

# **How to Turn Loneliness into a Multi-Trillion Dollar Business: A Perspective on China from the Writings of Erich Fromm**

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*This essay is intended to expand on the oral presentation given on January 28, 2019, specifically focusing on the writings of Erich Fromm from a social application perspective, using China's Singles Day as an example.*

*“To escape from Loneliness, human has no choice but to unite themselves with the world in the spontaneity of love and productive work or else to seek a kind of security by such ties with the world as destroy one freedom and the integrity of their individual self. One has give up individualization and to obey a certain authority, in order to gain a sense of belonging” (Fromm, 1941)*

In 1993, at a dormitory room of Nanjing University, four college students were having a conversation, they were talking about how to get away of being single, in a way, how to escape from loneliness. As a result, they set the dates which is the 11<sup>th</sup> month and 11<sup>th</sup> day (November 11<sup>th</sup>) as the social activity day to help them to escape from their loneliness. Soon it had became a local pop-cultural contest in Nanjing and soon spread to the whole country, Singles' day became a festival among Chinese young people. Additionally, the Chinese market turned this date into a sales day. In 2015, The Alibaba Group who operate Taobao (an eBay-like consumer-to-consumer online marketplace) and Tmall (a business-to-consumer variant of Taobao) made this day as the Global Shopping Festival. In 2018, within one day, the completed

transaction reached \$30.8 billion, which is over 3 times bigger than Black Friday and Cyber Monday sales combined (Lee, 2018).

## **Alienation**

How did this come true? Firstly, Alibaba and its online shops offer extremely tempting discounts. Secondly, the fast convened online payment: Zhi Fu Bao. If you go to China, you will see it's almost cashless and credit card-less, because mobile payment like Zhi Fu Bao has become the reality in China. The technology is used by 700 million people to pay each other. In addition, it is widely used not only by merchants, but from peer to peer, users are charged almost transaction-fee-free. Erich Fromm illustrated this phenomenon as Alienation, he further claims that man became *homo consume* (Fromm, 1981), or the alienated men in the affluent society. The *homo consume*(Fromm, 1981), is one “whose main interest becomes, aside from working from nine to five, to consume.” His attitude is that of “the eternal suckling” who “with the open mouth . . . consumes everything with voracity — liquor, cigarettes, movies, television, lectures, books, art exhibits, sex; everything is transformed into an article of consumption’. (Fromm, 1981)

## **Why China?**

In the first place, Fromm suggested that modern capitalism needs men who cooperate smoothly and in large numbers; who wants to consume more and more; and whose tastes are standardized and can be easily influenced and anticipated. As a result, Modern human is alienated from himself, and from their nature. In China, people from the bottom of society are actually longing for a sense of belonging, as Fromm (1941) illustrated:

*The masochistic person, whether his master is an authority outside of himself or whether he has internalized the master as conscience or a psychic compulsion, is saved from making decisions, saved from the final responsibility for the fate of*

*his self, and thereby saved from the doubt of what decision to make. He is also saved from the doubt of what the meaning of his life is or who 'He' is.*

As a consequences, people from MAO era turn to have a passion on this 'simple time', which in it, the decisions were made by the public, the idea of Individualization and personal achievements were replaced by repeatedly work and people's communes.

In addition, 18.8 trillion US dollars were transacted on mobile Internet in China at the year 2017, as this technology includes all transactions: wholesale, channels, retail, online, offline, going into a shopping mall or going into a farmers market, the totally transaction is larger than the country's GDP (Lee, 2018).

## **Mass Movements**

There is more convenience for human beings because advanced technology and computer science are developing rapidly. However, modern telecommunications such as mobile phone has isolated humans from their natural response, and connected human experiences exclusively to mobile devices.

*"By alienation I project an experience, which potentially is in me, to an object over there. I alienate myself from my own human experience and project this experience on something or somebody outside, and then try to get in touch with my own human being, by being in touch with the object to which I have projected my humanity" (Fromm, 1955).*

In *The True Believer*: Eric Hoffer (1951) offers his unique perspective on the nature of mass movements: the frustrated people are those who are most likely driven by mass movements. For Chinese middle-class families, inflation had become the main pressure, the lost of land and high housing price had made the middle classes became the new poor. Additionally, for the person who is frustrated, a mass movement offers

substitutes either for the whole self or for the elements which make life bearable and which they cannot evoke out of the individual resources. Their longing for quality life became the original dynamic of online shopping (Hoffers, 1951).

Boredom is nothing but the experience of a paralysis of our productive powers.

Alibaba knows how to propaganda their products, when customers shopping online, they turn to purchase package deals instead of single product. Besides, it convenes the customer especially the young people that they are shopping for their dream life. For instance, in 2018 the Global Shopping Festival entitled the theme as True self, which combined the products and self-realization through constantly broadcasting advertisements.

*“Today we come across a person who acts and feels like an automaton; who never experiences anything which is really his; who experiences himself entirely as the person he thinks he is supposed to be; whose artificial smile has replaced genuine laughter; whose meaningless chatter has replaced communicative speech; whose dulled despair has taken the place of genuine pain.” (Fromm, 1961)*

What’s more? Within 15 years, over 40% of jobs can be replaced by AI technology, we are facing a revolution, a mass movement in all human kind, and it’s coming faster than ever before (Lee, 2018)

*“The danger of the future is that men may become robots. True enough, robots do not rebel. But given man’s nature, robots cannot live and remain sane, they become ‘Golems’, they will destroy their world and themselves because they cannot stand any longer the boredom of a meaningless life” (Fromm, 1963) .*

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