-platforms, which might lead to the imposition of penalties on the accused. Even so, customers rarely received harsh punishments. According to Huang, this was because e-platforms sided with them since, ultimately, customers were the source of income. This situation might drive Huang to an extreme. During my fieldwork, he once continued to curse a customer whom he considered a troublemaker for three days by making phone calls from several phones with unregistered numbers that were purchased in other cities, sometimes at midnight. As he explained angrily, “The e-platform does not punish him, but I will. He wants to make trouble for me; in turn, I will be an even bigger troublemaker to him.” Some of his team members reminded him that his behavior might violate the law and public morality, but Huang held that he must teach that customer a lesson. He emphasized,

Let’s put morality aside first. Being moral is an ideal lifestyle, we have to be realistic when things actually happen. We have to adopt special measures in unusual times. If I don’t teach him this time, he will never know right from wrong!

Conclusions

Huang’s experiences with his customers and peers generated several moments of moral questioning. However, instead of returning to the original moral position that befit his standing as a self-regulated Confucian entrepreneur after self-reflection, as Zigon observed with his Russian informants, Huang chose to “put morality aside” and become an even bigger troublemaker for his adversaries. Like Mr. Zhou, Huang knew many tactics that might help him defeat his peers and solve problems with customers without confronting the regulations of e-platforms. He said he studied these for self-protection, but this was not always the case. To retaliate by using social networks in other cities and unregistered phone numbers, Huang tried his best to lower his risk of being traced by e-platforms and the government and, therefore, avoided potential punishment. Being clear that his scolding and harassment of customers distanced himself from the usual morality he held, he still attempted to legitimize his actions by initiating a new moral framework that defined teaching and punishing immoral people to distinguish right from wrong as moral acts. In the end, Huang’s moral agency serves his business interest by establishing a self-defending narrative through the manipulation of specific business contexts and the appropriation of his (and other people’s) experiences with awful customers. If the tactics and the subsequent self-serving creation of new moral frameworks helped Huang and Zhou expand their freedom to perform immoral business practices, Mr. Wang’s full grasp of the rules of the game of e-platforms and his industriousness contributed to his freedom to reject those practices, which ultimately strengthened his moral agency in upholding the moral values he embraced. In addition, e-traders such as Huang and Zhou also constructed a relatively free space on e-platforms through their imaginative work, e.g., by creating a feeling that they were being less regulated by the state and e-platforms or even forming a belief that they were collaborating with these regulators—by both selecting and reinterpreting certain contexts and personal experiences. These e-traders’ endeavors to exercise free will in making different moral

choices show the power of individual agency in negotiating with the regulating structure.

This article has presented divergent ethical trajectories of Chinese e-traders. By appropriating the contexts and interpreting personal experiences that support their moral choices, these individuals construct multiple ethical subjectivities in a relatively free space that they imagine and obtain through various strategies. The coexistence of these types of ethical personhoods reveals a moral diversification in this professional group, which emerges along with China's booming internet economy. As ordinary citizens, their divergent moral concepts and practices also mirror the moral diversities and complexities in Chinese society.

This article intends to contribute to both the study of morality in China and the anthropological literature on morality. The scholarship on the morality of Chinese individuals is polarized. Although studies have implied a trend of moral diversification in Chinese society, few scholars have addressed this issue directly. This article attempts to clarify and break the established dichotomy. It also offers an explanation for the moral diversification, which may be comparable to that in other societies. The anthropological literature of morality has demonstrated how individual ethical selfhood is shaped by social transformations and personal experiences. However, since this literature relies heavily on person-centered interviews and, hence, the scholarly data are mostly recollections of after-factual moral reasoning, it may be difficult for researchers to determine if and how their interviewees have manipulated their narratives of personal experiences. By participating in their businesses and everyday lives and observing their processes of moral reasoning closely, I find that Chinese e-traders often select and reinterpret certain contexts and personal experiences to fit the moral frameworks they choose or initiate to justify their ultimate moral decisions. This reveals the tremendous importance of individual agency in every step of making moral choices and, thus, further illuminates the agentive side of the individual in the new anthropology of morality.

Notes

1. Throughout the fieldwork, I found that my Chinese informants always conflated the two concepts and used them together or interchangeably. This differs substantially from the anthropologists in the West who struggle to distinguish the two (Laidlaw 2014; Fassin 2015). Siding with Clifford Geertz's call for representing the natives' points of view, in this article, I consider my informants' views and use the concepts interchangeably. For a Chinese scholar's reflection on the anthropology of morality/ethics, see Li (2017).
2. Yan's assertion seems inconsistent when considering his earlier portrait of Chinese youths as "uncivil" individuals. However, he conducted a more balanced assessment of morality of Chinese individuals and recognized the moral complexities in Chinese society in his later study (Yan 2016). Yan regarded the trend of moral diversification in China as a new phenomenon due to the recent social changes (i.e., the loosening of sociopolitical control and the introduction of liberal values), but I believe moral diversities exist in China and have existed in all other societies throughout human history. The anthropological literature on morality that I review in the coming paragraphs also points to this. Furthermore,

- in contrast to Yan's emphasis on structural changes, this article highlights the role of individual agency in expanding the freedom for making diverse moral choices.
3. On the moral values of villagers, Chinese anthropologist Tan Tongxue (Tan 2010) has offered an opposing viewpoint to Yunxiang Yan (2003). When Yan (2003) criticizes young people for their impiety, another scholar finds that they may have very different understandings of filial piety and practice the virtue in their own ways (Sun 2017).
 4. Other scholars may debate the extent of the remaining state pressure or whether the cultivation of moral citizens is a new form of state governance (Chong 2017; Hoffman 2013; Zhan 2020). However, it appears they will admit that there is departure of state power from individual life compared to the years before the economic reform. Even during those years, historians have found that, overall, ordinary people did not submit to the state; rather, they appropriated its ideology in their daily lives while finding ways to express discontent and challenge its moral authority (Brown and Johnson 2015).
 5. By "moral diversification," I refer to the dynamic process in which individuals choose to adopt different values from existing moral frameworks or initiate their own to guide and/or explain their social practices and interactions in a society. I use "diversification" in its broadest sense to cover both differences in moral values and practices among Chinese e-traders as a group and as individual e-traders. To restore their reputations, e-platforms are constantly developing new mechanisms for monitoring e-traders' business practices and protecting consumer rights. In various cases, the platforms have succeeded in gaining customer trust (Zheng 2019).
 6. In this article, the concept of freedom refers to individuals' power of self-determination that is attributed to will. In Kantian moral philosophy, freedom is regarded as the foundation for moral actions, and only free acts of rational agents are considered moral. By contrast, Durkheimian sociologists view morality as rules of conduct that society uses to compel its members for collective well-being. With morality controlling their minds and actions, individuals lose their freedom. The current anthropological literature on morality goes beyond these two polar paradigms by examining the interactions and negotiations between structural constraints and agentive individuals (Dyring 2018: 224-226; Laidlaw 2014: 16-23). To acquire freedom, individuals need both autonomy (the objective condition in which people can act independently) and agency (the capacity for people to make choices and express their individual power). This article will further show that autonomy and agency can intersect and reinforce each other mutually.
 7. This article is part of a larger project on investigating the e-commerce development in Yiwu city and its impacts on e-traders' everyday lives. In total, I have conducted interviews with 106 e-traders of various backgrounds in terms of age, gender, place of origin and educational level. I also considered the scale of their e-shops and the products they sell. To examine in detail the operations of e-businesses, I further conducted participant observations in ten e-shops. In this study, I found that the traders' moral values and practices were so diverse that I could hardly use their individual backgrounds to explain the diversities (e.g., older traders are not necessarily more honest than younger people in business

transactions). Thus, instead of engaging in a demographic discussion of individual traders' business ethics, this article attends to their divergent ethical trajectories and the resulting personhoods they have formed (moral, immoral, or morally divided). I will provide three representative cases that draw from my in-depth participant observations, and all names are pseudonyms.

8. Anthropologist Zhou Yongming (Zhou 2008: 224) has documented a similar narrative about Chinese government's reasoning in balancing economic growth and social control in his study of owners of private internet cafes in Beijing.
9. By "the orthodox moral framework," I refer to the moral standard that is promoted by the state and the public simultaneously. During the period of my fieldwork, the Chinese state was promoting "the core socialist values" (*shehuizhuyi hexin jiazhiguan*), which called for individuals to become citizens with "virtues" such as patriotism, dedication, integrity and friendship. The concept of integrity was especially highlighted in the state narrative in regard to e-business. Customers whom I have met also expressed substantial concern regarding e-traders' business integrity, which I believe constituted an important element of the moral standard of the Chinese public; see also Kuever (2018).
10. During my field research in Yiwu, I observed that a typical fake sale that was made by fake shoppers usually cost sellers 10~13 yuan (including shipping fees). Since Zhou was a leader of a *shua dan* team, he got a discount. For him, each deal cost only approximately 5 yuan. By running the team, Zhou saved a substantial amount of money.

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Author's contributions

This is a single-authored article. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Authors' information

Linliang Qian is an associate professor at the Department of Sociology, Southeast University of China. His research focuses on the sociocultural aspects of e-commerce in China. He has published at international journals such as *Asian Studies Review*, *China Information*, *Dialectical Anthropology*, and *Journal of Contemporary China*.

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