

In the early years of the Chinese online retail platform, Taobao (launched in 2003), a man in a rural village in China bought a computer and taught himself the language of e-commerce. He opened a Taobao store and began to sell small products with proven demand, like cell phone top-up cards and batteries, watching his profits grow in increments. One day he took a trip to Shanghai, where he visited a famous Western store called Ikea. The impressive display of products he saw there gave him insight into a growing consumer demand for self-assembled wooden furniture. He returned to his village to begin to manufacture and sell such furniture pieces through his online retail portal. He worked with local coffin and door producers for carpentry help, as his hometown had previously specialized in pig farming and plastics recycling and had no other tradition of woodworking. The furniture began to move quickly as online sales increased. Seeing his success, fellow villagers began to follow his model, and within a year, nearly half of the village was working in e-commerce. They began to accrue unheard of amounts of wealth. The village became locally and nationally famous for its online entrepreneurship.

Taobao Villages are defined in studies by Alibaba (Taobao's parent company) as villages in which large numbers of rural residents spontaneously engage in the e-commerce trade. Taobao Villages in close proximity are grouped together to form Taobao Towns, which group together to form Taobao Clusters, which group together to form Mega Taobao Village Clusters. Following the largest historical episode of rural to urban domestic migration during China's emergence as the world's factory in the 80s and 90s, the distributive networks of online retail began to be seen as a potential means of reversing the pattern of migration and its adverse social consequences (urban overcrowding and rural poverty). E-commerce entrepreneurship became a propagandistic marketing slogan for domestic consumption growth aligned with national progress and equanimity. One of Taobao's great success stories is the "mother-child bed," a product that went viral in the early 2010s. The "mother-child bed" was originally designed for life under the one-child policy, the restructuring of families under economic migration, and the ubiquity of cramped spaces. Given these conditions, it is still a tender object, a two-tiered bunk bed that allows a mother to sleep beneath her child.

China is currently experiencing a rise in birthrates, accompanied by an infectious baby culture. One evening last July, on the outskirts of the city of Yiwu, we were invited into a photography studio that specializes in making images of commodities for online circulation. We arrived in the evening, midway through a photoshoot involving two child models and a set of smiley face backpacks. As the shoot progressed, we learned that the photographer was the owner of the studio, and also the father of the little boy. The little girl seemed to be a friend, neighbor, or some form of relative. Each child's mother was tending to them, working to keep them feeling comfortable while extracting

convincing performances. The children were being instructed to smile, keep still, stand up, hold a bag, not throw it, smile again, to act like they were playing, but not to play. Looking back at the footage we shot from that night, we like to imagine how the children were processing these double-edged signals. The repeated order to perform play while not playing reminded us of cybernetic theorist, Gregory Bateson, and his writings on double-bind situations between mother and child, trainer and porpoise, Zen master and student. These are situations when communicative signals appear to contradict each other, leading potentially to enlightenment, creativity, or schizophrenia.

In the present exhibition, “mother-child” becomes code for these concerns:

1. the inextricable bonds of discipline and nurture which grow out of committed professional relationships
2. the family model of creative entrepreneurship
3. the problem of generating legible images out of confusing contexts
4. the question of an object’s (artwork’s) individuality

*(This document was automatically generated by Contemporary Art Library.)*