

**STATE-BUSINESS RELATIONS IN CHINA'S DIGITAL SILK ROAD:  
THE CASE OF ALIBABA GROUP'S E-WTP**

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Submitted to  
Central European University  
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In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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Vienna, Austria  
(2023)

## **Abstract**

This thesis explores interactive behaviors and relations between businesses and the Chinese state in the Digital Silk Road of China's foreign policy through a qualitative analysis method, using Alibaba Group as a case study. The data for the study comes primarily from government reports, corporate business statements, and media coverage. The study reveals four main findings: first, private businesses have a different relation to the Chinese state than state-owned enterprises. Private firms rely primarily on their own innovativeness and commercial strength to grow and do not rely exclusively on the Chinese state. Second, in the digital sector, businesses and the state demonstrate a mutually independent partnership in China's foreign policy. Third, local Chinese governments continue to provide a supportive and complementary role in promoting economic growth and cooperation with the world. Finally, financial support from the Chinese state is no longer seen as a necessary condition of backup to promote business globalization. This study provides important insights into interactions between the Chinese state and businesses.

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## Abbreviations

<b>AIIB</b>	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
<b>ANPI</b>	Africa Netpreneur Prize Initiative
<b>ASEAN</b>	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
<b>BRI</b>	Belt and Road Initiative
<b>B20</b>	Business 20
<b>CIDCA</b>	China International Development Cooperation Agency
<b>CIIE</b>	China International Import Expo
<b>DFTZ</b>	Digital Free Trade Zone
<b>DSR</b>	Digital Silk Road
<b>ESG</b>	Environment, Society and Governance
<b>e-WTP</b>	Electronic World Trade Platform
<b>FOCAC</b>	Forum on China–Africa Cooperation
<b>G20</b>	Group of Twenty
<b>MDEC</b>	Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation
<b>MIC2025</b>	Made in China 2025
<b>MFTDB</b>	Malaysian Foreign Trade Development Board
<b>MSE</b>	Medium-sized Enterprise
<b>NYSE</b>	New York Stock Exchange
<b>OFDI</b>	Outward foreign direct investment
<b>POE</b>	Private-owned Enterprise
<b>SBR</b>	State-Business Relation
<b>SDGs</b>	Sustainable Development Goals
<b>SME</b>	Small and medium-sized enterprise
<b>SOE</b>	State-owned Enterprise
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNCTAD</b>	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
<b>WTO</b>	World Trade Organization

## Chapter 1: Introduction

In today's rapidly changing global landscape, China's economic performance and growing impact on the world stage have become the subject of widespread attention. China's symbolic foreign policy approach, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, has become a defining framework for its engagement in the global political economy. According to official data (“The List of Countries That Have Signed Cooperation Documents with China to Build the Belt and Road 已同中国签订共建‘一带一路’合作文件的国家一览 - 中国一带一路网” 2022), nearly 200 countries and organizations have participated in the construction of BRI together with China, and more than 200 cooperation documents have also been signed.

With the rapid progress and widespread use of the Internet and related technologies, new industrial forms and business models based on the digital economy are rapidly emerging in China. The concept of the Digital Silk Road (DSR) was first introduced in a white paper jointly released by China's National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Commerce and Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2015. The document proposed to promote the construction of cross-border communication networks, improve international internet and boost the DSR. (“Vision and Action for Promoting the Construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road 推动共建丝绸之路经济带和 21 世纪海上丝绸之路的愿景与行动-新华网” 2015).

Subsequently, “National Economic and Social Development of the People’s Republic of China the Thirteenth Five-Year Plan Outline (中华人民共和国国民经济和社会发展第十三个五年规划纲要)”, released by the State Council in 2016, also emphasized the construction of a globalized digital and network Silk Road and the facilitation of cooperation in the digital economy and information technology.

With a series of international conferences, the concept has quickly entered the official discourse of the BRI. In May 2017, the idea of the DSR first entered the public discourse at the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation. Chinese President Xi Jinping formally introduced this initiative in his opening speech. According to “Full Text of President Xi’s Speech at Opening of Belt and Road Forum - Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation” (2017), China is aiming at in-depth research and international cooperation in the fields of “digital economy, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, quantum computing”, and promoting the establishment of “big data, cloud computing, smart cities” and other applications. It is the first time that China has announced its targets in the field of frontier science and technology. By 2020, the Digital Silk Road has become at the top of China’s foreign policy priorities (Allison et al. 2020, p3).

Some commentators have noted that the DSR, a subset of the BRI, is estimated to have funded approximately 79 billion dollars in projects worldwide (Prasso 2019). However, with the notable exception of Chinese state subjects, many participants and actors regarding the drive to

expand the DSR's global digital strategy have been overlooked. Chinese technology Internet companies are becoming globally competitive. There is no doubt that inside the framework of the DSR national initiative, the Chinese state naturally expects these private technology Internet companies to take significant roles in the implementation of the DSR projects, and these companies have a great interest in advancing this agenda. However, little is known about the details of the state business relations or interactions between the Chinese authorities and those corporations in the DSR.

### ***1.1 Research Motivation and Questions***

In China's foreign policy, the relations between the Chinese government and business enterprises have been studied before. The main context is the Go Out Policy after 2000 and the BRI since 2013, which focuses on the relations between Chinese state-owned enterprises and the Chinese state (Jiang 2006; Morton 2020). However, the political and business landscape in China has changed with the development of private enterprises, especially the rise of Internet technology companies. Although the DSR has received attention as an essential component of the BRI, there is a shortage of research on the state-business relations within it.

Therefore, this thesis asks the following questions: What is the relation between the Chinese state and private technology companies in the implementation of the DSR projects? Has a new

pattern emerged that differs from the previous relations between the Chinese state and state-owned enterprises?

As a key contributor to the DSR, Alibaba Group, as the top e-commerce platform in China and the world's leading Internet company, has been one of the representative firms in the evolution of China's digital economy. Currently, Alibaba has successfully expanded its project, the Electronic World Trade Platform (e-WTP), to Southeast Asia, Africa and Europe.

The relations between the state and business heavily influence the implementation of the DSR. This study predicts that while the engagement of technology giants in the DSR has generated more political and security controversy for the Chinese government globally, their private sector properties and ability to innovate have also created the potential to offer diverse development models. Through an in-depth study of the implementation of the DSR, this study is designed to uncover the complex linkages between the Chinese state and business and how they interact to drive the expansion of Chinese state initiatives.

The case studies in this thesis serve as a reference guide for understanding state involvement in private sector implementation of the DSR investment projects. It is worth noting that the cases in this study involve the implementation of Alibaba Group's e-WTP in multiple countries and regions, but the focus is restricted to the relations between the Chinese state and the business



firm, and the relations between the different host countries and Alibaba Group, while relevant, are not the main concern of this study.

Finally, this research also hopes to add information to its knowledge base by analyzing the concept of the DSR for subsequent studies. By thoroughly examining and analyzing the case of Alibaba Group in the DSR, this study aims to provide a valuable reference for future research and decision making.

## ***1.2 Structure of the Study***

The first chapter gives an overview of the research topic. It mainly presents an overview of the background and the objectives of the study. This part also highlights the significance of this research and its contribution to the existing literature. Chapter 2 analyzes the theoretical framework related to this study. It covers a definition of the DSR, discussions of the state-business relationships, China's foreign policy of Go Out, and non-state actors in the BRI. The third chapter is devoted to the research methodology section. It describes the methodology used in this study, which is a comparative case study. The chapter also explains the research design, case selection criteria, and analysis indicators.

Chapters 4 to 7 are specific case studies, mainly addressing Alibaba Group's e-WTP projects in Malaysia, Rwanda and Ethiopia, and Belgium. This contains a background on e-WTP, the

status of the projects' implementation and business practices in each host country. The analysis focuses on the behaviors of Chinese state and business actors in each case study, and how the two interact.

Chapter 8 draws on the results of the case studies to provide a comparative analysis of state-business relations. It explores the similarities and differences that emerge from the case studies and concludes with a summary of the patterns and trends. The final chapter closes with a summary outlining the study and discusses the limitations of the thesis and suggestions for future research.

## Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

This chapter reviews a multiple literature to understand and contribute to the explanations of the relevant theoretical frameworks on this topic. Four parts are included, the concept of the Digital Silk Road, the discussion of state-business relations, the context of China's Go Out policy, and actions of non-state actors in the Belt and Road Initiative.

### ***2.1 Digital Silk Road***

The Belt and Road Initiative is an ambitious trade and economic development plan. It is primarily concerned with infrastructure development and economic and trade-related links between China and the rest of the world. As an important sub-project of the BRI, the Digital Silk Road is regarded as a way to strengthen regional connections, facilitate trade and create new opportunities for cooperation in the digital sphere.

According to the available literature, the concept of the DSR is a Chinese state initiative specifically targeting the development of the digital sector in the context of the BRI (Liang and Zhang 2019, p. 39). The focus areas of this initiative include several digital infrastructures, for instance “fiber optic networks, 5G mobile networks, data centers, and e-commerce platforms”. After years of positive results from the BRI, China aims for the DSR to further upgrade its economic ties with the rest of the world (“Remarks by H.E. Xi Jinping President of the People's

Republic of China at the Opening Ceremony of the 17th China-ASEAN Expo and China-ASEAN Business and Investment Summit” 2020).

It is true that the DSR has great potential in the digital sphere. Its implementation is expected to facilitate digital trade and e-commerce between countries and regions, establish novel digital trade routes, and provide businesses with access to new markets and consumers (Zhao 2015). By utilizing digital technologies and trade platforms, the initiative also creates new growth opportunities for businesses (Lazanyuk and Revinova 2019; Greeven 2020). Moreover, in terms of sustainable development, the DSR also has the possibility to provide new ideas and contributions to the goals of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Gong and Li 2019).

However, some scholars have also raised concerns about the strategic goals of the DSR. While the DSR offers potential economic benefits and opportunities for participating countries, there are fears that the initiative could create new geopolitical tensions and conflicts (Nouwens 2020; Feldstein 2020), as well as the possibility of imposing new dependencies and vulnerabilities on its participants (Hemmings 2020), and the current lack of transparency in the governance of digital technologies and accountability (LY 2020). As Kozłowski (2018) argues, the difficulty in studying this digital dimension of the strategy lies in the ambiguous gap between the Chinese government’s stated ambitions and specific engagement projects.

In summary, the DSR is a concept that has the potential to deliver significant benefits to participating countries, including increased economic growth, enhanced digital connectivity, and strengthened digital innovation. However, uncertainties remain regarding the underlying challenges and implications of the initiative, particularly the leading position of China and the possibility of the DSR furthering its geopolitical interests.

## **2.2 State-Business Relations**

Peter Evans (1995) developed a typology that distinguishes two types of state-business relations (SBRs): “developmental” and “predatory”. He argues that developmental SBRs involve cooperation between state and private sector actors to promote economic development, while predatory types involve rent-seeking and corruption that undermine economic growth. Evans’ typology has since become a widely used framework for understanding the nature and dynamics of SBRs in different contexts.

The classification of SBRs proposed by te Velde et al. (2013) is based on several dimensions: “formal and regular” or “informal and ad hoc”, “passive or active”, and “direct or indirect”. Charles et al. (2017), on the other hand, provide a more detailed classification of SBRs by focusing on their impact on “sustainable inclusive growth”: “developmental versus predatory, benign versus malignant, effective versus ineffective, and cooperative versus collaborative”. The similar studies include the four types of SBRs distinguished by Maxfield and Schneider

(2018): “competitive, collaborative, coercive, and collusive”. However, the absence of a single definition in the study of SBRs makes this topic difficult to categorize.

In China, SBRs have also been characterized as “regulatory states” (Pearson 2005) or “managed states” (Kostka and Hobbs 2013). A common feature of these studies is the emphasis on state domination of the business sector. In other nations, there is a visible distinction between the public and private sectors. In China, however, this difference is not significant. The central government exercises strict regulation over most areas of business operations (Kostka and Zhou 2013, p. 250). The Chinese political system deliberately limits local government and emphasizes centralization, which further strengthens the link between the state and businesses. The constant rotation of local officials is why businesses want to seek a more permanent and stable relationship with the state (Wang 2016).

Naturally, this conceptualization of Chinese state capitalism has mainly concentrated on the study of state-owned enterprises (SOEs), which are often subordinate to the Chinese state (Milhaupt and Zheng 2015). However, scholars have also argued that private firms may also act on behalf of the Chinese state due to its dominant status in promoting and directing capitalist accumulation, which verifies the ambiguous conceptualization between SOEs and private firms in China (McNally 2012, p. 742).

As a consequence of this public-private business ambiguity, despite the growing recognition of the importance of state-private sector relationships in shaping China's economic development and political outcomes, research on the complexity of these relations and their activities outside of China remains limited.

### **2.3 China's Go Out Policy**

It is only in the last two decades that China has begun to regulate the overseas investments of Chinese companies, and the Go Out policy was formalized in 2000, partly in response to China's negotiations to join the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 (He 2017). In 2012, China became the third highest foreign investor worldwide. Among them, SOEs control about three-quarters of the stock of China's outward foreign direct investment (OFDI) (Sauvant 2014).

Energy investment and infrastructure contracts are prominent in China's foreign engagement, and Chinese SOEs continue to dominate these sectors, with Chinese state policy and guidance tending to target SOEs (Clarke 2013). Until 2013, SOEs were the main corporate implementers of the BRI, an upgraded form of the Go Out policy focused on large-scale infrastructure investments in Asia, Africa, and Europe. In fact, the international behavior of Chinese private-owned Enterprises (POEs) has also begun to become more active, however the magnitude of private investment independent of state influence continues to be unclear.

Since 2014, the Chinese government has started to motivate the private sector to participate in outbound investment by participating in the BRI (Zhang and Wu 2017, p. 34). In 2015, the State Council launched Made in China 2025 (MIC 2025), a policy focused on the high-tech sector (“China to Invest Big in ‘Made in China 2025’ Strategy” 2017), which provided encouragement and supportive policies for technology companies to advance China’s technological development.

In 2021, “the 14th Five-Year Plan for the Development of Electronic Commerce” (《十四五电子商务发展规划》) and “the Guidance on Overseas Investment Cooperation in the Digital Economy” (《数字经济对外投资合作工作指引》) were introduced, two documents that demonstrate China’s support for developing the digital economy and improving its international competitiveness. A clear encouragement was given in both documents for companies to participate in international innovation and competition, especially in the area of digital economy. There was also an underline on deepening cooperation in science and technology innovation with the BRI co-construction countries.

## ***2.4 Non-state Actors in the Belt and Road Initiative***

The BRI is undoubtedly the most examined China’s foreign policy in recent years. But as the World Bank (2018) notes, while business entities play an active role in it and bring benefits in



terms of infrastructure investment. There are still challenges regarding cooperation mechanisms between the parties, project feasibility and transparency.

Both the BRI and the DSR are implemented primarily through business actions. In the BRI, SOEs play a leading role in infrastructure, while non-state-owned enterprises are particularly active in emerging industries (Du and Zhang 2017). Although the BRI is often portrayed as a globalization strategy mobilized from the top down by the Chinese state leadership, it remains impossible to tell how different capital actors will react (Ye 2020, p. 13). In the case of the BRI projects there are some implementers (SOEs and local governments) that also prioritize their profits and commercial gains (Ye 2021).

Although Chinese POEs and SOEs have fairly similar interests and risk perceptions in their participations in the BRI projects, naturally their commercial interests are not fully consistent with the state's interests. SOEs' commercial interests are often mixed with political goals, while Chinese POEs are more focused on commercial interests and risk control, with higher flexibility and adaptability (Li and Zeng 2019). However, for the moment, these studies do not explain whether the relations between private firms and the state in the BRI or the DSR are completely different from those of SOEs.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter explains the methodology in depth, focusing mainly on the case study. It includes an introduction to the theory of case studies, the criteria for selecting cases, and the main indicators for analysis.

### ***3.1 Case Study Methodology***

A qualitative research approach is used in this thesis. The qualitative research approach is preferred because there is limited data and understanding about SBRs in the DSR projects. In order to identify SBRs in the study objectives, cases needed to be selected for the study.

There are different selection methods for case selection, including “maximum variation sampling”, “typical case sampling”, and “extreme or deviant case sampling” (Gerring and Cojocaru 2016). The typical case selection method is applied to this study, and as Gerring (2016, p. 89) explains, typical cases are those that are representative of a broader population or phenomenon. It can also reflect the most unique characteristics.

And based on the exploratory study described by Yin (1984), a comparative case study design is used in this study. Given the challenges of selecting cases for study, using a comparative approach provides greater control and refinement in the selection of comparable cases. It is also

due to the great level of complexity of causality that the comparative approach has its best results in studies with a small number of comparative cases (Lijphart 1975, p. 163).

Therefore, this study chooses to base its comparative analysis on a typical case, followed by a comparative analysis. That is, the Chinese technology giant company Alibaba Group, whose the DSR projects have been applied in several countries and regions globally. The analysis in this study is built on both first-hand and second-hand materials. The first-hand materials include government policy documents and company reports and data. Secondary sources focus on information extracted from online newspapers and magazines, academic journal articles, and book content in English and Chinese. These sources include company profiles of themselves and the DSR projects on their own websites, as well as consideration of external perspectives from media reports and academic analyses. These sources are selected for this study because they provide a multi-perspective view of state business interactions and actions.

### ***3.2 Case Selection Criteria***

As a world-renowned e-commerce platform, Alibaba Group's Electronic World Trade Platform ("Ewtp" 2016) is a representative cross-border e-commerce cooperation project. The platform involves multiple countries and regions with a wide geographical scope. The "Digital Hub" agreements signed or implemented under the e-WTP initiative have already served as one of the most prominent achievements in the area of cross-border e-commerce for the DSR. In

addition, the e-WTP is now the largest Chinese initiative in the area of international e-commerce. Therefore, it has been selected as a typical case for analysis.

It has been noted that while the process of building the DSR, the state and technology Internet companies appear to have formed a complex alliance, and this alliance has evolved and improved over time (Shen 2018). This study assumes that the Chinese state has some form of support for all projects under the DSR policy framework, as the DSR was initially proposed by the Chinese state level and Chinese technology companies were encouraged to operate abroad to identify common goals. However, the interests of their companies do not necessarily coincide with those of the state. Therefore, this study chooses Alibaba Group's e-WTP as a case study because it is a potential newcomer in the field of multinational e-commerce and there may be conflicts in SBRs.

To ensure the typical representativeness and comparability of the study, three specific cases are identified in this study based on three selection criteria. These criteria are 1) the projects must be representative of the DSR development areas implemented by Alibaba Group, 2) the three projects are located in the participating countries of the DSR, and 3) the three cases need to involve host countries in different regions.

### 3.3 Indicators for Analysis

As noted previously, given the absence of clear boundaries between the public and private sectors in China, the question here is not whether the state influences the overseas business activities of private firms. Instead, it is how and to what extent the state embeds private firms into the system in order to achieve the Chinese state's policy goals. Since information and evidence are not available from within the state and firms, this study considers the external behavior of both, namely, the interaction of their state behavior and business behavior, from which measurable indicators can be found. State behavior is mainly considered in terms of political, economic and financial dimensions, while business behavior is primarily based on dependence on business and business policies.

Indicators	
State Behavior	Political Support
	Economic Support
	Financial Support
Business Behavior	Business Dependence
	Business Policy

(1) State behavior: In the BRI's experience, Chinese state support is an important factor for Chinese firms to enter overseas markets, especially direct political and financial support. This can assist companies to increase their competitiveness and raise their likelihood of entering overseas markets. The main sources of evidence for this part are government reports, documents

from international organizations and summits, media reports and interviews, speeches by politicians, etc.

#### A. Political support:

This refers mainly to how companies enter the host countries and the existence of support provided by the Chinese central government to companies at the national level, such as high-level political events, formal or informal policy dialogues, and diplomatic dialogues.

#### B. Economic support:

This is about whether there is support from the government to the enterprise at the economic level to help it develop overseas markets. For example, previous government-business linkages or mutually supportive relationships, support from special economic zones or economic corridors, etc.

#### C. Financial support:

It means the funding provided by Chinese national banks or relevant state agencies during the financing stage of project implementation, which can reduce the cost of financing for enterprises in overseas markets and improve their chances of success. This is also a common way of state support in the BRI.

(2) Business behavior: When examining the behavior of companies investing overseas, their dependence on the Chinese state, business strategies and investment motives are the main aspects. The sources of this part of information are mainly the various strategic reports published by companies, think tank reports and media coverages.

A. Business dependence:

The degree to which a company's business opportunity to enter a host country is negotiated on the basis of the state's political/economic support. In the BRI, Chinese companies have a relatively high dependence on the Chinese state, especially SOEs.

B. Business policy:

The extent to which a company's business entry into international markets is based on the company's strategy and interests, and whether it is consistent with the objectives of Chinese state policy.

## **Chapter 4: Case Study Background: Electronic World Trade Platform**

What is e-WTP? e-WTP, or electronic world trade platform. The concept was introduced by Jack Ma, founder of Alibaba Group, who appeared at The Boao Forum for Asia on March 23, 2016, and was introduced in the G20 Communique in the same year. “G20 Leaders’ Communique Hangzhou Summit” (2016) expresses a willingness to strengthen public-private sector dialogue, recognizing the importance of promoting the establishment of related regulations. This offers the possibility of support from the policy and business environment for creating healthy and fair cross-border trade. Therefore, the e-WTP is also considered as a platform for worldwide e-commerce trade initiated by the private sector and including the participation of various stakeholders (Zhou 2020).

The “digital free trade zone” originates from the concept of digital hub (e-hub) proposed by Jack Ma. According to his elaboration, e-WTP aims to establish these “e-hubs” to assist small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to export goods to the world through digital platforms with speedy logistics and efficient customs procedures (“China’s E-Commerce Participation in the Global Logistics Chain Restructuring 中国电商参与全球物流链大调整” 2017). Through the interconnection of each digital hub, virtual free trade zones are presented, and the e-WTP enables development on a global scale (“What Is the EWTP?” 2020).



China's 13th Five-Year Plan for National Informatization ("The State Council on the Issuance of the 'Thirteenth Five-Year' National Information Planning Notice 国务院关于印发‘十三五’国家信息化规划的通知" 2016) officially confirms the progress of cooperation between China and the BRI countries in the digital economy and calls for Chinese Internet companies to be able to participate more actively and intensively. Alibaba's e-WTP is also regarded as sharing the same goals as the DSR and as a representative project of the BRI's expansion into cyberspace.

However, it remains difficult to determine the extent to which the success of Chinese Internet companies as global actors comes from the active intervention of the Chinese government (Woetzel et al., 2017; Oh and No 2019). As promised by the e-WTP, the project has a global perspective and emphasizes a business-led approach. This is quite different from the implementation of previous BRI projects. However, Jack Ma also openly states in his letter to Alibaba shareholders that it is the BRI that gives the company more opportunities to develop its business globally (Meldner 2017), especially in countries along the BRI in Southeast Asia and Africa. The e-WTP's ideas in advancing its global projects, on the other hand, coincide with President Xi's vision of seeing China as a cyber superpower, which is to promote "autonomous innovation" and "cyber sovereignty" in a comprehensive way (Zhao 2010). As a result, it continues to be seen by many as a proxy for the Chinese authorities.

## Chapter 5: Case Study I: e-WTP in Malaysia

China's first digital free trade pilot zone was established in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, where Alibaba Group is headquartered, and the first overseas e-WTP was established in Malaysia in 2017. It includes an e-commerce platform with digital payment and financial services, together with a regional logistics hub for Southeast Asian countries (Jaipragas 2017). This chapter focuses on Alibaba Group's relations with the Chinese state in the launch of e-WTP in Malaysia and its interaction with the Hangzhou regional government.

The signing ceremony for the landing of e-WTP in Malaysia was held in Kuala Lumpur on March 22, 2017. Former Malaysian Prime Minister Najib and Alibaba founder Jack Ma attended the conclusion ceremony of this cooperation. This is a center established by Alibaba Group in cooperation with the Malaysian government ("EWTP Digital Hub First Landed Overseas Cainiao with China's Logistics Group Collectively to the Sea EWTP 数字中枢首落海外 菜鸟携中国物流天团集体出海" 2017).

The launch is also seen as a result of the positive relations developing between China and Malaysia, especially in the areas of the BRI, trade and digital partnerships ("Malaysia Welcomes Alibaba, EWTP Helps Small Businesses Accelerate Globalization 马来西亚迎来阿里巴巴风, EWTP 助小企业加速全球化 - 中国日报网" 2018). Some critics, however, have raised concerns about Malaysia's e-WTP. They argue that fierce competition from the

Chinese market could hurt Malaysian companies and that Alibaba has excessive control over the digital trade process. Concerns are also raised about investments from China (Chandran 2018).

## **5.1 State Behavior**

### **5.1.1 Direct political support from the highest levels in China: not evident**

In 2015, the Chinese authorities released the “Vision and Action for Promoting the Construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (《推动共建丝绸之路经济带和 21 世纪海上丝绸之路的愿景与行动》)”, indicating that the BRI has become a guide for China’s foreign cooperation. However, the specific guiding role of the BRI is difficult to determine for business entities of various properties and sectors. Unlike traditional SOEs that choose to expand their intentions, Alibaba Group, like the one leading the construction of Malaysia’s e-WTP, lacks a state political background, and its position and influence in achieving international cooperation is more distinct and complex.

Although e-WTP was included in Article 30 at the G20 Hangzhou Summit on September 5, 2016 (“E-Commerce Written in Hangzhou Summit Communiqué for the First Time 电子商务首次写入杭州峰会公报” 2016; Xu 2016). But as advocated by the G20 Business Summit (B20), the leading players in e-WTP emphasize private sector-dominated enterprises. They come to facilitate dialogue between the public and private sectors to generate a productive

business environment for cross-border e-commerce (“B20 SME Development Taskforce Policy Paper” 2016).

While the highest political figures in the host country are involved in the e-WTP initiative, there is no direct evidence or reports of Chinese government or high-level involvement in Alibaba’s negotiations to enter the country. In Malaysia, the Prime Minister is a key figure. On November 4, 2016, Malaysia’s former Prime Minister Najib Razak had a separate in-depth meeting with Jack Ma in Beijing during his visit to China. Jack Ma said he spoke with Prime Minister Najib for 10 minutes and the prime minister immediately welcomed e-WTP (“Jack Ma: Malaysia’s Embrace of EWTP Only Took 10 Minutes 马云：马来西亚拥抱 EWTP 只用了 10 分钟” 2017). Juntao Song, director of Alibaba Group and head of the e-WTP project, also noted that it took only one brief meeting for Ma to convince Malaysia to become its first e-WTP center to open overseas. At the same time, he highlighted the Malaysian government’s strong interest in pursuing a digital economy, which fits well with Alibaba’s vision of globalization (Chen and Dong 2017). Prime Minister Najib similarly addressed (2017) the prospect of this digital free trade agreement, stating that it could create more jobs for Malaysia, help local small and medium enterprises find opportunities to connect with foreign markets, and improve Malaysia’s business environment.

Indeed, the context of peaceful and stable Sino-Malaysian relations has ensured the continued growth of Alibaba’s investment. Although since 2018, the Malaysian federal government has

undergone several changes of government, the ruling coalitions have adopted a position of continuing to develop economic cooperation in dealing with Sino-Malaysian relations. According to the Malaysian Foreign Trade Development Board (MFTDB) (“Malaysia-China Trade Volume Reaches RM329.7 Billion by 2020 2020 年马中贸易额达 3297 亿令吉” 2021), as of 2020, China remains Malaysia’s top trading counterpart, and the bilateral trade between the two countries exceeds 34 billion dollars. In 2021, Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob indicated that Malaysia’s 12th Malaysia Plan is closely aligned with the China’s BRI and 14th Five-Year Plan, and it is necessary to further strengthen cooperation between the two sides (“Malaysia’s Prime Minister: Malaysia Is Willing to Strengthen Comprehensive Cooperation with China in the Field of Digital Economy 马来西亚总理：马来西亚愿加强与中国在数字经济领域的全面合作 — 中华人民共和国驻槟城总领事馆” 2021). Based on China 2022 data, bilateral trade between China and Malaysia reached 203.6 billion dollars this year, an increase of 15.3 percent from the previous year. Over the past 14 years, China has maintained an ongoing relationship with Malaysia and remains the country’s premier international trade partner (“China Is an Important Economic Partner for Malaysia 中国是马来西亚重要经济伙伴” 2023).

This ensures that Alibaba’s investment in Malaysia’s digital economy stays largely unaffected by the local political situation. Following the Malaysian government’s acceptance of Alibaba’s e-WTP, the project is led by Alibaba in various areas of the digital economy and supported by

the Malaysian government's policies. The partnership between Alibaba and the Malaysian government is an innovative model.

### **5.1.2 Support from local governments and economic zones: significant evidence**

There was no evidence of specific policy support from the most senior ranks of the Chinese authorities, but both the Zhejiang province and Hangzhou municipal governments, where Alibaba Group is headquartered, have been highly supportive of the project. Meanwhile, the local General Administration of Customs has been partnering with Alibaba in the Hangzhou Special Economic Zone.

According to a document from the Hangzhou municipal government earlier this year (“Hangzhou Municipal Government and Alibaba Group Signed a Comprehensive and Deepening Strategic Cooperation Agreement 杭州市政府与阿里巴巴集团签订全面深化战略合作协议” 2023), the local government has recognized Alibaba's contributions to local economic and social development over the past decade, and emphasized that the cooperation between the two would continue and deepen.

The Hangzhou municipal government document (“EWTP Secretariat Starts Work and Signs up EWTP 秘书处开工挂牌” 2019) also points out that the government values Alibaba's innovation concept based on the Hangzhou Economic Zone and is strongly promoting more of its innovative pilot projects to be tried out here. This includes the construction and development

of the e-warehouse (Cainiao Intelligent Logistics Hub) pilot zone proposed by Alibaba, which is set to take a key step in the implementation of e-WTP.

There is indeed an interactive feedback mechanism for cooperation between companies and local governments. The Hangzhou municipal government announced plans to implement a comprehensive pilot zone for cross-border e-commerce in 2015 (“Zhejiang Provincial People’s Government on the Issuance of China (Hangzhou) Comprehensive Pilot Area of Cross-Border E-Commerce Implementation Program Notice 浙江省人民政府关于印发中国（杭州）跨境电子商务综合试验区实施方案的通知” 2015). In the 2016 document (“Zhejiang Province and Alibaba Group to Carry out Strategic Cooperation to Build an International E-Commerce Center 浙江省与阿里巴巴集团开展战略合作，建设国际电子商务中心” 2016), the Zhejiang government specifically advocated the development of an e-commerce zone for Alibaba Group. It indicates that it intends to boost Alibaba Group’s leading position in global e-commerce, lead the development of related industries in Hangzhou, and promote the local area as an international e-commerce center. Alibaba’s local partners have covered all three levels of local provincial and municipal governments: the Zhejiang Provincial Government, Hangzhou Municipal Government, and West Lake District Government.

Besides with the local government, Alibaba also focuses on cooperation with Hangzhou Customs. It has innovated the customs supervision model and launched practical initiatives for cross-border retail exports. Hangzhou Customs has also tailored a fully electronic paperless

process for Alibaba based on the specifics of the full cross-border e-commerce informatization process (Wang 2017).

On May 12, 2017, then Malaysian Prime Minister Najib visited Hangzhou to witness the signing of a tripartite cooperation memorandum between Hangzhou Municipal Government, Malaysia Digital Economy Development Authority and Alibaba Group. The Malaysian Digital Free Trade Zone and Hangzhou Comprehensive Pilot Zone for Cross-Border e-commerce were interconnected, making it the first “Digital Road” operated by e-WTP in the world. (“China-Malaysia ‘Digital Hub’ Interconnection Malaysia to Copy Hangzhou Cross-Border E-Commerce Pilot Zone 中马‘数字中枢’互联互通 马来将复制杭州跨境电商综试区” 2017). Najib also said that the Malaysian side is very optimistic about the future development of Zhejiang province and is willing to further deepen and expand exchanges and cooperation in various fields, especially strengthening cross-border e-commerce cooperation to achieve win-win development (“Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Visits Zhejiang 马来西亚总理纳吉布访问浙江” 2017).

Economic zones are a characteristic product of China’s economic development. They are created by the government to promote economic growth and attract investment. Inside these zones, the government and the private sector can work together strategically to achieve common goals and interests (“Special Economic Zones Performance, Lessons Learned, and Implications for Zone Development” 2008).



In the case of Alibaba, collaboration between local Chinese governments and the private sector is critical to establishing an overseas e-WTP hub. This center is an important step in Alibaba's goal to expand its cross-border e-commerce business. Nevertheless, cross-border operations involve complex tariff and regulatory issues that require government support and assistance. Through this cooperation, the government provides the necessary regulatory framework and tax policies to help businesses operate within the economic zone. At the same time, businesses create jobs and financial development for the economic zone. The interaction between government and business is complementary and can improve the competitiveness of the economic zone and attract more investment and businesses to the area.

For Alibaba Group, the support of Hangzhou Customs is essential. Customs provides the necessary regulatory and enforcement measures to ensure Alibaba's cross-border business runs smoothly. In addition, Customs is able to offer Alibaba convenient and fast customs clearance services, reducing operating costs and time for the business.

### **5.1.3 Financial support from the state and state-owned banks: no evidence**

Previous studies have shown that it is difficult to find evidence of government funding for Alibaba's overseas projects by the Chinese government (Oh and No 2019). As of April 2023, this study is also unable to find publicly disclosed evidence of government funding or financial

support for Alibaba's e-WTP projects. Alibaba Group has not declared the receipt of government funding or financial support from state-owned banks on its official website or in public documents.

## **5.2 Business Behavior**

### **5.2.1 Business dependence on the China state: low**

As the leading company building Malaysia's e-WTP project, Alibaba does not have the background of a SOE like traditional Chinese companies. Daniel Zhang, CEO of Alibaba Group, defines Alibaba as a private "digital economy" originating in China. He also views Alibaba's investment partnership model as different from that of traditional Chinese companies ("Daniel Zhang: From New Retail to New Manufacturing Alibaba Will Deeply Change the Future of Business 张勇：从新零售到新制造 阿里巴巴将深入改变未来商业" 2018).

After the Malaysian government approved Alibaba's e-WTP project, the construction in various areas of the digital economy was led by Alibaba, with the Malaysian government providing the corresponding policy support. This cooperation has become an inspiring model for Chinese companies investing overseas. On the one hand, its status as a private "digital economy" means that Alibaba Group does not need to rely on Chinese government funding to support its overseas investments, but instead takes the risk with its own funds. On the other hand, Alibaba's private

status also helps it avoid the “economic colonization” controversy that some Chinese SOEs face when investing overseas in Malaysia, where ethnic relations are sensitive.

As a business, investment and digital economy construction, the e-WTP project is beneficial to Malaysia’s industrial transformation and modernization. Alibaba’s investment can increase employment opportunities, help SMEs improve their competitiveness, and help the Malaysian government address livelihood issues and maintain social stability. Therefore, Alibaba’s investment in Malaysia’s digital economy is well-received by the National Front government and the Alliance of Hope government during their tenure. Meanwhile, for Malaysia, the establishment of the Digital Free Trade Zone is a national strategic objective led by the MDEC (“Malaysian Digital Economy Corporation” 2022). In November 2017, the Malaysia Digital Free Trade Zone was launched as a joint project between MDEC and China’s Alibaba Group. This became a way to assist Malaysian SMEs to go global with e-commerce and also aid global brands and e-commerce platforms to enter the ASEAN region, seeking to make Malaysia a hub for e-commerce development in the region (Rastogi 2018).

It is evident that Malaysia’s strategic economic and trade objectives have a shared and mutual need with Alibaba’s e-WTP in building a digital economy. Alibaba’s investment strategy is well aligned with Malaysia’s national development needs, and in November 2016, then Malaysian Prime Minister Najib and Jack Ma discussed at a meeting in Beijing how to help Malaysian SMEs go global through a global e-commerce platform. Meantime, the Malaysian

government hired Jack Ma as a digital economy advisor (Foon 2016). After the meeting, cooperation between Malaysia's Digital Free Trade Zone and Alibaba's e-commerce platform began to advance rapidly. Until November 2017, Malaysia Digital Free Trade Zone was officially launched. Compared with other countries in Southeast Asia, Malaysia's comprehensive infrastructure conditions are extremely favorable for the expansion of the digital economy, which assists in the smooth implementation of Alibaba's investment in the country.

Alibaba Group's investment in Malaysia's digital economy demonstrates an innovative model. That is, investing independently as a private company rather than relying on capital support from the government. This model allows Alibaba to avoid the controversy of "economic colonization" by Chinese SOEs investing overseas. Alibaba's investment is in line with Malaysia's national digital free trade zone strategy to build a digital economy. This is one of the reasons the Malaysian government welcomes Alibaba's participation in building Malaysia's digital economy.

### **5.2.2 Business attitude towards state initiatives: positive catering**

In a public interview after settling in Malaysia, Juntao Song, director of Alibaba Group and head of the e-WTP project, expressed that this is Alibaba's response to the national BRI, using modern Internet technology to give new meaning to the countries along the BRI (Chen and Dong 2017).

In 2018, Alibaba Group released its annual report affirming the company's positive response to the national initiative. It stated that the company should be willing to take the responsibility of the national science and technology innovation team and "bring the Chinese experience to global development, closely linking its own destiny with that of the state". It also pointed out that e-WTP is an exploration of the BRI, contributing to the smooth flow of trade in the BRI countries ("Alibaba Group 2017/2018 Social Responsibility Report 阿里巴巴集团 2017/2018 社会责任报告" 2018).

In April 2019, the Alibaba Research Institute published the report "Building the 21st Century Digital Silk Road - Alibaba Economy in Practice (《建设 21 世纪数字丝绸之路——阿里巴巴经济体的实践》)", it indicated that Alibaba hopes to promote smooth trade flows, commercial infrastructure development, humanities exchanges, and talent training in countries along the BRI.

There is no doubt that Alibaba's e-WTP construction in Malaysia is the digital practice of China's BRI, which not only connects trade between China and Malaysia, but also serves as a link between China and Malaysia's national development strategies. Alibaba's e-WTP experimental zone has been extended to Malaysia and other countries along the BRI, and cross-border e-commerce has been an advantageous feature of Hangzhou's interaction with the world.

## Chapter 6: Case Study II: e-WTP in Rwanda and Ethiopia

Following the successful launch of the first e-WTP hub in Malaysia in 2017, Jack Ma visited Africa for the first time in the same year as a special advisor to the United Nations (Cui and Hu 2017). In September 2018, Chinese President Xi Jinping publicly stated that China stands ready to invest more in promoting China-Africa e-commerce cooperation and building e-commerce cooperation mechanisms (“Xi Jinping’s Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the 2018 Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation 习近平在 2018 年中非合作论坛北京峰会开幕式上的主旨讲话” 2018). At the end of October of the same year, the first African project of e-WTP made progress. The Rwandan government paired with Alibaba to sign a cooperation agreement to build Africa’s first e-WTP (“Rwanda First in Africa to Join Alibaba-Led EWTP” 2018). In late 2019, the Ethiopian government also decided to join the global e-commerce platform, becoming the second e-WTP center in Africa after Rwanda (“Ethiopia Second in Africa to Join Alibaba-Led EWTP” 2019).

Both hubs are focused on promoting local digital commerce and cross-border e-commerce. Currently, the e-WTP is not progressing as rapidly in Africa as it is in Southeast Asia. The focus of this chapter is on the actions and interactions between Alibaba’s e-WTP in the African region and the Global Innovation Center in Yiwu, China. Many African countries are involved in the infrastructure of the BRI, and the landing of e-WTP in Africa is seen as an extension of the BRI in the e-commerce space.

## **6.1 State Behavior**

### **6.1.1 Direct political support from the highest levels in China: not evident**

At the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), China voiced its vision for the development of e-commerce and trade between China and Africa. The “FOCAC-Beijing Action Plan (2019-2021)” released by the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) also expressed encouragement for China-Africa cooperation in digital economy. However, the situation is similar to the case of Malaysia. While the highest political figures in the host countries are involved in the e-WTP initiative, there is still no direct evidence or reports of Chinese government or high-level involvement in Alibaba’s overseas negotiations. And Alibaba Group’s interest in Africa appears to pre-exist the documentation of official Chinese initiatives.

In 2017, at the invitation of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, Jack Ma visited Rwanda. His capacity at that time was as its special advisor (“Ma’s First Africa Trip about Empowering Young Entrepreneurs” 2017). He met with Rwandan President Paul Kagame at the Youth Connect Africa Summit and made a series of statements aimed at supporting e-commerce in African countries. Ma said there are many similarities between Africa and what was once China, and he was inspired by the passion and energy of young African entrepreneurs (Wong and Zhang 2019).

In late October 2018, Alibaba Group and the Rwandan government signed three memorandums of understanding to make Rwanda the first e-WTP hub in Africa. The two sides agreed on several bilateral initiatives. These include promoting the development of the country through “additional cross-border trade, capacity building and tourism”. The local focus of the e-WTP is to provide SMEs with infrastructure for operations covering “commercial logistics, mobile payments and skills training” (“Rwanda First in Africa to Join Alibaba-Led EWTP” 2018). At the signing ceremony, President Kagame expressed the importance Rwanda attaches to its development cooperation with the Chinese private sector, particularly its deepening cooperation with Alibaba Group (Liang 2018). In September 2019, Alibaba Group expanded its partnership with Rwanda by launching a four-year cross-border e-commerce training program for Rwandan students. The Rwanda Development Board, which oversees economic investment in the country, stated that it has agreed to remain a member of e-WTP for three years (“Alibaba Extends Trade Partnership with Rwanda” 2019).

A similar scene is replayed in Africa at the end of 2019. In the presence of Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Jack Ma, Alibaba Group signed another agreement with the Ethiopian government to build the e-WTP. Ethiopian prime minister indicated the country sees the potential of e-WTP, stressing that since it is a private sector-led initiative. This could provide a fair playing field for local SMEs to access information on export opportunities, trade, finance and logistics (“Ethiopia Second in Africa to Join Alibaba-Led EWTP” 2019).



The governments of Rwanda and Ethiopia also dispatched high-level delegations to Hangzhou to attend a customized New Economy workshop at Alibaba Business School to learn from China's experience in developing a digital economy over the past 20 years (Weng 2019; Twahirwa 2018). Yuan Ren, Alibaba's Director of African Affairs, writes that while the two countries are very different in size and population, they have one thing in common: from the government to the private sectors, they all have a strong belief in the power of the digital economy and a great passion for development. This is consistent with Alibaba (Ren 2020).

This segment discusses the extent of the Chinese government's involvement in Alibaba's entry into two African countries to establish e-commerce platforms. While the Chinese government has launched an initiative for China-Africa digital economy cooperation, there is no direct evidence that the Chinese government or high-level officials were on board in negotiating Alibaba's entry into the region. However, Alibaba Group's digital economy cooperation in Africa has received active support from the host countries, which may be largely due to the convergence of Alibaba's beliefs with those countries in developing a digital economy.

### **6.1.2 Support from local governments: evidence of cooperation is remarkable**

In contrast to the overseas experience of the first e-WTP, Alibaba's promotion in Africa did not rely solely on the governments of Zhejiang province and Hangzhou city, as it did for its

expansion in Malaysia. Instead, Alibaba Group has entered the Rwandan and Ethiopian markets with extensive partnerships with local governments and businesses to promote the digital economy and cross-border trade. Notable among these is the involvement of the government of Yiwu, Zhejiang Province, with which Alibaba Group has established a partnership. Namely, after the Hangzhou municipal government, Rwanda and Ethiopia's partnership with Yiwu is also known as a typical representative.

Located in Zhejiang Province, Yiwu boasts the biggest wholesale market for small merchandises worldwide and the city is known for its manufacturers, earning it the title of “the supermarket of the world”. Yiwu's booming economy is not only a benchmark for China's foreign trade economy, but also a barometer for overall global trade trends. According to Yiwu Customs, in 2022, Yiwu's exports amounted to 431.64 billion Renminbi, up 18 percent year-on-year. Africa is still the largest market for Yiwu's foreign trade exports (Ge 2023; “Global Businessmen Return to Yiwu Foreign Trade Economy Full Speed Rebound 全球客商回归 义乌外贸经济全速回升” 2023).

In June 2019, following the previous year's successful implementation of the e-WTP in Rwanda, the Yiwu government joined Alibaba Group's global strategic plan, and the two sides reached a mutual construction of an e-WTP innovation center on the ground (“Yiwu and Alibaba Signed an Agreement: To Build EWTP to Explore New Models of Trade 义乌与阿里签署协议：共建 EWTP 探索贸易新模式” 2019; “Yiwu, World's Largest Wholesale Market, Joins Alibaba-

Led EWTP” 2019). At the end of October 2019, the e-WTP Yiwu Global Innovation Center-Rwanda Digital Trade Center began operations (“EWTP Yiwu Global Innovation Center -- Rwanda Digital Trade Hub Formally Launched” 2020).

Based on the record of “China’s Yiwu and Rwanda’s Kicukiro District Establish Partnership” (2020), in November 2019, Yiwu Mayor Yi Lin visited the Rwanda National Pavilion and met with Rwandan Ambassador James Kimonyo during the 2nd China International Import Expo (CIIE) in Shanghai. In December of the same year, Kimonyo came to visit Yiwu to participate in the Yiwu-Rwanda Trade and Investment Promotion Conference. On November 13, 2020, at that year’s China Yiwu Import Expo, Yiwu City and Kikukero District of Kigali, the capital of Rwanda, established a formal partnership.

Yiwu Municipal Government is also participating in supporting Ethiopia’s e-WTP project. At the end of November 2019, a framework agreement signing ceremony for the e-WTP Yiwu Global Innovation Center Ethiopia Digital Trade Center was held in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. In addition to Ethiopian Prime Minister and Alibaba founder Jack Ma, the signing ceremony was also attended by Qiaodi Ge, Vice Mayor of Yiwu Municipal People’s Government, and Dong Wang, General Manager of Zhejiang Yiwu Commodity City Group Co. The Ministry of Innovation and Technology of Ethiopia, Alibaba and Small Commodity City Group shared a Memorandum of Cooperation on e-WTP Project in Ethiopia (Lang 2019; “Grand Launch of EWTP Yiwu Global Innovation Center Ethiopia Digital Trade Hub EWTP

义乌全球创新中心埃塞俄比亚数字贸易枢纽盛大启动” 2019). Jack Ma acknowledged the significance of this cooperation, expressing that Yiwu is a symbol of the industrialized era of trade, while e-WTP represents the trade model of the digital era. Thus, the cooperation between Alibaba Group and Yiwu government in Africa is a combination of two technological eras, fulfilling a huge transformation of the African trade model (Lang 2019; Ren 2020).

In June 2020, Alibaba Group’s partnership with Yiwu was upgraded. Alibaba and Yiwu Small Commodity City Group signed a joint partnership to provide digital infrastructure for local SMEs engaged in cross-border trade. The collaboration also makes Yiwu the standard for China’s most digitalized integrated security zone (“Alibaba Yiwu EWTP Cooperation Upgrades, Digitalization to Help Global Trade Recovery 阿里巴巴义乌 EWTP 合作升级 数字化助力全球贸易复苏” 2020). Although it is different from the participation of the Hangzhou Municipal Government in the Malaysian case. However, the active participation and collaborative role of the Yiwu government has been notable in supporting Alibaba’s growth in Africa.

### **6.1.3 Financial support from the state and state-owned banks: no evidence**

Although much of the financial support for China’s BRI projects in Africa has come primarily from the Chinese government and financial institutions such as Chinese banks. The Chinese government has set up several special lending institutions to provide loans and aid to African

countries. These are mainly state-owned banks such as the Bank of China (“Serving ‘Belt and Road’ 服务‘一带一路’” 2019), the Agricultural Bank of China (“Agricultural Bank of China Fully Supports ‘Belt and Road’ Construction 农业银行全力支持‘一带一路’建设” 2015), the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (“ICBC and 5 Chinese and Singaporean Institutions Join Hands to Promote ‘Belt and Road’ Cooperation 中国工商银行与 5 家中新机构携手推进‘一带一路’合作” 2016), the China Construction Bank (“Construction Bank: ‘Financing’ + ‘Integration of Wisdom’ to Serve the ‘Belt and Road’ Construction 建设银行: ‘融资’+‘融智’ 服务‘一带一路’建设” 2019), the China Export-Import Bank (“Export-Import Bank of China Helps China Gabon’s Practical Cooperation in Multiple Fields 中国进出口银行助力中加多领域务实合作” 2023), and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) (“Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank AIIB 亚洲基础设施投资银行” 2020), which was established specifically for the BRI. However, this study still finds no evidence of government funding or financial support in publicly disclose Alibaba’s e-WTP projects in Africa.

## **6.2 Business Behavior**

### **6.2.1 Business dependence on the China state: low**

Following the inclusion of e-WTP in the Group of Twenty (G20) Leaders Hangzhou Summit on September 5, 2016, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) confirmed a special assignment for Jack Ma on September 20. UNCTAD’s Secretary-General recognized Alibaba Group’s success as a global business entity, particularly its positive

potential in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. As an advisor on youth entrepreneurship and small businesses, Jack Ma's entrepreneurial story and Alibaba Group's winning experience are viewed as positive for inspiring junior entrepreneurs and small businesses in developing countries to join international trade ("Alibaba's Jack Ma Named UNCTAD Special Advisor on Trade | UNCTAD" 2016).

In the same year, Jack Ma began visiting Africa as a special advisor to UNCTAD and committed to supporting entrepreneurship growth in developing countries through the establishment of an African Youth Entrepreneurship Fund and learning programs ("UNCTAD Adviser, Alibaba's Jack Ma, Launches African Young Entrepreneurs Fund | UNCTAD" 2017). So, in 2017, Alibaba Group and UNCTAD launched the first e-Founder Initiative ("Launch of Jack Ma's EFounders Initiative | UNCTAD" 2017; "Alibaba Business School and UNCTAD Train African Entrepreneurs | UNCTAD" 2018).

The Africa Netpreneur Prize Initiative (ANPI), supported by Alibaba Group and the Jack Ma Foundation, is one of the initiatives to recognize business heroes across Africa ("Africa's Business Heroes" 2018). According to its official reports ("Africa's Business Heroes Annual Report 2019-2021" 2021), the program is open to entrepreneurs from all 54 African countries. It is worth noting that only 53 African countries are recognized by the Chinese government ("China and Africa in the New Era: A Partnership of Equals" 2021). Swaziland is not recognized by the Chinese government due to its diplomatic relations with Taiwan, but the

program does not exclude them. This initiative demonstrates the openness and inclusiveness of the ANPI and the broader opportunities and support for African entrepreneurs.

According to a World Economic Forum report (“Rwanda Is Tackling Digital Development Challenges - and Succeeding” 2022), the Rwandan government is driving the country’s digitalization as one of Africa’s top innovation hotspots; while the country’s startup ecosystem ranks fourth in all of Africa. Based on the latest e-commerce strategy for Rwanda published by UNCTAD (“Towards an E-Commerce Strategy for Rwanda” 2023, p.12), the country aims to embark on a sustainable and inclusive development path through digitization and e-commerce, contributing to its overall goal of becoming an upper middle-income country by 2035.

Ethiopia has a comparable strategy to develop its digital economy. According to a 2019 UNCTAD report (Tesfachew 2022), by 2025 the country also aims to become a leading manufacturing and trade hub in Africa. The strategy is largely inspired by China’s success in promoting digital transformation, and Ethiopia hopes to boost domestic and international trade through e-commerce platforms in the same way. Some commentators (Domingo 2022) note that while Ethiopia’s digital economy is booming, it also needs investment even more. In addition to relying on Chinese investment in digital infrastructure, the Ethiopian government has signed an agreement with Alibaba Group to give the country’s SMEs access to China’s digital marketplace.

Jack Ma's engagement as a special advisor and the related exchange activities during that time provided the foundation and support for Alibaba's entry into the African e-commerce market. In addition, Africa's desire for an e-commerce platform, the good development potential of the e-commerce market, and the popularity of Chinese goods within the region provided a concrete basis for Alibaba's subsequent actions. And Alibaba's programs and initiatives, such as the ANPI and e-Founders Initiative campaigns, also serve as strong support for the company's expansion. It is evident that Alibaba Group is relatively less dependent on the Chinese context, and its active search for partners and multiple projects around the world demonstrates its strength in diversification and strategic vision.

### **6.2.2 Business attitude towards state initiatives: adapting but not following**

Despite the positive attitude of Chinese officials following the expansion of e-commerce to Africa. China's National Development and Reform Commission has even put it straight that the DSR takes a primary role in it, accelerating the growth of e-commerce in the region ("Digital Silk Road Boosts Rapid Development of E-Commerce in Africa 数字丝绸之路助推非洲电商快速发展" 2020). Surprisingly, after the successful entry of e-WTP into the African market in 2018, Alibaba Group's company reports released for three consecutive years did not all mention the BRI or DSR again.



In “Alibaba Group Social Responsibility Report 2018/2019” (2019), for the first time, Alibaba Group responds to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), highlighting its dedication to sustainable development, sharing its similar vision, and contributing to the eradication of poverty. In the 2019-2020 report (“Alibaba Group Social Responsibility Report 2019/2020” 2020), Alibaba Group mentions the establishment of e-WTP in Malaysia and Africa, and the setting up of the Africa Startup Fund with 10 million dollars from the Jack Ma Foundation to promote global inclusive trade and digital economy growth, and to help SMEs and young people integrate into global trade. At the same time, the business reaffirms its commitment to support the 17 UN SDGs. In the following year’s report (“Alibaba Group 2020/2021 Social Responsibility Report” 2021), Alibaba Group expresses its continued focus on sustainable development and its commitment to assisting developing countries around the world achieve economic growth and social development.

The concept of the BRI or DSR remains absent from the “Alibaba Environmental, Social, and Governance Report 2022”. The company’s belief in sustainability and support for the UN SDGs dominate the highlights. It is evident that Alibaba’s e-WTP strategy in Africa is not just about following China’s initiatives, but more about seeking business opportunities through the concept of sustainability.

In summary, there is a real fit between Alibaba’s e-WTP project in Africa and China’s foreign policy. While the Chinese authorities have emphasized the importance of the DSR in promoting

e-commerce in Africa, it is absent from Alibaba's corporate reports. Instead, Alibaba focuses more on the concept of sustainable development at this stage, aiming to support the UN SDGs with practical actions. This move shows that Alibaba's business expansion in Africa is not just following national initiatives, but is based on its own business strategy and sense of social responsibility. In addition, Alibaba Group is further demonstrating its commitment to sustainable development in Africa by establishing the African Entrepreneurs Fund to provide development opportunities for SMEs and young people.

## Chapter 7: Case Study III: e-WTP in Belgium

In Europe, Alibaba's e-WTP has also made progress. In 2018, Belgium joined this global business initiative after Malaysia and Rwanda. Alibaba Group and Belgium co-signed an announcement on December 5 regarding the e-commerce trade hub. As part of the e-WTP, the establishment of the e-commerce trade hub includes investments in logistics infrastructure ("Alibaba-Led EWTP Finds First European Partner: Belgium" 2018). Daniel Zhang, CEO of Alibaba, states that with e-WTP, European companies can also gain more opportunities from global cross-border commerce, especially access to the Chinese market ("EWTP Opens Its First European Hub in Belgium" 2018).

As part of the deal, Alibaba's logistics arm Cainiao leases a 220,000-square-meter logistics port at Liege Airport in Belgium and is investing 75 million euros in the project. The first warehouse of the Liege e-WTP hub at Liege Airport was officially opened on November 8, 2021 (Pan 2021). The launch of e-WTP in Belgium strengthens digital trade partnership that exists between China and Europe. However, the move has also been met with numerous doubts and objections regarding digital security and political motives (Heikkilä 2020). The focus of this chapter is to explore Alibaba's pre-preparatory actions in the Belgian e-WTP project and its interaction with the Yiwu Municipal government and the China Railway Express.

## **7.1 State Behavior**

### **7.1.1 Direct political support from the highest levels in China: not evident**

According to public reports and information (“Magic of Alibaba: Global Leaders Meeting Jack Ma” 2016), the Alibaba-Belgium deal has been in the works for years. From September 19, 2014, when Alibaba rang the opening bell at the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE), to 2016, when Jack Ma presented the concept of e-WTP at the G20 conference, Ma met continuously with leaders of several countries. Belgium was also one of them. In May 2016, Jack Ma visited the royal palace in Laeken at the invitation of King Philippe of Belgium. During the visit he said that Alibaba would set up an office in Brussels to promote the sale of Belgian goods in China (“Alibaba Will Come to Belgium in May” 2016). And prior to that, King Philippe had already met with Jack Ma twice, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, and during his visit to China in 2015.

During a meeting between the then Prime Minister of Belgium, Charles Michel, and Jack Ma in the summer of 2018, the Prime Minister expressed the interest in the e-WTP and expressed his willingness to promote the expectations of both sides as potential collaborators (“Belgium Prime Minister, Jack Ma Meet and Discuss EWTP” 2018). Subsequently, in November, during the China International Import Expo (CIIE) in Shanghai, Belgium’s then Deputy Prime Minister Kris Peeters met with Alibaba Group CEO Daniel Zhang and restated the interest in cooperation (“Government of Belgium and Alibaba Group to Jointly Promote Inclusive Global Trade under

EWTP Initiative” 2018). After many months of intensive negotiations, the two sides finally resulted in a partnership.

After the signature of the deal, the Belgian government sent an economic and trade delegation of about 600 people to China. They visited Alibaba’s Shanghai office and aimed to promote comprehensive cooperation and attract more investments. Princess Astrid of Belgium once again welcomed Alibaba’s choice of Liege, Belgium, as a digital hub and base for its development in Europe (Gu 2019).

At the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos in early 2019, Jack Ma explained his expectations for a new form of globalization. Stating his belief that in the next 30 years, the new model should be one in which companies make decisions and governments provide supporting support. And the e-WTP is exactly the contribution to popularize the new globalization (“Jack Ma in Davos: EWTP Benefits Globalization” 2019).

Despite the lack of significant direct political support from the Chinese government, Alibaba’s partnership with Belgium represents a trend in economic relations and cross-border cooperation between the two countries.

### **7.1.2 Support from local governments: evidence of cooperation is remarkable**

According to public reports, Yiwu Municipal Government is also participating in the e-WTP project in Europe. Similarly, to the case of Africa, it has been an effective and supportive actor since the launch of the e-WTP projects.

In this, support has been provided by the China Railway Express starting from Yiwu. At the end of October 2019, the first China-European cross-border e-commerce train from Yiwu arrived at the Belgian logistics hub Liege. This directly connects two important nodes of the e-WTP in Yiwu and Liege. Through the logistics hub in Liege, the European transport network and cross-border parcels are quickly distributed from Liege to Germany, France, the Netherlands and other European countries (Gong 2019). At the departure ceremony, Jihuan Guo, Vice Mayor of Yiwu, expressed that the operation of the train realized the first connection between Yiwu's e-WTP hub and Liege. This provides a new channel for the promotion of cross-border e-commerce in Europe (“Yangtze River Delta's First Cross-Border E-Commerce China-European Train from Yiwu Arrives in Belgium 长三角首条跨境电商中欧班列 自义乌开抵比利时” 2019).

As interpreted by the State Council Information Office (“National Development and Reform Commission, China Railway Corporation on the Unified Brand Opening of China Railway Express Q&A 国家发改委、中国铁路总公司就中欧班列统一品牌启用答问” 2016), China

Railway Express is particularly defined as an international rail transport system linking China with Europe and other BRI countries. But in reality, China Railway Express was initiated in 2011, before the BRI (“What Is China Railway Express 什么是中欧班列” 2022). The official information of China Railway Express (“Introduction of China Railway Express 中欧班列简介”) shows that by 2020, its operations have covered more than 70 cities within China and reached over 60 in Europe. Among them, Yiwu is one of the main originating cities and its cumulative number of departures has exceeded 1,000 in 2019 (“2019 Yiwu China Railway Express Departures Reached 500, the Volume of Transport Increased by More than 60% Year-On-Year 2019 年义乌中欧班列开行数达 500 列 运输量同比增长超六成” 2019).

Naturally, the cooperation between Yiwu and Alibaba Group covers much more than that. As shown in documents published by the Yiwu Municipal Government (Gong 2020), seven innovative projects have been officially landed, including the new model of cross-border exports launched by Yiwu and Alibaba, of which four are aimed at overseas trade. After 2020, the cooperation between Yiwu and Alibaba Group has been upgraded, aiming to jointly promote the digitization of the physical trade chain and the comprehensive formation of a digital trade service ecosystem.

In conclusion, the partnership between Yiwu Municipal Government and Alibaba Group gets a visible reflection. After the e-WTP landed in Belgium, the two sides have jointly promoted the construction of China Railway Express, Digital Integrated Security Zone and other aspects.

Within this process, the synergistic cooperation between Yiwu Municipal Government and Alibaba has achieved remarkable results in various fields, and the partnership has been consolidated and intensified.

### **7.1.3 Financial support from the state and state-owned banks: no evidence**

The positive implementation of Alibaba's e-WTP project in Belgium is a novel example of digital business cooperation between China and Europe. While the Chinese authorities have offered financial backup for some projects in Africa and Asia through the BRI, such as dedicated loans and aid funding from the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) (Yan and Sun 2017), no evidence has been found to suggest that Alibaba's Belgian project has been funded. This is also coherent with Alibaba's official statement that puts emphasis on relying solely on market forces to drive its business.

## **7.2 Business Behavior**

### **7.2.1 Business dependence on the China state: low**

Alibaba Group's dependence on Chinese states is relatively low due to its early start in overseas markets and its large global user base and business coverage. Its recent financial report ("Alibaba Announces Third Quarter Fiscal Year 2023 Results: 26% Year-On-Year Growth in Overseas E-Commerce Business 阿里巴巴公布 2023 财年第三季度财报：海外电商业务同



比增长 26%” 2023) also reveals that Alibaba’s overseas e-commerce achieved a 26 percent year-over-year growth. In the global market, Alibaba already has a rather stable business position and is not entirely dependent on the domestic Chinese market.

Alibaba chooses to enter the Belgian market not only to expand its business scale and commercial position, but more importantly, the European market is a new opportunity for Alibaba. Prior to Alibaba’s entry into Europe, the European e-commerce market was largely dominated by companies such as Amazon and eBay. Alibaba’s entry into e-WTP helps improve trade relations and economic cooperation between European countries and China, and also strengthens Sino-European cooperation in fields including digital economy and cross-border e-commerce. In addition, SMEs are an important part of the European economy, and the EU currently has about 84.6 million SMEs with a total added value of 3.9 trillion euros (“SMEs in Europe - Statistics & Facts” 2023). The e-WTP explores inclusive trade through digital economy innovation, which can enable more SMEs to participate in the global trade landscape. This is also a major background for Alibaba’s choice to open up the European market.

So, it seems that Alibaba’s overseas investments are biased towards continuously improving the strength of its core business. In 2018, during a meeting with then Deputy Prime Minister of Belgium Kris Peeters in Shanghai, Alibaba’s CEO Daniel Zhang commented that the group is committed to using innovation and ecology to drive the overall health and sustainability of global trade, and that e-WTP is set to accelerate this mission. Meanwhile, Alibaba also

announced its globalization strategy for the next five years, with a total import value of more than 200 billion dollars in merchandise promise (Zhu 2018).

In Alibaba's 2020 report ("Alibaba Group Fiscal Year 2020 Report 阿里巴巴集团 2020 财政年度报告" 2020), the business reaffirmed its intention to further advance its globalization strategy. It noted that while the future is filled with a high degree of uncertainty, the greatest certainty still exists, namely the major trend that the entire economy and social life are going to be fully digitalized. As a result, Alibaba Group's globalization strategy is to expand its business scale and commercial position by pushing its core business into overseas markets. Its initial overseas operations, existing diversified businesses and active exploration of suitable overseas markets have made Alibaba more competitive in the global marketplace and less dependent on the Chinese state.

### **7.2.2 Business attitude towards state initiatives: adapting but not following**

According to Alibaba's strategy announced after its listing, the business focuses on three main trends, namely "globalization", "e-commerce", and "big data" ("Alibaba Group Profile 阿里巴巴集团概况" 2017). The e-WTP projects comprehensively cover these three priorities and are independent of China's national BRI and DSR. While Alibaba Group does not rely on China's national initiatives to sustain its own business strategy development, the e-WTP is highly compatible with China's national initiatives, especially after the DSR was formalized in

2015. China's National Information Center assessed the impact of Chinese companies in the BRI in 2017 ("Alibaba Ranked First among Private Enterprises in the 'Belt and Road' Enterprise Influence Ranking '一带一路'企业影响力排名公布, 阿里巴巴排名民企第一" 2017), and the results showed that Alibaba Group ranked fifth among all companies, placing first among private companies.

In fact, Alibaba has been diversifying its globalization strategy to minimize its over-reliance on any one market. The e-WTP enters Belgium and Europe, also to expand its market share and increase global trade. It is certainly true that Alibaba, one of China's leading e-commerce companies, maintains a close partnership with the Chinese authorities and engages in driving its digitalization and internationalization strategy. In this context, Alibaba has the potential to leverage its influence and resources in global markets to support China's BRI and DSR, and to seek business opportunities in these countries and regions.

## Chapter 8: A Comparative Analysis of State-Business Relations

According to previous studies, researches on China's overseas investment programs in foreign policy have focused on the SOEs and infrastructure projects. The majority sees significant Chinese state intervention in business entities and believes that most actions of business entities represent the interests of the state. Even though these projects also provide an alternative to global development to a certain extent. However, researches on the behavior of Chinese POEs, particularly business entities involved in emerging industries, remains limited. This study expects to find more on this issue to fill the gap.

While Chinese state initiatives are more oriented towards overall national interests, the cases in this study show that POEs exhibit a high degree of autonomy and independence in their cross-border investments. This is particularly evident in the technology internet sector. Business entities prefer to rely on market competition and their own capabilities to gain resources and influence, showing independence from state intervention.

Therefore, this thesis looks for similarities and differences in the interactions between the state and companies by comparing Alibaba's cases in different countries. It explores the features of Chinese POEs' actions and decisions in their overseas investments to more fully understand the impact on the global economy and governance. The table on the next page briefly summarizes the characteristics of each indicator in the cases.

	State behavior			Business behavior	
Case	Political	Economic	Financial	Dependency	Attitude/Policy
I	non	Zhejiang Provincial Govt. Hangzhou Municipal Govt. Hangzhou Customs	non	low	Proactive catering
II	non	Yiwu Municipal Govt.	non	low	Neutral fit
III	non	Yiwu Municipal Govt. China Railway Express	non	low	Neutral fit

### ***8.1 Comparison of State Behavior***

In all three cases in this thesis, there is no evidence of political backup from the Chinese state or central level. This provides a distinct contrast to the links between the state and SOEs in the BRI. In previous BRI projects, the Chinese authorities' political support for SOEs was active and visible, often directly involved in infrastructure development, energy resource cooperation, and cultural exchange in the host countries.

In the e-WTP projects, there is indeed some background of political favor, such as the G20 and UNCTAD, but such context comes mainly from recognition of Jack Ma and Alibaba Group's business vision and capabilities, rather than Chinese state initiatives. This suggests that Ma and Alibaba Group's business influence and its reputation in the international stage play an important role in the e-WTP projects.

In addition, the effects of business projects also depend on the type of initiative and the goals of the host countries at the governmental level. In all three cases, the host countries have demonstrated interests to participate in the growth of the global digital economy. Their national strategies are highly compatible with the concept of the e-WTP. Meanwhile, the host countries have realized that the digital economy is the future direction of the worldwide environment, and the cooperation with e-WTP can assist countries' further development in this field. It is evident that Alibaba Group's choice of going abroad has fully considered the relevance of its business value to the host countries' e-commerce and digital economy development strategy, demonstrating its autonomy and innovation in the globalization process.

Despite the lack of evidence of political support from the Chinese state, there is significant proof of economic support from Chinese local governments, in Zhejiang Province and its subordinate cities of Hangzhou and Yiwu. This fact further confirms the role of local governments in China as promoters and coordinators of economic development. This active participation of local governments is a result of China's decentralization policy, which gives greater autonomy and decision-making power to regional authorities in economic growth.

Zhejiang Province has been at the forefront of China's reform and opening-up, actively promoting the transformation of its economic structure and innovation-driven development. It has made remarkable achievements in building innovative provinces, fostering new industries, and foreign cooperation. Hangzhou, its provincial capital city, has long been one of the key

centers of China's economy. Not only does Hangzhou have the headquarters of well-known companies such as Alibaba Group, but it has also built modern technology zones and innovation hubs. It is known for its well-developed e-commerce and logistics infrastructure, becoming one of the key centers of the global digital economy. And the Yiwu city government's commitment in the project is mainly focused on the commercial cooperation aspect. By taking full advantage of resources like the global small commodity market and the China Railway Express, it is exploring global market and trade opportunities together with Alibaba. This partnership further consolidates Yiwu's position in global trade and makes it an outstanding gateway to international business cooperation.

In terms of financial support, this thesis does not find any evidence that the Chinese authorities or state-owned banks have provided funds for Alibaba's business practices. This is significantly different from the behavior of the Chinese state in the BRI. Typically, a large number of projects in the BRI receive massive financial support from the Chinese state in many forms, including loans, investments and insurance. However, the e-WTP projects rely heavily on Alibaba's own capital and business model to drive and develop them. Alibaba Group, as a private company, has demonstrated the importance of digitalization and technological innovation to drive cross-border trade and global commerce. This business model operates in a way that makes the e-WTP different from traditional government-supported projects to a certain extent.

## **8.2 Comparison of Business Behavior**

During the global promotion of the e-WTP, Alibaba Group's attitude and behavior towards responding to the Chinese national initiative has undergone some changes. During the early stages of the e-WTP proposal, the group's business reports made several references to the alignment of its business with the national initiative, hoping to contribute new ideas and technologies to the initiative. This alignment reflects Alibaba's identification with the Chinese national initiative and implies the group's willingness to adopt an effective position in facilitating trade and cooperation in its framework. By connecting its own business with the BRI and DSR, Alibaba is able to expand its reach in countries along the BRI.

However, its alignment with national initiatives has decreased over time and as Alibaba has progressed in the e-WTP projects. A year after the e-WTP successfully launched overseas, Alibaba Group's strategy report no longer mentions the BRI and DSR. Instead, the group has begun to emphasize the UN SDGs. This shift is remarkable and shows that Alibaba Group's vision and strategy has moved beyond national initiatives and is more driven by its own business development. As a global company, Alibaba Group is actively promoting the sustainability agenda through its own innovation and growth, rather than simply following China's national initiatives. This transformation further demonstrates the Group's desire to enhance its leadership and social responsibility in the global business landscape.



In summary, in the three cases of Alibaba Group's participation in international markets, this thesis observes new patterns and trends in the participation of Chinese private technology companies in globalization. First, the financial resources, innovation capabilities and business visions of the corporate entities become core factors in determining the expansion of their globalization. Second, Chinese local governments still have greater autonomy and decision-making role in economic development, and they play a supportive and complementary position in promoting growth and cooperation with the global community. Third, the host countries' national strategies and potential market environments are essential considerations for business entities in their investment choices. Finally, political involvement and financial support from the Chinese state are no longer seen as necessary supporting conditions.

## Chapter 9: Conclusion

This thesis explores the emergence of a new type of relation model between state and business bodies in China's foreign policy. Although the research sample is specific and limited, it aims to discuss the interactive behavior of the both in the digital economy.

In the literature review section, it is noted that past research on SBRs in China has focused on the traditional business domain, namely the link between the Chinese state and the SOEs in traditional industries in the BRI. These studies have mostly considered the SBRs as conceptually ambiguous and described as a “regulatory” or “managerial” state (Pearson 2005; Kostka & Hobbs 2013). However, this study examines the responses of private technology firms to state initiatives in the digital economy and confirms that the interactions between them can be more complex and reveal emerging patterns of relations.

This research finds that the relations between private technology firms and the Chinese state in the digital economy are not ambiguous. The business entity's own innovation strength and globalization strategy determine its business behavior and are independent from state intervention. While there may be a strategic fit between the state and the business entity, showing a pattern of “cooperative”, it is not possible to argue for the theory that the state can directly manage the business entity or that the business acts on behalf of the state. In the digital economy, corporate responses to state policies and initiatives are more motivated by business

decisions than by mere state intervention. Although, in the process, business entities and the state do establish a mutually independent partnership. This “cooperative” partnership and trend suggests a transformation in the form of state-business interaction in China’s foreign policy, particularly in the emerging digital sector.

This thesis still has some limitations. First, the selection of a typical case study weakens its generalizability, diversity and complexity. Future research could consider expanding the sample size by selecting more types and regions of business projects as subjects, which could include more case studies covering businesses of different industries, sizes and regions to obtain more comprehensive and diverse data. This will help improve the external validity and generalizability of the study and provide insight into the differences and commonalities of typical cases. Second, multiple stakeholders are also involved in these cases. However, due to the long-term lack of credible and valid transparent data, this study is limited to the analysis of publicly available information. Future studies could consider using more diverse data sources in the form of questionnaires, field observations, and in-depth interviews to obtain more accurate and detailed information. Further research should also focus on revealing more diverse forms of interaction between states and businesses. In addition to the cooperative patterns, different modes of interaction, such as competition, negotiation, and the co-existence of cooperation and competition, can be examined to provide an in-depth analysis of the overall impact of the digital economy on China’s foreign policy and the specific behavior of different stakeholders. Finally, policy and regulatory changes in the digital economy are rapid, and

researchers need to be sensitive to the dynamics and diversity of this topic. The impact of the digital economy is equally multi-dimensional across political, economic, technological, and social domains, and it is possible for future research to provide more precise guidance to policy makers through evolving perspectives or by combining interdisciplinary approaches and theoretical frameworks, including international relations and sociology.

In conclusion, this thesis makes an important contribution to the field of political economy and to the literature on China's foreign policy research. With the rapid growth of the digital economy, China's rise and strategic ambitions in the emerging digital sector have attracted widespread attention. Through in-depth case studies, the study provides unique insights to explore the impact of the digital economy on China's foreign policy and the ways in which the state and business interact within it. In addition, this study provides a reference for policymakers, scholars and businesses, as well as new research directions for future related studies.

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