



Alibaba: The House That Jack Ma Built

Duncan Clark

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An engrossing, insider's account of how a teacher built one of the world's most valuable companies—rivaling Walmart and Amazon—and forever reshaped the global economy

In just a decade and a half, Jack Ma, a man from modest beginnings who started out as an English teacher, founded Alibaba and built it into one of the world's largest companies, an e-commerce empire on which hundreds of millions of Chinese consumers depend. In 2014, Alibaba's \$25 billion IPO was the largest global IPO in history. A Rockefeller of his time, who is courted by CEOs and presidents around the world, Jack is an icon for China's booming private sector and the gatekeeper to hundreds of millions of middle-class consumers.

Duncan Clark first met Jack in 1999 in the small apartment where Jack founded Alibaba. Granted unprecedented access to a wealth of new material, including exclusive interviews, Clark draws on his own experience as an early adviser to Alibaba as well as his two decades in China chronicling the Internet's impact on the country to create an authoritative, compelling narrative account of Alibaba's rise.

How did Jack overcome his humble origins and early failures to achieve massive success with Alibaba? How did he outsmart rival entrepreneurs from both China and Silicon Valley? Can Alibaba maintain its 80 percent market share? As it forges ahead into finance and entertainment, are there limits to Alibaba's ambitions? How does the Chinese government view its rise? Will Alibaba expand farther overseas, including into the United States?

Clark tells Alibaba's tale in the context of China's momentous economic and social changes, illuminating an unlikely corporate titan as never before.

Advance Praise For Alibaba

"Anybody who thinks the Chinese just copy or steal technology from the West should read this book and think again. Jack Ma is part Bill Gates, part Steve Jobs, part Larry Page, part Sergey Brin, and part Mark Zuckerberg, all rolled into one."—Sir Martin Sorrell, CEO of WPP

"Duncan Clark gets into the heart and soul of Alibaba and its founder, Jack Ma, who deftly maneuvered through the discontinuities and barriers in China to create one of the greatest companies in the world. China has thrived under the leadership of Jack Ma. This book is a must-read for anyone who wants to understand the present China and the heartbeat of a great entrepreneur."—Tim Draper, founder of Draper Associates, DFJ, and Draper University

"This book provides excellent insight into the world of Jack Ma, perhaps the most famous of the leaders of the new economy in China. Duncan Clark is a real China 'Old Hand,' unique in his knowledge of the Jack Ma generation. This book is definitely on the short list for those who wish to understand the Chinese economy today."—Ken Wilcox, Chairman Emeritus, Silicon Valley Bank

Alibaba: The House That Jack Ma Built Details

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From Reader Review Alibaba: The House That Jack Ma Built for online ebook

Denis Vasilev says

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Lincoln says

Lots of interesting materials but just a poorly written and structured book. Needs serious editing and clean up.

Ryan Lackey says

More like 3.5 stars. I'm a big fan of Jack Ma and Alibaba, but this biography just didn't do a great job of introducing the reader to him. It was adequate, but focused on a lot of pointless details in some places, and short on facts and analysis on other places. It is especially hard to see how replicable what he did really is. The book felt sometimes fawning to a degree which really calls into question overall objectivity, too.

Viet Nguyen says

Duncan Clark đã kể một câu chuyện hết sức thú vị về Jack Ma, từ một cậu bé hiếu học ở Hàng Châu, một thị trấn giáo dục nổi tiếng trở thành CEO của Alibaba, một công ty hàng đầu ở Trung Quốc. Tuy nhiên, cuốn sách đã lý giải những lý do khiến ông trở thành công ty của Jack Ma: một phần lớn là nhờ tính cách và sự khôn ngoan của ông, nhưng cũng nhờ những yếu tố khác như sự trợ giúp của Internet ở Trung Quốc, những bước đi sai lầm của các công ty cạnh tranh khác như Yahoo, eBay,...

Một số ghi chú từ sách:

- Thuở bé, Jack Ma là một thanh niên rất hiếu học. Ông ham học tiếng Anh, nên đã rất nhiệt tình học tiếng Anh các du khách nước ngoài ở Hàng Châu. Ông có một sở thích tập tiếng Anh. Ông thậm chí còn học tiếng Anh ở nhà. Ông yêu cầu mọi người liên lạc với ông bằng tiếng Anh sau và ông bắt đầu gia đình có còn tài trợ tiếng Anh cho Jack và gia đình.

- Tính cách của Jack một phần nhờ hình thức thu hút, khi bắt đầu ông rất yêu thích pingtan, một thể loại di chuyển xã hội hóa dân gian của Trung Quốc. Bản thân ông cũng rất yêu thích truy cập Kim Dung. Thế nên sau này, Jack có thể nói là một CEO rất "triết gia", ông thường đưa ra những bài học mang tính triết lý và những so sánh, bài học rất dễ hiểu. Rất nhiều phát biểu của Jack Ma đã trở thành châm ngôn được chia sẻ trên mạng.

- Trước Alibaba, Jack đã trải qua thất bại với hai công ty khác của ông: công ty dịch vụ Hi V và China Pages. Tuy thất bại, nhưng công ty này đã giúp Jack tích lũy kinh nghiệm cho sự thành công của Alibaba sau này.

- Thành công của Alibaba nhờ tận dụng ba khía cạnh: thế hệ mới, hạ tầng kho vận và tài chính.
 - Khi Trung Quốc bắt đầu tiếp cận Internet, nó lên nhớt là ba công thông tin lớn: Sina, Sohu và NetEase. Các người thành lập các công thông tin này đều có kiến thức cao về công nghệ. Lúc này, Jack vận hành làm việc môn mại ở MOFTEC (bộ công thương Trung Quốc), ông quy tụ nhân sự phần mềm công ty mại để đón cận giới Internet mới ở Trung Quốc này, dần dần trở thành lập của Alibaba.
 - Hiện tại, các công ty công nghệ lớn ở Trung Quốc gồm: Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent. Mặc dù các công ty bắt đầu mở rộng lĩnh vực kinh doanh, nhưng ban đầu: Baidu mởnh về tìm kiếm, Alibaba hàng về thế hệ mới, còn Tencent làm giàu nhờ tin nhắn giá rẻ và trò chơi trực tuyến.
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Harish Challapalli says

Alibaba- The house that Jack Ma built.

Alibaba- The bio that Duncan Clark spoilt.

Thanks to Duncan Clark for making jack ma's bio so boring.. the writing was very poor.. I have seen some talks of jack ma, those were very inspiring.. I wanted to learn more about him and very interestingly started this book. My interest was spoilt almost in the beginning itself.. the basic structure of the bio itself was not planned properly..a half baked narration..

I think some author like Walter Isaacson must do jack ma's bio cos Ma deserves more..

Ran says

Internet expert in China, Duncan Clark wrote this book on a familiar figure in his circles, Jack Ma - founder of Alibaba (the Amazon of China) and its subsidiaries like Taobao. The work itself is truly a biography of Ma, or as close as one might get to a biography because I find that works like this do tend to treat their subjects with some sense of mythology. However, Clark could have written this a little more tightly and with better direction. I'm not surprised at all to find that the author is a chairman (BDA China Limited).

Michael says

Never underestimate Jack Ma. Those 4 words are the repeated storyline of this book. While this "school teacher" may come across as humble and common, his fondness for Forest Gump is foretelling. For those who liked The Everything Store story of Amazon, this book is the best English account of the unlikely tale of Alibaba and a Gump-like character known to the world as Jack Ma. Read this book and you will find that China has quite a few insights to teach the west about online shopping. Far more Chinese consumers order their groceries online than groups in the west and the levels of customer service provided set a very high comparative mark. The SARS scare had a huge impact on Alibaba and also e-commerce in China as it drove more people to shop online when they didn't want to be exposed to a pandemic.

With a Gump-like ending, Jack has vast successes that seem pedestrian. The results run much deeper than

luck, never underestimate Jack Ma.

Arun Divakar says

“Today is brutal, tomorrow is more brutal, but the day after tomorrow is beautiful. However, the majority of people will die tomorrow night .”

Jack Ma’s quote finds resonance with any team/organization striving towards a lofty goal. There are days in your professional life when you are on the verge of throwing it all away and walking off and a lot many of us do just that. But still a few still persevere and this hard work eventually finds it’s worthy rewards. Alibaba’s rise to prominence in China is a chronicle of how hard work, perseverance, luck and a canny business acumen can take you a long way. It is also the story of the charismatic Jack Ma whose soundbites have since then made him a darling of social media. The book however focusses more on Alibaba as a company than it does on Jack Ma as an individual. While their lives are more or less intertwined, there is but precious little you can take away about Jack Ma especially from the years after he became the successful head of the entire Alibaba umbrella. The author has had a direct access to Jack and he uses it along with his own personal connections to weave a pretty good yarn.

China has been a consumer market that businesses have been keen to explore and tap into but with governmental focus being what it is, how would a business find its footing ? The struggles Jack underwent until the creation and eventual success of Taobao and Tmall is also a history of internet fuelled entrepreneurship in China. While the author does not go into too much of detail, the gradual lowering of walls in China is a factor that helped usher in a new age. A few of the internet portals rose to prominence prior to the entry of Yahoo into the mix and all this while Jack slowly kept his company going. The eventual all-trumpets-blaring arrival of eBay changed the whole outlook about Alibaba and the eventual humbling of this global major cemented Jack’s position as a tech tycoon to watch out for. All through the eBay v/s Alibaba battle, the shrewdness that Jack and his second-in-command Joe Tsai exhibit makes for great reading. The book ends with the IPO V2.0 of the firm and also ponders on some of the challenges that the road ahead might bring for Alibaba.

The material in here is just splendid. You cannot really read about the contributions of people like Jack Ma, Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Sergey Brin/Larry Page, Mark Zuckerberg et al without being truly impressed at the scale with which their businesses have grown and how they touch our lives virtually . But even with such a treasure trove of information, the book suffers from superficiality at a lot of places. For instance where the subject matter would have asked for a detailed analysis (like the business strategy at Alibaba), the author skips over with only a customary view at things. It would have been understandable if this was done for Jack Ma’s biography but considering the fact that it is biography of the company, this did not sit too well with me. Ironically I also felt that at places where brevity would have admirably done the job in conveying the message to the reader, there is quite a lot of information poured out.

It is a good read to perhaps start off in understanding Jack Magic but a deeper and more analytical view of the organization would have done wonders as a book.

Note : The rating is somewhere in the hinterlands between a 3 and a 4 star.

Jefi Sevilay says

Ne kadar çok kitap okursam o kadar fazla hayal k?r?kl???na u?ruyorum. Alibaba: Jack Ma'n?n Evi de bu y?l beni hayalk?r?kl???na u?ratan 3. biyografi oldu. San?r?m Walter Isaacson'un Steve Jobs biyografisi a?z?mda öyle bir tat b?rakm?? ki geri kalanlar?n hepsi ders notu gibi derleme haber geliyor.

Benim bekledi?im Jack Ma gibi bulundu?u yere (milyar dolar cinsinden) t?rnaklar?yla kaz?y?p gelmi? birinin do?du?u ortam, onu etkileyen olaylar, h?rs? ve çal??kanl???n?, ya?ad?klar? zorluklar? ve bu engelleri nas?l a?t???n? okumakt?. Buldu?umsa Google'dan Jack Ma, Alibaba, Baidu, Tencent, Yahoo, Ebay yaz?p ç?kan haberleri ucuca ekleyen, bunlar? da bir ödev gibi kategorize ederek sonuna referans numaralar?n? ekleyen bir ö?renci tezi oldu.

Hatta Jack Ma'y? ve Alibaba'y? bekledi?im bu kitab?n %30'u Ebay, %30'u Yahoo, %20 Alibaba, %10 Jack Ma ve %10 Alibaba'da ne sat?l?r bunlardan olu?uyordu. Alibaba'n?n yan kuruluşlar? bile bu %20'nin içinde.

Kitab?n bas?m? ve diline gelince o da hayalk?r?kl??? Zaten kitapç?da görürseniz içini aç?n dedi?imi anlayacaksınız?z. Dil konusunda da çeviri bana çok ilginç geldi. Ayn? paragraf içinde üç farklı zaman gördüm. Hani orijinali böyle bile olsa biraz dilimizde kolay okunurlu?u aç?s?ndan düzeltme yapmak gerekirdi diye dü?ünüyorum.

Dolay?s?yla "bekleneni vermeyen biyografiler" raf?ndaki yerini aldı?.

Herkese keyifli okumalar!

Marks54 says

This is a company biography of the Alibaba group in China. In parallel, it is an official biography of Jack Ma, the Chinese entrepreneur and former English instructor who is behind the growth of Alibaba. The book is written by a former Morgan Stanley analyst who got to know Jack Ma during the time when he advised Alibaba. The book is largely descriptive and follows the firm from its inception up through its recent IPO. There is even a concluding section updating the group since the IPO. The overall tone of the book is highly positive and complimentary. Alibaba is presented as a major player in China and the Internet more generally and the presentation of how it grew to such a place of prominence is a story to explain the very favorable trajectory that the firm's activities have traced. It is not a critical treatment of Ma or of Alibaba, although the book does not gloss over issues either. It is informative and even interesting and I recommend it to anyone wishing to be up to date with Chinese business and economic developments and wishing to get beyond the snibbets of gossip that pass for news in the popular press or on certain platforms, such as CNBC. While I need to supplement this with other material, the book was fairly effective.

I would have liked more analysis, but that was clearly not on the author's to do list here. To start with, popular treatments of Internet businesses almost always fail to develop the economic reality of these businesses. How does one make money on the Internet at all? What is the difference between B2B (business to business) and B2C (business to consumer) or C2C (consumer to consumer)? eBay, Amazon, and Alibaba are different firms but most people will have trouble telling you why? Similarly, the scale issue is huge here, but not really presented well. For many Internet businesses, scale is nearly everything, yet in some markets such as China in the 1990s and early 2000s, scale was hugely difficult and allowances needed to be made for local markets. This was crucial to the issues between eBay, Yahoo, and Alibaba (TaoBao) but the issues are not well explained in the book.

Another area that is crucial for these businesses is what are sometimes called "agency" problems - which boil down to issues of trust and corruption avoidance. We take these for granted, even though many people will have trouble explaining how they have determined ebay's strategy, for example. In China, all the agency problems are magnified and Internet platforms that failed to deal with them failed as businesses. What Ma did and failed to do with Alibaba is important and could have stood more discussion. I have ceased to think that "Alibaba" in this context implies an association with "40 thieves" or something similar, but it is not obvious.

There are lots of other interesting questions raised by the book. Obvious ones deal with Ma as the founder and the importance of his charisma - and of being bilingual in doing business with China.. There are also issues of corporate versus business strategy that are fascinating. How do the different businesses that make up the Alibaba Group fit together? Is it necessary to combine a B2B business with a C2C business with a payment business (Alipay in some form)? Why does Ma need all of them versus just hiring some firm to help? The conclusion even raises an issue that Alibaba has in common with the other large Internet firms - that of becoming a platform for a full range of Internet services and as a result launching a acquisition binge so that Alibaba starts looking like a Chinese version of Amazon, Google, Facebook, or Apple.and there is also the issue of relations with the Chinese government and its "Great Firewall of China".

This was a fun read and is very accessible. Have a map of China handy. I would also suggest going to some the the website mentioned in the book to see what they are like and how hospitable they can be to western browsers.

Prateek Gupta says

The first 100 pages feels like a stint from Ocean Eleven. Jack Ma built an industry where internet penetration was non existent. With government watching every step you take, Alibaba transformed how small businesses function in an isolated country. With fierce competition from local players and eBay on the horizon, Jack Ma was able to defend the bastion and led the company to a record breaking IPO.

The last 50 pages are average and hence I had to bring down one star.

I would highly recommend this book.

Andrew says

Alibaba: The House that Jack Ma Built is a biography of Jack Ma, founder of the "Amazon of the East" Alibaba. The book is written by a former Morgan Stanley employee, Duncan Clark, who has had a close relationship with the company since its inception in the late 1990's. Alibaba is a decent biography, chronicling the rise of Alibaba and the "Jack Magic" its multilingual and entrepreneurial founder brought to the table. Jack is an interesting character, as he has lead his company through the inception of the internet in China, the dot-com bust in 2000, and the rise of competitors like Google in the post bust period. He has navigated the choppy waters of international investment in China, balancing the needs of foreign investors, like Japan's Softbank or USA's Yahoo, while maintaining control over Alibaba's affairs. He also has the influence of China's SOE's and government agencies to contend with, as internal politics has had an influence on the development of Alibaba's investment in both the mainland and abroad.

Duncan Clark's book is a company biography, first and foremost. It does not skimp on some of the poor investments Alibaba and Jack have made, but always portrays each downswing in a positive manner. This biography is also positively glowing with praise for Jack Ma. The man himself is an interesting case study

for a go-getter entrepreneur who never gives up, and is always looking for the next venture. Even so, this is no Walter Isaacson's "Steve Jobs." The book offers little criticism for Alibaba, but enough for its competitors, like Yahoo and eBay, that it is clear this is a company book, so to speak. There is little in the way of apt criticism, or inward searching, besides Alibaba's alleged ties to China's Communist Party, which are touched on only briefly.

All in all, this is an interesting biography about Alibaba, an extremely successful company with a brilliant founder and innovative business model. It also offers tantalizing glimpses of China's internal marketplace, which I find fascinating. It is, however, a "corporate biography" meaning it is full of praise and reads like a corporate propaganda piece. Even so, it is interesting, insightful and well written, and should offer an interesting biographical account of the rise of one of China's most interesting businessmen and his influential e-commerce platform.

Mala Ashok says

A full account of Jack Ma's rise to the internet mogul that ALibaba has made him. The book was well-written but lacked humpor. I found it tough reading.

Zak says

After reading Porter Erisman's "Alibaba's World" recently, this book by Duncan Clark is a useful continuation of the Alibaba story for me. Not continuation in the literal sense (since it also covers the period from startup to the second IPO) but rather it adds layers of information which I found useful.

While Erisman actually worked at Alibaba, Duncan Clark on the other hand only consulted for it. As such, I found Erisman's book much more anecdotal (based on his personal experiences), whilst Clark provides a lot more information on the competitive and regulatory challenges facing Alibaba during that time. Other China internet giants like Sohu, Sina, NetEase, Tencent, Baidu, etc are covered in sufficient detail (including its battle with the then uber internet giant Yahoo), giving the reader a better grasp of the early battle for China e-commerce supremacy and how Alibaba managed to not only survive but thrive.

Overall, I enjoyed this book very much although there is one minor complaint. Towards the last one third of the book, the number of end note references seemed to mushroom for no good reason. For instance (just examples for illustration, I can't be bothered to go back and hunt for actual sentences) a sentence would go like "In 2010, Alibaba acquired XYZ (9)". When I checked the end note it would read something like "9. For \$380 million". Or another example, "then CFO XYZ (3) stated that' and the end note would say "3. Now CEO of ABC". I don't understand why the additional information being so short couldn't just be incorporated into the main text. After a while it just got annoying flipping back and forth and seriously interrupted the flow.

Hadrian says

Books about modern China can be very bad. Books about businessmen can be very bad. Books about the

modern Internet can also be very bad. This book, on the other hand, is good.

The beginning of the book almost dips into corporate hero worship, but the main text of the book is a balanced and informative description of Jack Ma's life and work. Much is written here about the scale and speed of China's economic transformation. When Jack Ma was born in 1970, private business was unthinkable; when he began his first online venture, a business director, in the 1990s, most of his customers had no access to the internet and had no idea if he was living up to his word. They began to believe him when they started getting phone calls from Western investors.

Clark knows his subject well enough not to dip into cliché - he knows that Alibaba is not Amazon because Alibaba focuses on small shop owners instead of larger firms. The sudden burst of online shopping is also a bellwether of the sudden rise of consumer spending in China.

I can also say the book has an interesting treatment of the early 2000s dot-com boom in both China and the United States, as well as the unsavory role of dealing with the central government. At times, the detail is overwhelming, with almost too many names and figures to write at once. Still, this book fills a valuable gap in understanding Jack Ma, and arguably much more.
