IOSR Journal Of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)
Volume 30, Issue 8, Series 6 (August, 2025) 67-72
e-ISSN: 2279-0837, p-ISSN: 2279-0845.
www.iosrjournals.org

The Influence Of E-Commerce On Social Life In China

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Abstract
In a little over a decade, China's e-commerce story has moved from novelty to normalcy—and then beyond, into something more like social infrastructure. What began as digital storefronts has fused with payments, logistics, video, chat, and local services to create an ecosystem in which buying things is just one small piece of how people connect, work, move, entertain themselves, and even participate in community life. E-commerce has revolutionized China's economy and society, evolving from a nascent digital marketplace into a dominant force shaping daily interactions, cultural norms, and economic opportunities. With a market projected to reach US$1,773 billion in revenue by 2025, e-commerce penetrates over 82% of the population, influencing everything from rural livelihoods to urban consumer habits. This article explores how platforms like Taobao, Alibaba, JD.com, Pinduoduo and Meituan have altered social life, fostering new forms of community, consumerism, and challenges such as digital inequality and privacy concerns. Drawing on historical developments, economic data, and social trends, it argues that e-commerce is not merely a commercial tool but a profound social transformer in contemporary China. This article explores how that evolution has reshaped social life in China—at the level of daily routines, relationships, cities and villages, cultural expression, livelihoods, and public governance.

Keywords: *China, Society, Economy, E-Commerce, Online shopping,*

Date of Submission: 16-08-2025 Date of Acceptance: 26-08-2025

I. Introduction

In the span of two decades, China has emerged as the global epicenter of e-commerce, boasting the world's largest online retail market. As of 2025, China's e-commerce sector generates approximately US$1,773 billion in revenue, accounting for nearly half of global online sales and growing at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 7.42% through 2029. [1] This explosive growth is underpinned by a massive population of over 1.4 billion, with internet penetration exceeding 70% and smartphone usage driving mobile commerce to dominate transactions. Platforms such as Alibaba's Taobao and Tmall, JD.com, and the social-focused Pinduoduo have not only redefined shopping but have permeated every facet of social life, from interpersonal relationships to cultural festivals.[2]

E-commerce in China transcends mere transactional convenience; it is a catalyst for social change. Traditional brick-and-mortar retail has given way to digital ecosystems where shopping is intertwined with social media, live streaming, and community engagement. This integration has fostered "social commerce," projected to account for 17.1% of online retail sales by 2025, up from 14.3% in previous years.[3] Consumers now discover products through influencers (Key Opinion Leaders or KOLs), share purchases in virtual groups, and participate in collective bargaining, blurring the lines between commerce and socialization.

China's e-commerce journey began in the late 1990s with platforms like Alibaba founded in 1999, capitalizing on the country's rapid internet adoption. By 2013, online retail sales surpassed those of the United States, and today, with 904.6 million online shoppers, China leads globally.[4] Government policies, such as the "Internet Plus" initiative launched in 2015, have accelerated this growth by integrating digital technologies into traditional sectors, including agriculture and manufacturing. These policies have not only boosted GDP contributions—e-commerce accounts for about 10% of retail sales—but have also influenced social structures, enabling remote work, online education, and virtual socializing amid events like the COVID-19 pandemic.[5]

Socially, e-commerce has democratized access to goods, bridging urban-rural divides. In rural areas, where traditional retail infrastructure is limited, platforms like Taobao Villages have empowered villagers to sell handmade goods online, lifting millions out of poverty. However, this comes with trade-offs: increased screen time has altered family dynamics, and the rise of live-streaming sales has created new social hierarchies based on digital influence.

The article of this paper is that e-commerce has profoundly transformed social life in China by enhancing connectivity and economic inclusion while introducing new challenges like consumerism overload, privacy erosion, and social isolation. This transformation is evident in shifted consumer behaviors, revitalized rural communities, and evolving cultural practices. To substantiate this, we will examine historical developments,

economic impacts, social dynamics, cultural shifts, and future implications, supported by data from industry reports and academic studies.

In summary, e-commerce's impact on Chinese social life is multifaceted, offering unprecedented opportunities while posing risks to societal well-being. The following sections delve deeper into these dimensions.

II. Historical Evolution Of E-Commerce In China

The roots of e-commerce in China trace back to the mid-1990s, when the country first connected to the global internet. Initial adoption was slow due to limited infrastructure and low internet penetration—only 0.6% in 1997. However, the establishment of Alibaba by Jack Ma in 1999 marked a turning point. Alibaba's B2B platform connected Chinese manufacturers with global buyers, laying the groundwork for domestic consumer-focused sites like Taobao (launched in 2003) and Tmall (2008).[6]

By the early 2000s, e-commerce gained momentum amid China's WTO accession in 2001, which spurred economic liberalization and foreign investment. JD.com, founded in 2004, emphasized logistics and quality control, differentiating itself from Alibaba's marketplace model. The 2008 global financial crisis paradoxically boosted e-commerce, as cost-conscious consumers turned to online discounts. By 2010, online retail sales reached CNY 461 billion (about US$70 billion), a tenfold increase from 2005.[7]

The mobile revolution in the 2010s supercharged growth. With smartphone penetration soaring to 50% by 2013, mobile commerce (m-commerce) became dominant. WeChat, launched by Tencent in 2011, integrated social features with payments via WeChat Pay, enabling seamless transactions. This period saw the rise of social commerce, where platforms like Pinduoduo (2015) leveraged group buying and social sharing to target lower-tier cities.

Government support was pivotal. The 2015 "Internet Plus" plan aimed to digitize industries, investing in broadband and 5G networks.[8] By 2020, amid the COVID-19 lockdown, e-commerce sales surged 14.8% to CNY 11.76 trillion (US$1.8 trillion), as physical stores closed and online grocery delivery boomed.

Post-pandemic, innovations like live-streaming e-commerce exploded. In 2021, live commerce generated US$363 billion, tripling from 2018 levels. Platforms like Douyin (TikTok's Chinese version) integrated short videos with shopping, attracting Gen Z users. By 2025, cross-border e-commerce has grown to CNY 2.65 trillion (US$0.37 trillion), with exports dominating. [9]

This evolution has reshaped social life. Early e-commerce fostered entrepreneurial spirit, turning housewives into online sellers. In Taobao Villages, entire communities pivoted to digital trade, altering traditional agrarian lifestyles. Socially, it promoted individualism, as young people pursued flexible gigs over stable jobs.

However, rapid growth led to saturation. By 2018, villages like Lirendong saw rising rents and competition, displacing some residents. Regulatory interventions, such as the 2021 Antitrust Guidelines, curbed monopolies, promoting fairer social access. In essence, China's e-commerce history is one of innovation-driven social upheaval, transitioning from economic tool to societal fabric.

III. Economic Dimensions And Social Implications

E-commerce's economic prowess in China is undeniable, contributing over 10% to GDP and employing millions. In 2023, the market's gross merchandise volume (GMV) hit CNY 15.42 trillion (US$2.15 trillion), with a projected CAGR of 10.42% to US$2.52 trillion by 2030. This growth has profound social implications, particularly in job creation and inequality reduction.[9] Employment transformation is key. E-commerce has created 50 million jobs, from logistics to content creation. Live-streamers and KOLs earn substantial incomes, with top influencers like Li Jiaqi generating billions in sales annually. This has empowered women and youth, who comprise 60% of online entrepreneurs, fostering gender equity in a traditionally patriarchal society.

Rural revitalization exemplifies social change. Taobao Villages—over 5,000 by 2020—have integrated remote areas into the digital economy. Villagers sell local products online, increasing incomes by 20-30% and reducing urban migration. This has strengthened family bonds, as young people return home for e-commerce ventures.

Urban-rural divides narrow through accessibility. In lower-tier cities, e-commerce penetration reached 80% by 2024, outpacing Tier-1 growth. Community group-buying on Pinduoduo fosters neighborhood ties, as residents collaborate on bulk purchases. However, economic benefits mask disparities. While urban elites enjoy premium services, rural users face logistics delays. Gig economy workers in delivery endure exploitative conditions, sparking social debates on labor rights. Cross-border e-commerce enhances global connectivity, with exports to ASEAN and beyond influencing diaspora communities.[10] Socially, this promotes cultural exchange but raises concerns over data sovereignty. Overall, e-commerce's economic engine drives social mobility, yet demands policies for inclusive growth.

IV. Changes In Consumer Behavior And Daily Life

E-commerce has fundamentally altered how Chinese consumers shop, socialize, and structure their days. With 92% of shoppers using smartphones, m-commerce dominates, accounting for 73% of transactions globally but even higher in China. Daily routines now revolve around apps. Morning commutes involve browsing Taobao, while evenings feature live streams on Douyin.[12] This convenience has reduced physical outings, with online grocery sales surging 30% post-pandemic. Families bond over shared carts, but excessive screen time—averaging 6 hours daily—strains relationships.

Mobile-first habits

Mobile payments and app-stitched commerce changed not only where people buy, but when and how often. Micro-moments—waiting at a bus stop, riding the subway, standing in an elevator—became times to browse, coupon-clip, join a group deal, check a flash sale, or catch a livestream. Shopping shifted from a discrete activity to a background rhythm threaded throughout the day. This constant, low-friction access to goods and services subtly reconfigured attention: price drops and limited-time incentives introduced a pulse of urgency that many people now recognize as part of their ambient mental landscape.

The last meter

Delivery couriers and pick-up lockers have become familiar fixtures of residential compounds, campuses, and office parks. The "last meter" experience—how a package moves from gate to door—has reshaped routines: residents schedule elevator trips around parcel drop-offs; security guards in gated communities manage packages alongside visitor flows; building basements host parcel rooms and refrigerated cabinets for fresh groceries. [12] The social texture of neighborhoods changed too: couriers and riders are not just logistics nodes; they're recurring faces, sources of hyperlocal knowledge, and sometimes first responders in small emergencies.

Instant retail and mealtime

On-demand groceries and meals restructured domestic life. Planning shifted from weekly stock-ups to just-in-time ordering; households experiment more with cuisines because the cost of trying and failing is low. For busy families, elder care situations, or students cramming for exams, the ability to summon essentials quickly reduces the friction of daily living. It also reassigns responsibilities: one partner can order ingredients from work, while the other starts cooking at home; grandparents watching children can tap a few buttons to replenish snacks or diapers. The tiny "who does what" negotiations of family life now include app skills, promo literacy, and timing.

Yet, addiction is a downside. "Shopaholism" affects 10% of users, leading to financial stress and social withdrawal. In daily life, e-commerce enhances efficiency but commodifies time, turning leisure into consumption.

V. Social Interactions And Community Building

E-commerce platforms have become virtual town squares, redefining social bonds. Social commerce, valued at CNY 3.5 trillion in 2023, fosters interactions through shared experiences. Live streaming exemplifies this. Hosts engage viewers in real-time, creating parasocial relationships. During streams, comments build camaraderie, turning solitary shopping into communal events.

Group buying on Pinduoduo encourages offline-online hybrid interactions, as friends coordinate deals via WeChat groups, strengthening ties. Virtual communities thrive. Interest-based forums on Taobao discuss products, evolving into support networks for hobbies or parenting.

Private traffic and the micro-community

E-commerce in China increasingly flows through "private traffic"—brand-run or influencer-run communities in chat groups, fan circles, and app channels. These spaces blend customer service, product education, and social support. Parents in baby-care groups trade coupon codes and sleep tips; fitness micro-communities share form checks and bulk equipment orders; skincare circles compare routines and co-buy seasonal sets. The line between "friend talk" and "shopping talk" blurs, and trust migrates from brand logos to human hosts—store associates who broadcast live, category KOLs (key opinion leaders), or simply the most active group member.[13]

Livestream intimacy

Livestreaming turned shopping into a social event. Hosts greet regulars by screen name, answer questions in real time, demonstrate products under different lights, and troubleshoot on the fly. This fosters intimacy that can feel like companionship—particularly for viewers who are homebound, working late, or living alone in big cities. The phenomenon is double-edged: on the one hand, it offers social warmth and entertainment;

on the other, it can nudge impulsive buys and create parasocial attachments that heighten expectations and disappointment cycles. Yet, for millions, "going to the stream" is now like popping into a familiar shop where the owner knows your taste.

Digitized Gifting and Relationship,

Guanxi (relationship networks) has always included symbolic exchange—small gifts, favors, introductions. E-commerce streamlined that exchange. Digital gifting cards, mini-program red-envelopes, and curated gift lists make it easier to reciprocate promptly and appropriately. Corporate teams send festival packages to clients without wrestling with address lists; classmates contribute to a shared wedding fund; diaspora family members in other countries can arrange deliveries for hometown elders during holidays. The choreography of social reciprocity sped up and diversified, softening friction in relationships while also raising the bar: because it's easier to be thoughtful, it can feel costlier not to be.

VI. Cultural Shifts And Transformation

E-commerce has reshaped Chinese culture, amplifying consumerism and inventing new traditions. Singles' Day (November 11), initiated by Alibaba in 2009, generated US$139 billion in 2021, dwarfing Black Friday. It symbolizes empowerment for singles but promotes materialism.[14]

Cultural festivals like Chinese New Year now feature online red envelopes and virtual gifting, blending tradition with tech.Consumer culture emphasizes status via luxury buys on Tmall, influenced by KOLs promoting Western brands. Sustainability emerges, with platforms pushing eco-products amid climate awareness.

From consumer to creator

Short-video platforms collapsed the distance between viewers and producers. A teenager who watches a recipe can shoot their own remix and tag the original chef; a fashion fan becomes a stylist with affiliate links; a calligraphy hobbyist sells practice sheets while demonstrating technique. Taste is now social currency—curation, not just consumption, creates status. Comment sections are miniature salons where wit, kindly critique, and hack-sharing are prized.[16]

Festivals go hybrid

Traditional festivals—Spring Festival, Mid-Autumn, Dragon Boat Festival—now have synchronized online cycles of pre-sale, gifting, and virtual celebrations. "Unboxing" mooncakes becomes content; regional zongzi varieties are ranked in polls; livestream charity auctions fund local causes; shared wish walls pop up in mini-programs. Family rituals adapt: out-of-town children send same-day fruit boxes to parents, hop into a video call, and "attend" the dinner via a tablet propped up on the table. Commerce does not replace ritual; it instruments it, making coordination easier and broadening participation.

Subcultures and niche markets

E-commerce amplified subcultures: Hanfu enthusiasts, indie perfume fans, mechanical keyboard modders, niche tea collectors, home-barista communities. These groups are not only consumers but also small-batch makers whose releases sell out in minutes through group-buy mechanics and preorders. The social lifetime of a product includes its lore: the maker's story, the behind-the-scenes process, the meanings encoded in names and packaging. Belonging is expressed through both owning and knowing.[16]

Taobao villages and the hometown brand

When e-commerce meets rural craft and agriculture, local identity becomes a marketable story. "Hometown brands" emerge around tea, mushrooms, dried fruits, embroidery, bamboo products, or pottery. Young returnees bring marketing and photography skills; elders contribute craft tradition and networks. Livestreams from orchards—fruit plucked under the camera's gaze—rebuild consumer trust and reconnect urban buyers to rural landscapes. The pride of place strengthens: villages compete to professionalize packaging, adopt collective trademarks, and create regional flavors that stand out online.

Logistics and social mobility

Reliable logistics channels—first-mile pickup, consolidated sorting, cold chain—enable perishable goods to travel confidently. This infrastructure generates new roles in the countryside: packers, cold-storage managers, livestream assistants, quality inspectors. In some areas, e-commerce income lets families renovate homes, finance education, or diversify crops. The ability to "stay and sell" rather than "leave to earn" softens migration pressures for some, while also making rural life more connected to urban consumption rhythms.[17]

VII. Challenges And Future Outlook

Despite benefits, e-commerce poses social risks. Digital divide persists, with 43% of rural elderly offline. Addiction and mental health issues rise, as constant promotions fuel anxiety. Privacy breaches from data collection spark distrust. Inequality widens, as small sellers struggle against giants.Counterfeits erode trust, affecting social perceptions of quality.

Overconsumption and credit traps

The same tools that make life convenient can encourage excess. Installment payment options and constant exposure to enticing content challenge self-control. Communities respond with accountability threads ("no-buy months"), budgeting templates, and public check-ins. Influencers who promote responsible spending gain credibility; those who flaunt extravagance face backlash.

Fraud, fakes, and fatigue

Scammers target group chats, counterfeiters shadow trending products, and aggressive upselling erodes trust. The social immune system kicks in: moderators enforce verification rules; community members maintain "do not buy" lists; platforms harden seller onboarding and traceability. While bad actors persist, collective vigilance reduces easy wins for deception.

By 2030, e-commerce will integrate AR/VR for immersive shopping, with AI personalizing experiences. Sustainability and metaverse commerce will rise. Socially, it may deepen isolation or enhance global ties.

Ambient AI shopping assistants: Not just recommending, but negotiating, assembling bundles for specific occasions, and coordinating with friends' calendars. Socially, this could reduce planning friction for gatherings but raises new questions about agency and privacy.

VIII. Conclusion

E-commerce has irrevocably changed Chinese social life, fostering inclusion and innovation while presenting challenges. Balancing these will define its legacy. In China, e-commerce has grown into a social medium—a fabric through which people coordinate living, caring, learning, celebrating, and earning. It is not merely that people shop online; it is that social life is woven through marketplaces. Family logistics are smoother; neighborhood bonds find new forms; rural communities sell themselves to the world; youth train on real markets; city spaces adapt to flows of riders and packages; and culture expresses itself in curated carts and shared projects.

The transformation is neither utopia nor dystopia. It brings empowerment and pressure, intimacy and manipulation, inclusion and new divides. But its most lasting effect may be this: people have learned to treat commerce as conversation and coordination, not just transaction. That shift—toward co-creating value in public, visible, interactive ways—reshapes how individuals imagine community, how neighborhoods organize daily life, and how a sprawling country stays threaded together in real time.

As the next wave unfolds—smarter assistants, greener logistics, thicker local networks—the measure of success won't be only in gross merchandise value or delivery speeds. It will be in the quality of connection: whether the tools of trade help people feel more capable, more trusted, and more at home with one another in the intricate choreography of everyday life.

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