RESEARCH ARTICLE

To Be "Entrepreneured": An Ethnographic Study of Tech Entrepreneurship Competitions in China

Olivia Yijian Liu

Abstract

Technological incubators are commonly regarded as important infrastructures that nurture nascent business ventures, meant to create conditions for innovation and regional economic development. However, in China, such an incubator functions as a performative apparatus governed by the state. The Chinese state has purposefully fostered entrepreneurial hopes and expectations among certain privileged groups of talents through the indirect manipulation of competition winners by mentors and judges. These individuals are not necessarily the ideal entrepreneurial talents according to market standards. In this article, I employ the passive construction of entrepreneurship as a verb – "being entrepreneured" (*bei chuangye*) – to illustrate how entrepreneurs are not merely actors with agency, but are also acted upon by socialist mechanisms in China and the performative governance exercised by the Chinese state over individual entrepreneurs. Using an ethnographic case study of a state-sponsored entrepreneurship competition, which took place in Guangzhou in 2020, and 95 semi-structured interviews collected

throughout seven months of multi-sited fieldwork, the article shows how transnational technological communities are in some ways "being entrepreneured" in China. I problematize this notion to show the discrepancies and contradictions between the public and the private criteria in selecting entrepreneurial talents in China.

Keywords

Entrepreneurship competition, Ethnography, Performative governance, China.

Introduction

The Chinese term *chuangye* functions both as a noun, translated as "entrepreneurship," and as a verb, meaning "to launch a business" or "to create a new venture." In everyday Chinese interactions in recent years, I have observed an increasing trend in the use of the passive voice, with "being entrepreneured" (*bei chuangye*) being one notable example. This newly emerging trend of using the passive voice presents the complexities of the individual decision-making process and various facets of contemporary Chinese societal issues, collectively underscoring the paradoxical relationships among Chinese individuals, society, and the state.

According to transnational entrepreneurs I met during fieldwork in South China in 2020 and 2021, the term "being entrepreneured" describes individuals who are cultivated by external factors to establish entrepreneurial ventures in major Chinese urban cities. Often, they later discover that the reality falls short of their initial expectations. Drawing inspiration from Chris Steyaert's concept of "entrepreneuring" (1997, 2007) – which transforms the noun "entrepreneurship" into a verb to highlight its dynamic, creative, and human aspects – I adopt its passive form, "be entrepreneured," that is used in the Chinese interactions. By blending theoretical perspectives with everyday language, I aim to use the concept to illuminate how individual entrepreneurial decisions are influenced by the Chinese local state and institutions while enacted by individual entrepreneurs. With this term, I do not mean that transnational technological communities are compelled into entrepreneurship. Rather, Chinese local state institutions have facilitated the transition of these communities into entrepreneurship through performative governing instruments enabled by technological incubators. This is achieved by simplifying entrepreneurial risks and nurturing entrepreneurial hopes and dreams.

It is worth noting that the state's promotion of entrepreneurship and state-run socialist infrastructures for cultivating entrepreneurship are not unique to China. State policies in Silicon Valley have attracted

skilled immigrants and fostered the development of an entrepreneurial industrial system (Saxenian 1996, 2006). In India, entrepreneurs are also positioned as agents of change and solutions to development challenges (Irani 2015, 2019). While I largely concur with the view on the universal celebration of entrepreneurship and the extensive and powerful state-owned infrastructures that contribute to it, I problematize the concept of being entrepreneured to show the specific paradoxes embedded within China's entrepreneurship governance mechanism and its impact on individuals.

In the realm of entrepreneurship, the status system typically centers around a singular rule: achieving business success in the market economy. However, in China, there exists an additional set of rules that come into play. My ethnographic case study of being entrepreneured myself revealed a realization of the contradiction between state policies and market realities that pervades the entrepreneurial landscape in China. Through this event, I discovered that the seemingly marketized entrepreneurship competitions were actually subject to Chinese state governance. This governance follows predefined criteria that outline the characteristics of ideal entrepreneurs. In this article, through the entrepreneurship competition that I attended in Guangzhou in 2020, complemented by semi-structured interviews within high-tech start-ups and incubators, I will demonstrate how the Chinese state's governing instruments shape individual entrepreneurs in practice.

Performative in Entrepreneurship and Governance

In entrepreneurship studies, the term *performance* refers to both theatrical and substantial performance. While substantial performance describes a company's objective financial and operational performance indicators (Venkatraman and Ramanujam 1986), the emphasis here is on the theatrical or dramatic dimension of performance. In what Anna L. Tsing (2005) has called "a global economy of appearances," where "dramatic performance is the prerequisite of [...] economic performance" (2005: 57), the dependence on dramatic performance is rather common for investment-oriented start-ups aiming to attract financing (2005: 63). Entrepreneurs then need to "dramatize their dreams [...] [and] exaggerate the possibilities of their [discoveries] in order to attract investors so that they might, at some point, find something" (2005: 57). In many ways, such dramatic dimension of performance makes it "very difficult to discern companies that have long-term production potential from those that are merely good at being on stage" (2005: 64).

One well-studied case in this regard is Silicon Valley's Theranos scandal (Carreyrou 2018; Williams, 2022). Elizabeth Holmes, founder and chief executive officer (CEO) of Theranos, adopted a deep voice, a masculine demeanor, and a pioneering persona that helped recruit

investors, stakeholders, and lucrative private partnerships with the convincing promise of innovative technology that did not work at all (Carreyrou 2018; Williams 2022). In addition to early-stage start-ups, a focus on theatrical performance is prevalent in other client-facing industries and organizations. For instance, in management consultancy, appearing presentable and intelligent is one key ability when impressing clients (Chong 2018). Similar observations have been made in Wall Street investment banks (Ho 2009).

The aforementioned examples have underscored the persuasive influence of *speech acts* in creating a false impression of substantial performance to convince the target audience. Introduced by John Austin (1962), a speech act refers to an utterance that is not primarily judged as true or false, but rather functions as an action. Examples given by Austin regarding performative utterance as illocutionary are couple's marriage ceremonies; by contrast, perlocutionary performatives characterize the utterances from which effects follow only when certain other kinds of conditions are in place. Judith Butler (1990, 2004, 2010) extends Austin's work on performatives, noting that perlocutionary performatives are not isolated occurrences, but rather repetitions of prior acts and utterances. Through these repetitions, subjects are brought into existence under specific felicitous circumstances (Butler 2010: 148). This is particularly evident in her explanation of gender as performative: Gender is "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (1990: 25). The performative is therefore taken for granted; it involves an ongoing process of recognition (2004), an expression of something that one does over time rather than something one is (1990). Inspired by Butler's concept of "gender as performative," there is a growing scholarly effort underway to conceptualize entrepreneurship from a performative perspective (Garud, Gehman, and Giuliani 2018; Garud, Gehman, and Tharchen 2018). For instance, entrepreneurial pitches can be viewed as perlocutionary speech acts, utterances aimed at securing the support of stakeholders by using conversations, stories, and dialogue (Garud, Gehman, and Tharchen 2018).

In addition to using the performative lens to study entrepreneurship primarily at the individual level, it also serves as a compelling tool for analyzing state governance in relation to entrepreneurship. Michel Foucault (1982) uses the concept of governmentality to refer to the set of rationales and technologies of governance that guide individual behavior in western societies (Miller and Rose 2008: 31). Governmentality, which problematizes the art of governing, can be understood as a framework for explaining the establishment and exercise of political power that extends beyond conventional state-centric approaches. This framework encompasses the

governance of others as well as the governance of the self (Lemke 2012). The approach is useful because it allows for an open-ended approach to historical and empirical research, and it provides a new way of thinking about how society and the individual are made and managed (Miller and Rose 2008). In addition to disciplinary power, Foucault (1988) examines techniques that:

> permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality (1988: 18).

Foucault calls such techniques "technologies of the self" (1988: 18).

Various researchers have applied the performative lens to study state governance in China. Drawing on Austin (1962), Michael Schoenhals (1992) examines the use of language and the definition of terminology in the Chinese political context. These linguistic tools function as a bureaucratic apparatus to attain, consolidate, and preserve state power. Borrowing from Butler (1990), Iza Ding (2022) uses the term *performative governance* to highlight the symbolic aspect of state behavior in China's environmental governance. While a government's substantial performance defines the quality of its public service, measured by objective standards such as GDP growth, some Chinese street-level environmental bureaucrats, when failing to achieve their mission of improving pollution, are engaged in creating a theatrical impression of "good governance" in the public perception, though these performative governing efforts are, oftentimes, ineffectual. Although the above-mentioned research on performatives draws on different sources and disagrees on the level of intentionality among other aspects, they all highlight how performative utterances, visuals, and acts constitute a social reality (Ding 2022: 9).

In this article, in response to Raghu Garud, Joel Gehman, and Antonio P. Giuliani (2018), who advocate for a performative turn in entrepreneurship, and following Ding (2022), I adopt a performative perspective to study entrepreneurship in China. I utilize performatives as a lens to examine two levels: the symbolic behavior of state governance regarding entrepreneurship and the motivations and experiences of individual entrepreneur performers. First, I examine performative governance in the context of high-tech start-ups in Shenzhen by identifying concrete governing instruments employed by the Chinese state. Then, I empirically show how transnational talents in China become entrepreneured in the context of the mass campaign of innovation and entrepreneurship.

Ethnographic Case Study of Entrepreneurship Competitions in China[1]

Anthropology advances the scholarship of entrepreneurship in distinct ways through its focus on individual intentionality, agency, strategic behavior, and experiential processes (Stewart 1991: 73). When viewed through an anthropological lens, entrepreneurship is conceptualized not as a singular event, outcome, or sequence of occurrences, but as an ongoing "social and cultural process" (Stewart 1991: 75). The application of ethnographic methodologies allows us to better understand entrepreneurial behavior in social and cultural contexts (Pfeilstetter 2021; Briody and Stewart 2019; Rosa and Caulkins 2013). Scholars in the anthropology of entrepreneurship have, therefore, advocated for empirical research to augment our understanding of entrepreneurial behaviors and small business operations across cultural and geographical contexts (Briody and Stewart 2019). In alignment with this scholarly call, I employed ethnographic research methods during an entrepreneurship competition in Guangzhou in November 2020. While acknowledging its limitations concerning generalizability, the ethnographic research method enables a nuanced understanding of entrepreneurship from an intimately personal perspective. The generalizability of my ethnographic case study is further complemented by 95 interviews with other high-tech entrepreneurs and incubator actors within the high-technology start-up ecosystem in South China.

In providing a backdrop to this study, it is important to expand upon the context of entrepreneurship competitions in China. Since China's mass campaign of innovation and entrepreneurship in 2015, "innovation and entrepreneurship competitions" (*chuangxin chuangye dasai*) and "pitch events" (*luyan huodong*) – an event that allows individual entrepreneurs or entrepreneurial teams to present their business idea to a captive audience – have become prevalent in urban China. While many international incubators and venture capitalists (VCs) host entrepreneurship competitions as a way to select start-ups for investment and are subject to a selection process emphasizing viable and innovative business proposals, the prominence of state-sponsored competitions (for instance, State Council, local government agencies, state-owned enterprises) has significantly increased since the mass campaign. These competitions target various high-tech industries (for instance, Internet, AI, new materials) and are organized across different administrative levels (for instance, nationwide, provincial, city-wide, district). They are designed to appeal to a diverse participant base, including college students, returnees, international entrepreneurs, and

---

[1] Some of the data presented in the following is also published as a book chapter in *Start-up Wolf: The Shenzhen Model of High-Tech Entrepreneurship* (Liu 2024).

PhDs. Posters promoting these events are widespread in streets, alleys, schools, and universities.

The state-sponsored competitions in China are open to anyone who applies. For many entrepreneurs in the high-tech sector, winning such a competition represents more than just an accolade; it symbolizes the institutional endorsement of both the business idea and the entrepreneurial team. This recognition can act as a gateway to government funding and other support mechanisms.

At the time of the state-sponsored entrepreneurship competition that I attended in late November 2020, I had been conducting multi-sited ethnography in South China for months. The fieldwork was undertaken between July 2020 and February 2021. I conducted follow-up interviews in 2022 and 2023. Shenzhen and Dongguan in Guangdong province were chosen as my primary research sites because they are China's frontiers in high-tech entrepreneurship. I travelled to Guangzhou twice for the entrepreneurship competition and follow-up interviews. The social relations relevant to my research project stretched far beyond South China, however. Many foreign entrepreneurs travel to Shenzhen or Dongguan for prototyping and manufacturing; meanwhile, many Chinese entrepreneurs, particularly Chinese returnees who have transnational connections and resources, aim to make their business go global.

Besides the entrepreneurship competition, I conducted four unpaid internships to collect data. Internships eased my access to the field, enabled me to engage in daily office work in start-ups and support organizations such as incubators and VCs. On site, I interned in three start-up companies and one incubator in total, spending between one and two months in each participant organization. As an intern and an ethnographer, I went to the office on a daily basis, unless I had alternative responsibilities. On a normal working day, I arrived in the office at 9 a.m. and finished working at 6 p.m., and my work involved research, translation, and assisting others in need. In Shenzhen's high-tech industries, I followed entrepreneurs to multiple places: start-up offices, makerspaces, and business meetings. I also actively attended entrepreneurial events, social occasions, seminars and workshops, pitching events, and exhibitions in different start-up communities. In these sites, I met many people with whom I conducted interviews, including entrepreneurs, makers, investors, and incubator operators. Participant observation served as the basis for investigation, and interviews were used to gain deep insights into the actor's perception of what I observed in participant observation. Before the end of the fieldwork, I conducted follow-up interviews or informal chitchats with several key research participants with whom I had previously carried out participant observation. In total, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 95 start-up entrepreneurs, employees, and support organization actors. All of my informants have been given pseudonyms in this article.

In addition to observational and interview data, I read and cited talent policies, local state planning documents, governmental reports, news and articles on the government websites to comprehend the research environment. I paid particular attention to public and state discourses, such as new policies on entrepreneurship and innovation.

When I came across the announcement for the entrepreneurship competition on a social media post shared by one of my informants, I was on the cusp of concluding an internship at a high-tech start-up and gearing up for a relocation to Shenzhen. My initial motivation for participating in the competition was driven by a desire to understand how individuals from specific demographics develop an interest in entrepreneurship and to explore the challenges they face in the early stages of their ventures. Through this experience, I gained insights into both the accomplishments and shortcomings of entrepreneurship competitions in China. On the one hand, they have fostered entrepreneurial aspirations among transnational talents and provided winners with credentials and financial support. On the other hand, this governing apparatus has risked precarizaring both state-recognized entrepreneurial talents and those who must prove themselves in the competition. This is because a dichotomy of differing expectations was dominant in Shenzhen's start-ups: state-supported talents and those recognized by market actors as entrepreneurial talents are not necessarily the same people. The following sections will explore who the state-supported talents are, who the market-recognized talents are, and how this dichotomy of ideals manifests.

Being "Entrepreneured": Cultivating Entrepreneurial Talents for the Chinese State

In November 2020, a new state-of-the-art office building in Guangzhou's urban center hosted the city's entrepreneurship competition on its 33rd floor. The reception drew a diverse crowd of approximately 35 participants, including early-stage entrepreneurs, engineers, designers, employees from leading firms, and university students. During the orientation session, Xiaoshi, a Chinese returnee entrepreneur and Ivy League graduate, took the stage to introduce the competition's agenda and the event sponsors to open the evening. This event, orchestrated by the local entrepreneurial community and incubator, received financial backing from both state-owned and private enterprises and was heavily promoted by local state media. The competition comprised a three-day entrepreneurial hackathon, which included a training phase followed by a Demo Day. Throughout this period, start-up teams engaged in intensive business idea formation and development before presenting their pitches to a select audience of investors, press, and media on Demo Day.

When her time was over, Liyong, a departmental head of a local state development programme, gave a welcome on behalf of the state-owned company and the event's sponsors that managed the space we were in. He emphasized the significance of incubators like this one in the Greater Bay Area. In summary, his argument was that technological innovation and entrepreneurship could serve as key drivers for the regional economic development and industrial upgrading.

After the orientation, the competition commenced with participants introducing their business ideas in a one-minute elevator pitch. When my turn came, I took the stage for my first-ever business pitch. After a brief self-introduction, I presented a basic SaaS (Software as a service)[2] app designed to connect incoming Chinese overseas students with senior Chinese students at the same university. This idea had come to me during the one-hour train ride from Dongguan[3] to Guangzhou. Following all the pitches, the organizers distributed three sticky notes to each participant, instructing us to award them to the business ideas that we found most compelling. During the subsequent mingling and networking session, many attendees approached me, asking if I was "that Oxford graduate" or "PhD candidate," and handed me their sticky notes. Once the votes were cast, the six most popular presenters were selected as team leaders. The ideas varied, from smart homes to SaaS platforms. Notably, four of the six chosen team leaders were Chinese returnees, predominantly graduates from prestigious universities in the global north (primarily the US, Canada, and the UK). Despite my business idea being conceived on the spot, and later discovering that similar apps existed already in several countries, I received the most votes, with one-third of the attendees giving me their sticky notes. Consequently, six teams of five or six members were formed.

The second day of the competition featured lectures and mentorship sessions focused on developing viable business plans from an idea. The first speaker of the day recounted the entrepreneurial story of TikTok, a short-form video hosting service that originated from Start-up Weekend, an entrepreneurship competition event in Shanghai in 2014, and has since become a globally successful company. The speaker encouraged us, suggesting that we too could achieve success if we worked hard, thereby instilling hopes of business success.

The successful example raises the question to us: How can participants learn to think and behave like successful entrepreneurs? On stage, lecturers discussed various methods and free business tools that

---

[2] SaaS is a form of cloud computing in which the provider offers the use of application software to a client and manages all the physical and software resources used by the application.

[3] Dongguan is an industrial city in China's Greater Bay Area. I was based in a tech start-up in Dongguan during the time of the entrepreneurship competition.

entrepreneurs could use to test business models, develop web pages, refine value proposition, calculate cost structure, manage social media accounts, and more. One example is Eric Ries' (2011) lean start-up model and his concept of Minimum Viable Product (MVP), which describes the most basic version of a product that a company aims to launch. To develop a MVP, start-ups can use the lean canvas tool. "The most important job of a MVP is to get feedback from your potential customers in order to learn from it," one speaker specified. "Now go out and find clues during lunchtime!"

The morning lectures appeared overly simplistic yet highly ambitious in their claims, as some experienced entrepreneur attendees noted. On the one hand, the examples of successful enterprises and their methods suggested that business success was attainable with hard work and the right tools. On the other hand, although the event disseminated information about easily accessible software and business toolkits, the limited time of the lectures prevented the speakers from explaining their use in depth. I had a similar experience during the afternoon mentorship sessions. Each team discussed their business concept with six mentors, each for around 15 minutes, during which the mentors provided suggestions. While the mentors were generally encouraging and positive about all the business ideas, their comments were rather general. One competition participant used the Chinese colloquialism "inject chicken blood" (*da jixue*) to suggest that the lectures and mentorship sessions at entrepreneurship competitions were more about fostering an entrepreneurial hope and dream than providing comprehensive advice for novice founders struggling with start-up launch and development. Reflecting on the experience, Pedro, a non-Chinese participant who had twice attended similar entrepreneurship competitions in Shenzhen, remarked that the suggestions from lecturers and mentors were of little practical help:

> What they ended up doing was [...] not going to be super helpful for me. [...] I feel like the judges just did not really get what I was talking about. They did not actually grasp that [my business idea]. [...] They did not really ask any meaningful questions (Interview, May 2020).

It became evident that the lectures and mentorships were not particularly useful for developing our business idea. After a whole day of sessions, my team was even more perplexed by the varied comments and unable to reach a consensus regarding the viability of our initial idea. After several rounds of brainstorming, we decided to discard our original concept and instead switched to a SaaS platform providing knowledge experience trips by linking part-time expert tour guides with Chinese middle-class families traveling overseas. Given the last-minute switch, we did not have time to conduct market research to validate the new concept. Instead, we chose to craft a compelling narrative that demonstrated the

potential of our business. We created a story about how I had decided to attend top overseas universities after participating in a personalized tour that sparked my interest. This story set the stage for introducing our digital platform, designed to help Chinese students and families explore their dream universities with seniors and offer Chinese middle class the opportunity to explore the world with local guides. Following the pitch deck template introduced by the mentors, we created a presentation that included problem and solution statements, market potential, competitor analysis, a business model plan, a product roadmap, cost evaluation, and a product demo. Through writing, imagining, and refining this entrepreneurial story, we aimed to present a convincing case for our new business idea.

The Demo Day event took place on the final day of the competition, attracting an audience of over 80 people. The seven judges – comprising six men and one woman – were investors, government institution leaders, and business school professors who each introduced themselves. During the event, each team had up to six minutes to pitch their business, followed by five minutes of questions and comments from the judges. In their final pitches, most teams expressed ambitious and somewhat exaggerated goals, with slogans like "Initial Public Offering (IPO) in five years," "Revenue with the first order," "Becoming the best brand of Chinese sleeping products," and "Aiming to be the number one AI-enabled interior design system." Despite the lofty assumptions, most teams received praise and were told that they had the potential to succeed if they made the often minor adjustments suggested by the judges.

At the end of the Demo Day, after a 30-minute closed discussion, the judges made their decisions regarding the first, second, and third prizes. Unexpectedly, my team won first prize in the competition. I was thrilled to walk onto the stage to receive a medal and an award. Following the applause and camera flashes, the judges explained the rationale behind awarding my team the competition winner:

> This is an original idea that was born in three days. It represents a great combination of an overseas PhD candidate and a full-time adventurer (Fieldnote, November 2020).

During the after-competition celebration, many people, including investors, came to propose a toast to congratulate us and to exchange contact information for future business cooperation. We gained so much positive feedback and encouragement, though my team had conducted little market research and many aspects were underdeveloped in the pitch. "This idea is great!" remarked one serial entrepreneur. "I think it can work well if we devote resources to this." Potential customers also came to chat. One said, "I am very interested in your background and the

service your team provides; my son is 17 years old, [and] I would also like to encourage him to aim for Oxford University."

My experience at the competition exemplifies how many Chinese returnees are promoted as entrepreneurial talents through such events. When asking around, I was surprised to hear that many of my overseas PhD peers in Shenzhen had also won similar entrepreneurship competitions. Dr. Rouyu, a start-up CEO and a competition winner, remarked:

> It [entrepreneurship competition] is a nice and fun game. I received lots of encouragement from judges and mentors. Everyone was kind of pushing me towards starting a business right here and now. However, it was a bit removed from real entrepreneurship, because real entrepreneurship won't be fun. Of course, in such an event, they were there to encourage you to pursue entrepreneurship. That was their goal. You should think more carefully before you really decide to become an entrepreneur (Fieldnote, December 2020).

A state-sponsored entrepreneurship competition was "a fun game," yet it was far removed from the realities of genuine entrepreneurship. The criteria for winning these competitions often diverged significantly from the actual skills and capabilities required to grow and succeed in the global market economy. The primary emphasis in these competitions seemed to revolve around meritocratic biographies that embodied the values promoted by the Chinese state, although there was variation across different competitions. This prioritization of state-sanctioned values over entrepreneurial effectiveness is not uncommon in China, as illustrated by Pedro's recounting of his experience with one competition in Shenzhen:

> I lost [the competition] to an app [...] for deaf people. The team leader was deaf herself, so she was trying to make an app for people like her. [...] The business model and the start-up concept were actually very invalid and not viable, but she won the hearts of judges. That company was put at the top because she had a story, and people liked that she was deaf and she was making an app. I thought I had a good product; I got a business model and everything. Yet, I lost to a company that probably did not have what it takes to make it work. At that point, I was already feeling like [...] this [entrepreneurship competition] might not be very useful (Interview, May 2020).

This example suggests that the transnational talents who have achieved educational merit are not the only entrepreneurial subjects promoted by

the local state in pursuit of its goals of modernity and stability.[4] I argue, therefore, from both examples of entrepreneurial talents and entrepreneurial disabled people, that the key criterion for winning an entrepreneurship competition in China seems to be predetermined by the Chinese state.

The seemingly market-oriented entrepreneurship competitions in China serve as a form of performative governance, designed to foster an entrepreneurial ethos among specific groups and encourage them to perceive themselves as self-enterprising subjects. Various central and local state institutions have created sources of both fictional and material capital – entrepreneurial aspirations and financial support – through entrepreneurship competitions and other state-sponsored initiatives. These competitions enact an economy of appearances (Tsing 2005), serving China's economic and political objectives. This economy has cultivated dreams and desires among entrepreneurial citizens, suggesting that they have significant potential to build successful ventures, thereby being entrepreneured. My analysis thus aligns with Irani's (2015) study of India's technology incubators, which emphasizes: "hackathons sometimes produce technologies, but they always produce subjects" (2015: 800).

Market Selection of Entrepreneurs

During the first few days after winning the entrepreneurship competition, I kept receiving compliments, suggestions, and interest in getting involved in the development of the idea. Despite having disclosed my data collection purpose and my plan to return to Norway, a fact everyone had already known and consented to at the beginning of the competition, people who I met at the competition still attempted to persuade me to continue the start-up project in my spare time and after graduation. Subsequently, my team and I discussed our business idea and plan with several interested parties, who passionately reaffirmed the potential of the idea and encouraged us to take the next steps on the entrepreneurial journey. For instance, one entrepreneur and event organizer wrote the following message to my team:

> The project leader is relatively young, and it is excellent that one is able to produce this idea in a short time. The project itself is valuable. The limitation is the social network of the founder in China (Fieldnote, December 2020).

Many others in the group then offered to make introductions to relevant support organizations. For example, one competition judge commented:

---

[4] For China's promotion of entrepreneurship among people with disabilities, see also Yu (2019).

"If you really want to start doing the project, I will introduce you to the MBA programs at my university." A fellow participant remarked: "I have a lot of music contacts to contribute to this project, as I used to organize high-end classical concerts in Canada."

Despite the encouraging prospects, my astonishment grew when I learned, a few days later, that another team from the same competition, which focused on an AI beauty tool and which had not received any prizes at the competition, had secured investment from one of the investors present at the Demo Day, who also served as a judge. This development was perplexing, considering the apparent endorsement of my idea and team by the judges, who selected it as the winning team and urged me to continue its development post-competition. Seeking clarity, I returned to Guangzhou a month later to engage in follow-up discussions with peers of the competition cohort. The investor provided insights into the decision to invest in the AI beauty start-up: despite the founder lacking overseas experience or educational merit, they possessed significant industry expertise and extensive networks within the beauty sector, while their product prototype was readily deployable in beauty salons. Additionally, the investor hinted at the AI beauty prototype's two-year development timeline preceding the competition, which contravened the event's emphasis on novel and innovative ideas conceived by participants. The importance of industrial experience resurfaced during an unsuccessful attempt by my team to secure an incubation programme, as institutional investors reiterated it as a pivotal investment criterion. Subsequently, I opted to end the project and decided to start my last internship.

The difference observed between the selection criteria of institutional investors, who took on the role of mentors/judges of an entrepreneurship competition, and the investment criteria that they *actually* apply when they financially invest, became apparent here. Such disparity affirms that the world of the Chinese state is detached from the world of the market in defining entrepreneurial talents. The discrepancies of the two standards matter, because they are related to a broader issue that questions the potential wastefulness of state resources. Can people, those striving talents who were benefitting from the state's support, succeed in the global high-tech economy?

Consider the case of Dr. Ning and his business partner, both PhD graduates from one of the top universities specializing in machine learning. They qualified for the most prestigious overseas talent scheme established by the Shenzhen government. Despite their impressive educational credentials, Dr. Ning encountered significant challenges in securing funding from private investors for his early-stage start-up. He candidly noted that while most investors were impressed by their team profile, they were still passive when negotiating valuation because "we are not very familiar with the manufacturing process when it comes to an AI product" (Interview, August 2020).

It seems that educational meritocracy, which is essential for state-sponsored domains, is not a key, or at least not the only key, criterion for market domains. The criteria that investors in China applied, despite investors invoking state-policy logic when judging competitions, were not unlike the criteria financial investors elsewhere might apply. For instance, Quhua, the director of the Inno Venture China office (one of the biggest seed-stage VCs in high-tech start-ups worldwide), summarized the entrepreneurial teams she expected to see when making investment decisions. Her insights appeared instructive and representative in this context:

> We believe there are three characteristics that make a good team in the early stage. […] The first is "hipster" […]. This person needs to have a long-term plan and a long-term thinking mode. He or she can know what the company vision is now, and what needs to be done to achieve the goals in the future. The person can plan in this way, be very big picture in their thinking and stay on the ground at the same time. The second type is called "hacker," the person who makes the product. This person can be the CTO, a technical expert. This person's job is to implement the technology very quickly. […] The third type is "hustler" […] who is fond of, and willing to make friends with, all kinds of people, to share resources, and build relationships. Since the early start-up team certainly cannot survive alone, it must cooperate with some people in the industry chain. […] We think these three competencies are key to an early-stage team's success (Fieldnote, January 2021).

Quhua's statement openly emphasized the market-originated investment criteria (see also Ellwood 2012). The criteria, according to the market logic, focused on the start-up founders' willingness, ability, technological know-how, industrial experience, social ability, and so on. These listed qualities of the investment logic may seem general and vague, because they are the investment ideals. Many VCs often assess entrepreneurial teams on a case-by-case basis in order to find, as one VC put it, "the amazing companies that truly change an industry and an era" (Interview, February 2021). By contrast, the imaginary of the state-recognized talents is more of a meritocratic ideal, an ideal self-enterprising subject that matches the broader talent policies and embodies the striving values, who can contribute to the state's vision. Outlining the contradictions between the hipster-hacker-hustler team summarized by Quhua and the state-endorsed striving talents apparent from the competition winners, it became clear why many state-recognized striving talents in Shenzhen, such as my team and Dr Ning's team, despite winning entrepreneurship competitions or securing governmental talent grants, struggled to obtain market recognition.

However, this does not imply that entrepreneurs endorsed by the Chinese state or talented individuals who have won entrepreneurship competitions are not viable candidates for market actors. The relationship between state promotion of entrepreneurship and market investment is intricate and multifaceted. Economically, there are instances where state-sponsored prizes effectively attract further market investments. Winning start-ups can leverage these opportunities to secure financial support, bolster their credibility, and gain access to a wider network of potential investors, partners, and customers, particularly within the Chinese market. However, it is essential to recognize that state sponsorship serves more as a bonus than a necessity. For example, Dr. Hehui, a PhD student turned entrepreneur, participated in and won several entrepreneurship competitions at the start of his entrepreneurial journey, successfully secured funding from institutional investors and later sold his company to a state-owned firm in 2024. He regarded winning entrepreneurship competitions or receiving talent grants merely as a "bonus" for success in the global market. While government funds and competition awards provided his team with financial cushioning and third-party validation, he considered that understanding the industry and demonstrating the product's market validation were crucial for his success. He mentioned that these entrepreneurship awards are "good to have, but definitely not the core." For Dr. Hehui, the priority is to continue generating market value (Interview, January 2021).

The contradictions and tensions between the entrepreneurship competition winners and the successful industry moguls create a new way of seeing the Chinese economy. In an entrepreneurial context characterized by the two seemingly dependent and somehow contradictory worlds of the state and the market, entrepreneurship competitions in China were meant to encourage certain talent biographies to start entrepreneurship. Such processes can play a crucial role in producing self-enterprising subjects by instilling individualistic hopes and training certain skillsets that are needed to foster a world of technologies (Perng 2018). However, entrepreneurs in China must navigate both state and market criteria to succeed in their ventures, often leading to precarious conditions. Only those who acknowledge and adapt to these diverse evaluative frameworks, such as Dr. Hehui, can establish successful ventures in China.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, I have shown that the entrepreneurship competitions and state-sponsored incubators function as performative governing instruments, meant to create the conditions for entrepreneurship in high-tech industries and develop the country into a globally competitive

technological nation. This argument echoes research that focuses on the cultivation of entrepreneurs among marginal citizens and the poor in other contexts (for instance, Irani 2019; Dolan and Rajak 2016; Pollio 2020).

The concept of being entrepreneured is particularly relevant for understanding entrepreneurship in the Chinese context. This concept has offered a distinct perspective on the dynamic interplay between individual agency and structural forces in the entrepreneurial process. While public actors regard these competitions as means to foster entrepreneurship, support high-tech industries, and stimulate economic development by encouraging transnational talents to start business ventures, competition organizers, judges, and mentors solely emphasize the entrepreneurial potential of certain profiles, including those from transnational educational backgrounds, while intentionally overlooking other important criteria (for instance, hipster, hacker, hustler) that might be crucial for a start-up's success in the global economy.

In this sense, the entrepreneurship competitions, particularly the "entrepreneurial game" that I attended, is part of the state's performative governance and has led to an economy of appearance. Privilege is, in this way, seen as a valid means to restrict and direct the pool of future high-tech entrepreneurs for the knowledge economy. In these state-sponsored contexts, entrepreneurial talent is an impression that has to be repeatedly recognized by many local state institutions, confirmed by competition mentors and judges and, finally, enacted by entrepreneurs-to-be. This is, though, not a purely intersubjective communication between competition jury and participants, but a political performance that follows predefined rules formulated by an "invisible hand," the Chinese state.

However, such performative governance exists only in the state-sponsored contexts. The contradictions between private investors acting as competition juries in entrepreneurship competitions and making private investment decisions reveal an underlying tension between public interests and private investment in China. State institutions aim to generate entrepreneurial citizens, while private investors focus on profiting from specific investments. This public-private tension is not unique to the Chinese context.

The extensive and powerful public infrastructures, funding, and organization have contributed to the widespread celebration of transnational entrepreneurship, with global implications (Saxenian 1996, 2006). In India, the concept of entrepreneurial citizenship encompasses state policies favoring innovation and individuals acknowledged as innovators, alongside reshaped practices to foster entrepreneurial innovation (Irani 2019). This often overshadows other rights or democratic processes and hinges on entrepreneurs' capacity to mobilize resources from others, such as gendered household labor or class and

caste networks, thereby reproducing structures of privilege in new forms. Entrepreneurship, in this context in India, is based on enduring hierarchies and systems of meaning (Irani 2019). Similar tensions can be also found in the state-sponsored hackathon in Khayelitsha, Cape Town (Pollio 2020).

While my research underscores the similar contradictions between state and private ideals of entrepreneurial talents, it also shows the limitations of the state-led entrepreneurship production when juxtaposed with market criteria in China. Two contrasting principles for selecting entrepreneurial talent emerge in the Chinese market economy: state-led governance emphasizes meritocratic backgrounds and socialist values, while private investment prioritizes individual merit and immediate financial return, as favored by VCs. In China's high-tech sector, dependence solely on unproven business ideas and profiles for capital growth and market support beyond state sponsorship has proven ineffective. The shortcomings of competition winners underscore that talents who are entrepreneured do not necessarily further China's socio-economic goals.

In summary, this article's focus on being entrepreneured in China thus enriches scholarship on entrepreneurship governance and performativity by prompting a critical evaluation of how individual entrepreneurial passion, aspirations, and experiences intersect with broader political and economic frameworks in a Chinese context.

Funding details

References

Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to Do Things with Words.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Briody, E. K. and Stewart, A. (2019). "Entrepreneurship: A Challenging, Fruitful Domain for Ethnography." *Journal of Business Anthropology* 8(2): 141-166. https://doi.org/10.22439/jba.v8i2.5846

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* New York: Routledge.

Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing Gender.* New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203499627

Butler, J. (2010). "Performative Agency." *Journal of Cultural Economy* 3(2): 147-161. https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2010.494117

Carreyrou, J. (2018). *Bad Blood: Secrets and Lies in a Silicon Valley Startup.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Chong, K. (2018). *Best Practice: Management Consulting and the Ethics of Financialization.* Durham: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478002376

Ding, I. (2022). *The Performative State: Public Scrutiny and Environmental Governance in China.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press. https://doi.org/10.7591/cornell/9781501760372.001.0001

Dolan, C. and Rajak, D. (2016). "Remaking Africa's Informal Economies: Youth, Entrepreneurship and the Promise of Inclusion at the Bottom of the Pyramid." *The Journal of Development Studies* 52(4): 514-529. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2015.1126249

Ellwood, A. (2012). "The Dream Team: Hipster, Hacker, and Hustler." *Forbes.* Available from https://www.forbes.com/sites/andyellwood/2012/08/22/the–dream–team–hipster–hacker–and–hustler/?sh=5c331062c85e [Accessed 20 November 2022].

Foucault, M. (1982). "The Subject and Power." *Critical Inquiry* 8(4): 777-795. https://doi.org/10.1086/448181

Foucault, M. (1988). "Technologies of the Self." In H. M. Luther, G. Huck, and P. H. Hutton (eds.), *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (pp. 16-49). Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Garud, R., Gehman, J., and Giuliani, A. P. (2018). "Why Not Take a Performative Approach to Entrepreneurship?" *Journal of Business Venturing Insights* 9(June): 60-64. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbvi.2018.01.001

Garud, R., Gehman, J., and Tharchen, T. (2018). "Performativity as Ongoing Journeys: Implications for Strategy, Entrepreneurship, and Innovation." *Long Range Planning* 51(3): 500-509. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lrp.2017.02.003

Ho, K. Z. (2009). *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street.* Durham: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822391371

Irani, L. (2015). "Hackathons and the Making of Entrepreneurial Citizenship." *Science, Technology, and Human Values* 40(5): 799-824. https://doi.org/10.1177/0162243915578486

Irani, L. (2019). *Chasing Innovation: Making Entrepreneurial Citizens in Modern India.* Princeton: Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.23943/princeton/9780691175140.001.0001

Lemke, T. (2012). *Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique.* London: Routledge.

Liu, O. Y. (2024). *Start-up Wolf: The Shenzhen Model of High-Tech Entrepreneurship.* London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003456339

Miller, P. and Rose, N. (2008). *Governing the Present: Administrating Economic, Social and Personal Life.* Cambridge: Polity.

Perng, S. Y. (2018). *Shared Technology Making in Neoliberal Ruins: Rationalities, Practices and Possibilities of Hackathons.* The Programmable City Working Paper 38: 1-34. Available from https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/k793w [Accessed 29 March 2022].

Pfeilstetter, R. (2021). *The Anthropology of Entrepreneurship: Cultural History, Global Ethnographies, Theorizing Agency.* London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367824136

Pollio, A. (2020). "Incubators at the Frontiers of Capital: An Ethnographic Encounter with Startup Weekend in Khayelitsha, Cape Town." *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 110(4): 1244-1259. https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2019.1680232

Ries, E. (2011). *The Lean Startup: How Today's Entrepreneurs Use Continuous Innovation to Create Radically Successful Businesses.* New York: Crown Business.

Rosa, P. and Caulkins, D. (2013). "Entrepreneurship Studies." In: D. Caulkins and A. T. Jordan (eds.), *A Companion to Organizational Anthropology* (pp. 98-121). New York: Wiley–Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118325513.ch4

Saxenian, A. (1996). *Regional Advantage: Culture and Competition in Silicon Valley and Route 128.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674418042

Saxenian, A. (2006). *The New Argonauts: Regional Advantage in a Global Economy.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1dp0ttd

Schoenhals, M. (1992). *Doing Things with Words in Chinese Politics: Five Studies.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Stewart, A. (1991). "A Prospectus on the Anthropology of Entrepreneurship." *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* 16(2): 71-92. https://doi.org/10.1177/104225879201600206

Steyaert, C. (1997). "A Qualitative Methodology for Process Studies of Entrepreneurship: Creating Local Knowledge through Stories." *International Studies of Management and Organization* 27(3): 13-33. https://doi.org/10.1080/00208825.1997.11656711

Steyaert, C. (2007). "'Entrepreneuring' as a Conceptual Attractor? A Review of Process Theories in 20 Years of Entrepreneurship Studies." *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development* 19(6): 453-477. https://doi.org/10.1080/08985620701671759

Tsing, A. L. (2005). *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection.* Princeton: Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400830596

Venkatraman, N. and Ramanujam, V. (1986). "Measurement of Business Performance in Strategy Research: A Comparison of Approaches*." Academy of Management Review* 11(4): 801-814. https://doi.org/10.2307/258398

Williams, M. (2022). "Elizabeth Holmes and Theranos: A Play on More Than Just Ethical Failures." *Business Information Review* 39(1): 23-31. https://doi.org/10.1177/02663821221088899

Yu, H. (2019). "Self as Enterprise: Disability and E-entrepreneurship in China." In: A. Athique and E. Baulch (eds.), *Digital Transactions in Asia: Economic, Informational, and Social Exchanges* (pp. 153-166). New York: Routledge.

Olivia Yijian Liu is an entrepreneurship researcher and a strategy consultant. She holds a PhD from the University of Oslo and a MSc from the University of Oxford.

Olivia Yijian Liu can be reached at olivia.yijianliu@gmail.com