

**Olivia Yijian Liu.** *Start-up Wolf: The Shenzhen Model of High-Tech Entrepreneurship*. London and New York: Routledge, 2024, 198 pp. ISBN 9781032597164

Why does talent from across the world come to Shenzhen to create high-tech startups while agreeing to work on schemes known as 9-9-6 (nine to nine, six days a week) and 0-0-7 (noon to midnight, seven days a week)? And how has Shenzhen become a global innovation hub in the global market economy when China is an increasingly authoritarian state? *Start-up Wolf: The Shenzhen Model of High-Tech Entrepreneurship* by Olivia Yijian Liu takes a close look at a new type of migrant labour—the global technical talent—and how this talent navigates flows of global and local capital, global and local spaces for talent development and the shifting global and local political frameworks. This book makes an important contribution to the understanding of the limits, opportunities and global interdependence of Chinese innovation and the people working in this sector. In a time of global decoupling, this insight is very important.

The book's title is a reference to the wolf culture frequently portrayed as a dominant work culture in the tech industry and 'draws inspiration from the behaviour of wolves, known for their pack mentality, teamwork and hunting prowess' (7). 'Wolves' cooperate in a clear hierarchy inside the company but are fierce against competitors. The 'start-up wolves' referred to in the title are not only what Liu refers to as transnational entrepreneurs who have founded and/or currently run a high-tech start-up, but they are also non-Chinese or Chinese returnees who have extensive experience overseas or in transnational corporations. Additionally, start-up wolves have diverse career trajectories:

The start-up wolf is not a coherent class defined by occupation, but an unstable and contested social label that is constituted by the daily practices, performances, perceptions and aspirations of a diverse group of transnational entrepreneurs, start-up executives, professionals and employees in Shenzhen. (9)

On the surface, the wolf metaphor would appear to be easily compatible with neoliberal ideals of entrepreneurship found in western zones of innovation, such as Silicon Valley. However, based on impressive ethnographic fieldwork in Shenzhen—China’s leading zone of tech innovation—Liu finds the particular forms of entrepreneurship under the increasingly authoritarian governance of Xi Jinping to be fundamentally different. Throughout the book, Liu studies the contexts in which some entrepreneurs are successful, some fail after having been successful and some choose to retire from being start-up wolves.

The Introduction sets the scene in Shenzhen, and presents the impressive fieldwork. The book is based on Liu’s PhD thesis, and the fieldwork includes participant observations from several tech start-ups and interviews with 95 informants. This fieldwork was possible to conduct despite Covid 19 restrictions. Chapter 1 presents the theoretical framework for understanding how transnational tech talent pursues privilege while embodying precarity, and how this process is related to Chinese governance. The following chapters (2 to 6) explore different aspects, including: how performativity for both the market and the state are important to become an entrepreneur in China’s tech industry; how the ideals for entrepreneurs put forward by various levels of state do not always match market demands; and how transnational talent often becomes an unexpected precariat as a result of the sometimes conflicting demands from market and state. These conflicting demands have become virtually impossible to fulfil concurrently, even with the very long working hours which are an integral aspect of the performance expected from start-up wolves. This conundrum, among others, is particularly illustrated through the autoethnography of Liu’s experience with winning a state-led start-up competition in which she found her background from the University of Oxford to be an important assessment criterion. While she won the prize, she found that it was someone with a less prestigious background but with a solid idea who was approached by actual investors (Chapter 4).

Chapter 7 studies entrepreneurs and talent who pursue careers or establish businesses outside the precarious setting in Shenzhen or in other ways attempt to escape the precarious conditions and extreme working hours idealised in Shenzhen’s wolf culture. Liu suggests that the emergence of a counter-movement and highlights the temporality of Shenzhen and the speed with which individual

talent comes to Shenzhen. At one point, this talent typically leaves again, similar to the migrant workers. The book's final chapter explores the broader implications of the study for Chinese governance and for entrepreneurship. It suggests that the performativity of entrepreneurship creates a degree of precarity, or at least a need for performing obedience to authorities, for all entrepreneurs, even the most successful. Liu mentions Jack Ma as an example, who was at one time a role model but has been forced to leave the eye of the public. Liu highlights how through various disciplining techniques, the state has the ultimate control over the development in the sector; the state leaves space for market development, yet firmly places the interest of the Party above all else.

Liu sets out to understand precarity in a capitalist system, yet she also finds a surprising use of performance. This use of performance is a familiar aspect of politics, yet she observes this dynamic not only in the interaction between state and market but also within the market itself. She recognises a form of performativity and campaigning often used by cadres who engage in Chinese politics employed when entrepreneurs present their ideas in the market. They too present an empty shell (in one of Liu's cases literally an empty box looking like a device). This empty shell (be it lip service to a political campaign or an empty box) is sometimes used to fulfil market needs, and sometimes used to fulfil political needs. Liu's book may make readers wonder how high-tech industries with an immense work pressure and labour which is sometimes just performative busyness still end up innovating new products. This short and well-written book does not answer this question, and it generally makes readers wonder more than it provides answers. Within a tech savvy and innovation sector where there is a plethora of self-help books that provide very generic guidance and finite answers on how to succeed, Liu's astute and reflective book may offer a greater help for understanding how the sector really works.

*Start-up Wolf* offers a novel understanding of the paradoxical co-existence of entrepreneurship and increasingly authoritarian governance under Xi Jinping; hence, it is an important contribution to a number of debates. The book provides nuanced insight into the extreme labour regimes of high-tech talent and entrepreneurs. It furthermore skilfully links literature on migrant labour with literature on the cultivation of the urban, upper-middle classes. In its

localised study of Shenzhen, the book adds to the literature on zoning and neoliberalism by highlighting how the special economic zone of Shenzhen can no longer be understood as an exceptional space of the market alone, but also entails a new kind of localised governance. Finally, the book also contributes to understanding the intersection between the global high-tech industry and state governance. While the study is localised in Shenzhen, and in many ways not generalisable to China, the trans-local and transnational focus contextualises this study in a way which contributes to a broader understanding of governance and entrepreneurship in both a Chinese and global context. The rich ethnography offers insights into a world which is a micro-cosmos of some of the newest developments of how China meets the world.

Jesper Willaing Zeuthen  
Associate Professor  
Chinese Area Studies  
Aalborg University