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# **On the socio-technical embeddedness of “Weibo florists”: *online marketing discipline and conventions of simplicity prototyping and standard production***

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In late 2011, a Shanghai-based flower amateur, offering luxury bespoke bouquets, sparked an entrepreneurial wave of florists on the Chinese microblogging website Weibo. Some business experts have attributed her success to *Weibo marketing* and *storytelling*, establishing her as a landmark for e-commerce start-ups. However, from the perspective of the sociology of entrepreneurship, articulating the actor-network theory and the economics of convention, we find that these marketing strategies have been effective because *Weibo florists* were embedded in the online floral field, where the *online marketing* discipline based on the business practice of *remote flower delivery* set the rules of the game. Faced with exponential competition at the time, *online florists* focused on efficient economies of scale, at the expense of personal interaction with clients. On the other hand, they tended to simplify the prototyping of bouquets to reduce the uncertainty of their quality during floral delivery, while standardizing the production of local florists with whom they collaborated. The marketing discipline and these management conventions have then unexpectedly provided the institutional resources for the entrepreneurialiat of Weibo florists.

Keywords: florists, e-commerce entrepreneurship, socio-technical embeddedness, online marketing, management conventions.

## 1. Introduction

On 22 November 2011, a blogger named *Beast* appeared on the microblogging website Weibo (the Chinese equivalent of Twitter). She quickly attracted attention by sharing photos of flower bouquets made for some of her clients and friends, including the famous Japanese film director Shunji Iwai and a popular Chinese singer at the time. Afterward, many Weibo users commented and shared the florist's tweets, expressing their admiration for her taste and asking her for information on how to buy. She quickly responded by offering a bespoke bouquet service using the *Alipay* payment platform: if a customer reserves a bouquet, by privately writing to her the identity of the recipient and the emotions he or she wishes to express, the florist would personalize and make it from seasonal flowers. However, the delivery of these bouquets was limited to the city of Shanghai. At the same time, she insisted that she was just a flower enthusiast with no professional training and that she did not own any shops.

Nevertheless, her products were expensive. Although the price of a medium-sized bouquet at her shop was comparable to the average price of a bouquet sold by *Salala*, a reputable digital floral transmission network positioned at the top end of the market at the time, this florist used far fewer flowers. However, this not only failed to arouse the suspicion of bloggers but also led to a rapid influx of orders. Then she continued to share personal stories written by her customers, floral design ideas, and anecdotes she had encountered during her business. These tweets and the constant innovation of her unprofessional bouquets helped her gain 180,000 followers within a year. The following September, she launched her website, but the price of her same-sized bouquets immediately doubled and has increased almost every year since. In fact, this trend was in contrast to the growing competition among online florists.

## 2. The entrepreneurial wave of "Weibo florists": a sociological issue

In addition to attracting a large number of fans, *Beast* triggered a wave of florist start-ups on Weibo. Imitators soon sprang up in other coastal metropolises besides Shanghai, such as Beijing, Guangzhou, and Hangzhou. Some established florists have also turned to Weibo to promote their products. Moreover, since 2012, flower e-commerce companies' registrations have increased dramatically, with annual growth of 90% and 110% in 2013 and 2014. On the other hand, florists on Weibo have become a symbol of high-end floral design. In response to this striking wave of entrepreneurship, the professional organization "China Floriculture Retail Congress" (*zhongguo huahui lingshouye jiaoliuhui* 中国花卉零售业交流会, CFRC) set up a conference in 2013, calling on its peers to "be creative in floral design, but even more

so in floral marketing!"<sup>1</sup>. During this forum, Beast and his followers were named "Weibo florists" (*weibo huadian* 微博花店). This appellation represented both a challenge and an opportunity for the traditional "online florists" (*wangshang/wangluo huadian* 网上/网络花店) and "brick and mortar florists" (*shiti huadian* 实体花店).

At the same time, the rise of Weibo florists has drawn the attention of a number of business journalists and other business experts. In the past, florists have rarely been mentioned in financial news reports. However, on 16 November 2012, *Chinese Business News*, China's most influential business newspaper, published a report on Weibo florists in its entrepreneurship section. It pointed out that it was because of the sympathetic stories they shared that they had managed to sell the bouquets at high prices and attract many followers, including celebrities. On the same day, *Huxiu*, a leading digital aggregator of business and technology news, reprinted this article under a different title. In addition, on this platform, an e-commerce expert and business angel took advantage of Beast to talk about the role of Weibo's mode of communication in the business world. Shortly afterward, picking up the *China Business News* article, this author included Beast in his article "Ten Classic Examples of Managing with Weibo", in which her business strategies were conceptualized as "Weibo marketing" (*weibo yingxiao* 微博营销) and "storytelling marketing" (*gushi yingxiao* 故事营销). While Weibo marketing emphasized companies' interactions with customers in a friendly and dynamic way, with the aim of developing positive word-of-mouth through social media and their followers, storytelling marketing referred to the integration of customers' personal stories into products, making them the protagonists of companies' advertisements, while giving these products added value in terms of experience. In his view, these two types of marketing were complementary.

The above articles, especially the two concepts, have since been quoted, plagiarised, and reconstructed by a large number of digital media and business writers. As a result, Beast has become a marketing reference in the history of Chinese e-commerce, being the subject of case studies in several business and investment textbooks and guides. Thus, these professional market intermediaries have collectively turned Beast into an entrepreneurial heroine, a singular florist who has disrupted both the floral industry and the e-commerce sector through Weibo. In fact, this collective narrative has largely simplified the social conditions of Beast's entrepreneurship, while mythologizing her entrepreneurial work.

There is no doubt that Weibo has provided florists with a new marketing device. In 2011, powered by wireless technology and smartphones, this social media rapidly gained popularity in China. It changed the way information was disseminated on old Internet devices such as portals and forums based on wired connections and personal computers (Zhang, 2018), shaping a new "form of visibility" (Cardon, 2019: 153) for Internet users and "democratizing"

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1 (2013), "花舞七星 裘桂月林 2013 第十三届中国花卉零售业交流会", *China Flower & Gardening News*, 21 May.

their creative skills (Flichy, 2010: 10) at the same time. However, caught up in technological determinism, the business experts failed to explain why it was floral enthusiasts like Beast, rather than professional florists, who had pioneered the use of Weibo for marketing purposes and achieved success. In fact, Chinese floristry, which was one of the first sectors to implement e-commerce, was no stranger to online marketing. On the other hand, the experiential quality of bespoke bouquets cannot be denied either, as personal emotions are an important value in the gifts of young Chinese people in a society under individualization (Yan, 2017: 73-74). However, these experts failed to analyze why it was the Weibo florists who had captured the personality needs of the public rather than the traditional florists who, as local merchants, should have been in close contact with their customers. It is thus necessary to shift the collective narrative of the Beast entrepreneur as a singular heroine to a sociology of entrepreneurship perspective to analyze the socio-technical “context” (Chauvin *et al.*, 2014) of Weibo florists. Thus, three concrete questions arise: How did online florists perceive the internet before? How did they market through internet devices? Why did they ignore their customers' demand for personality?

Although Beast has become a domestic luxury brand, it has barely entered the academic landscape. Existing studies focus mainly on communication (*e.g.* Yang, 2014) and management (*e.g.* Lei and Li, 2016), while they are not far removed from the reviews conducted by the aforementioned business experts. In fact, the absence of Weibo florists in sociological research is not an isolated case. In response to the rise of e-commerce in urban and rural China, social scientists are generally concerned with the macro analysis of its causes such as the state, international financial markets, and e-commerce giants from the perspective of political economy (Yu, 2017; Li, 2017; Zhang, 2020; Qian, 2021), and less on specific e-commerce merchants. Moreover, the limited research on their entrepreneurial activities has two main limitations: some authors focus on the power relations between giant platforms, especially e-commerce platforms like Alibaba and social media platforms such as WeChat, and entrepreneurs, thus reducing the latter's work to “digital labor” (Liao, 2017) or “entrepreneurial labor” (Qian, 2020), and in doing so ignoring their “do” (Flichy, 2017). On the other hand, in examining the impact of these platforms on local markets (Boullenois, 2022) or their co-construction with offline social networks (Peng and Wang, 2021), others largely neglect the purpose or product of e-entrepreneurs and thus are not in dialogue with the sociology of markets.

These limitations do not allow for a proper explanation of the entrepreneurial work of Weibo florists and the “rules of the game” (Bourdieu, 2001: 297) of the field in which they were embedded. Thus, by combining the actor-network theory and the economics of convention, we first move away from the Marxist perspective of platform giants as power and instead, take a pragmatic approach by treating them as “internet devices” (Beuscart *et al.*, 2019). In this case, based on more than 10,000 articles collected from the trade journal *China*

*Flower & Gardening News* (1992-2012) and the industry magazine *China Flower & Horticulture* (2001-2012) using keywords such as “cut flower”, “florist” and “internet”, we present the business practice of online florists and their social structure, in particular, their “usage frames” (Flichy, 1995) of the internet and the “valuation” conventions (Bessy and Chauvin, 2013) of the bouquets it mediated.

### 3. The genesis of the “online floral field” and its discipline

When talking about Beast's contributions to e-commerce marketing, the business experts however have forgotten one social fact: at the time of the birth of this florist, there was already an “online floral field”, in which florists all over the country were potentially engaged in retailing and marketing, through a variety of Internet devices.

#### 3.1 The business practice of floral platforms

The first online florists can be traced back to a flower order transmission website set up by a Beijing-based communications company in 1997. Since then, similar sites have blossomed in other coastal metropolises besides Beijing, such as Shanghai and Guangzhou, reaching over 70 by 2000. In addition, a number of large shopping platforms and web portals have also embarked on this floral e-commerce. In 2001, there were no less than 300 online florists, in 2005 there were more than 1,000, and in 2012 more than 2,000. On the other hand, buying bouquets online has become a fashion among young urban people, especially white-collar workers, who needed to express their feelings to their remote friends and relatives.

These online florists were essentially digital platforms based on the business practice known as “remote flower delivery” (*yidi xianhua sudi* 异地鲜花速递, RFD): they sell bouquets made up for giving via a merchant website aimed at individuals and then pass the customer's order on to a “delivering florist” (*peisong huadian* 配送花店) close to the recipient's address, with whom they usually collaborate under a franchise or not<sup>2</sup>. Thus, together with the delivering florists, their customers, and Internet devices, these online florists built interregional socio-technical networks and, at the same time, made a profit by linking the first two parties. This profit resulted precisely from the price difference between the order transmitted and executed or from the profits of the orders shared with their delivering florists. A purely digital florist could therefore refer to the ideal type of “two-sided market” for the platform economy (Evans and Schmalensee, 2016) since it did not require flower stocks for bouquet production or logistical facilities for delivery. Thus, we call the first online florists

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<sup>2</sup> In this case, the delivering florist is also often called a “franchised florist” (*liansuo/jiameng huadian* 连锁/加盟花店) by the online florist to which it belongs.

“floral platforms”. However, the producer and the consumer were not visible to each other on these platforms.

### 3.2 The formation of the online floral field

Although the business practice of online florists was well established by floral platforms at the turn of the century, it was not until 2007, when internet technology and knowledge of e-commerce applications became widespread among brick-and-mortar florists, that it began to overtake the rules of the game for the floristry as a whole. The first online florists were created by ICT companies or individuals, while few flower shops were interested in the digital market at first. From 2005 to 2007, with the rapid development of the Internet, online florists started to familiarise themselves with this technology and gradually ventured into the field of e-commerce. However, the websites they created served as business cards to enhance their reputation in the local market, or as e-catalogs to publish new products, but rarely as sales tools. Until 2007, nationwide online florists, such as Salala, had emerged from the Internet industry.

Since 2007, the spread of e-commerce knowledge has led to the emergence of a large number of online florists. Firstly, following and imitating the forerunners, new floral platforms such as *Amorflora* have emerged and developed, even replacing the former. However, the professional experience of their founders was no longer limited to the internet sector, but most of them were small, consisting of only three to five people, with little management capacity and therefore a short period of survival. Secondly, large flower shops have launched their websites as a new sales channel in order to expand their local market or even to access the RFD market, through the regional or national transmission network they have established, through platforms specializing in floral transmission exchanges between florists, or through social media. We thus call them "connected florists"<sup>3</sup>, who together with the floral platforms constituted online florists. This trend was particularly evident in metropolitan areas, where setting up a website did not add much cost, but allowed florists to expand their business due to rising rents.

Lastly, with state support, especially after the 2008 financial crisis, integrated C2C e-commerce platforms such as Taobao, based on the "growth before profit" strategy endorsed by international venture capital, attracted and created a large number of "petty capitalists" (Zhang, 2020) florists. In 2008, these platforms had up to 10,000 florists, with over 400 in Shanghai alone. Moreover, the turnover of some of the most reputable florists on Taobao exceeded that of many established floral platforms. The vast majority of them were young and operated physical shops. For these connected florists, e-commerce platforms meant huge

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3 Unlike the floral platforms, they made their profits from both the transmission of orders and the bouquets they produced.

available internet traffic, simplified website development and maintenance tools, and low sales costs. As Taobao gained a monopoly, its large network effect also attracted former floral platforms. On the other hand, this e-commerce giant that promised the state to develop domestic demand simultaneously accelerated the spread of the online flower-buying habit (see Hong, 2017; Yu, 2017). In addition, the enhanced labor mobility caused by the financial crisis has also increased the demand for interregional transmission of flowers.

As a result, under the impetus of the state, international capital, and e-commerce giants, e-commerce knowledge was no longer a “cultural good” (see Cézard *et al.*, 2000) reserved for pure players, but gradually became an infrastructure for the flower market, to the extent that “even in small towns, online florists are no longer strangers”<sup>4</sup>. Thus, physical florists were no longer a separate or opposing sub-field to floral platforms, nor a specialized executant group in RFD practice. On the contrary, they have started to become subjects of power in e-commerce, *i.e.* connected florists, forming the "online floral field" together with the floral platforms.

### 3.3 The discipline of “online marketing” and the *jiedan* game

In fact, the practice of RFD is not new to Chinese online florists. It dates back to the 1920s when a British florist offered the service of the Florist Telegraphic Delivery Association in the Shanghai International Concession. However, these florists, led by floral platforms, gradually "disciplined" (Cocohy, 2001) this practice in the digital age into "online marketing" (*wangluo yingxiao* 网络营销), which emphasized the rapid expansion of cross-regional economies of scale based on Internet devices. From an individual online florist to an RFD website, Salala's inventor Guo Feng realized during his entrepreneurship that "the advantage of *online marketing* is not in the same city, but in long-distance sales," since logistics was the main bottleneck of flower delivery. He, therefore, decided to set up a nationwide delivery network through a franchise model, which he said was decisive in his conquest of the Shanghai market, because the large Shanghai flower platforms only delivered to the city and its surrounding areas and had therefore ignored "the national market". Nevertheless, he stressed that his company Salala was in fact “the culmination of many failures. If it had been the only one, consumers would not have been aware of the existence of digital floral marketing”<sup>5</sup>. As a result, while competing with each other, online florists have imitated each other, finally creating an “institutional isomorphism” (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) in this marketing.

On the basis of this marketing discipline superimposed on the RFD practice, many

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4 Wang, X.王新悦. (2012), "从传统到现代的跨越——中国花卉零售业蓬勃发展", *China Flower & Horticulture*, n°23.

5 Guo, W.郭文风. (2004), "莎啦啦：网络铸成的鲜花王国." *Xin Langchao*, n°3.



flexible interregional or even interprovincial socio-technical networks were established by online florists, with the aim of (re-)producing bouquets in different locations in the form of orders, overcoming the perishable nature of cut flowers and thus achieving economies of scale, under conditions where logistics – especially the cold chain – were not well developed. As the price difference between the ordered and delivered bouquet was the main source of profit for online florists, the quantity of orders represented largely their competitiveness, especially with the intensification of competition in the online floral field. As a result, prospecting, or in their market terminology, *jiedan* 接单 “receiving or taking orders”, became their key competitive strategy in a digital “attention economy” (Kessous *et al.*, 2010). In doing so, they invested a lot of capital in the Internet, using its wide range of devices as “captation devices” (Cochoy, 2004; Mellet, 2011) to increase their visibility and traffic, in order to *take* more orders and make more profit from their transmission. The *jiedan* was thus no longer just their basic *reception* function but also became a crucial disciplined skill.

Prior to 2007, online florists generally enhanced their *jiedan* capacity through traditional advertising and the Pay for Placement (P4P) system in search engines. Web portals rich in internet traffic were one of their first preferred marketing devices. In addition, co-branding with reputable portals has also been able to enhance the florists' brand authority. The founder of Salala considered this "reputation work" (Zafirau, 2008) as the lever to open up his market. However, the possibility of this collaboration depended to a large extent on the florists' initial “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu, 2001: 294-296). In fact, search engines such as Baidu and Google, as well as the P4P system introduced by Baidu in 2003, were more democratic marketing tools than the portals. Being more concerned with the economic capital of florists than with their symbolic capital, they were accessible to almost all florists. Therefore, by strategically adapting the configuration of their websites to the search engine ranking system, or by buying keywords on these platforms, online florists, lacking reputation, could also improve their visibility.

However, the cost of flower keywords quickly increased, far outstripping that of similarly priced items, demonstrating the intensity of the competition between online florists for consumer attention, which continued unabated until 2008. Therefore, with the commission on orders being virtually the only source of profit, there arose a risk, even for established floral platforms, that they would not be able to make ends meet when they entered the money game<sup>6</sup>. Inevitably, the capital-starved connected florists were also involved in this war, but they invested much more cautiously than the floral platforms, as the local market was still

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6 Unlike Google Ads, which modifies the ranking according to two variables – the quality of the information and the number of clicks – according to a CPC (cost-per-click) system (Cardon, 2019: 317), Baidu's rank bidding service largely only cared about advertisers' investments and did not check the authenticity of the information well, due to the lack of proper legal regulation of online advertising (see Li, 2016).

their main concern. Besides, they could take advantage of local social networks and traditional marketing tools such as business cards and flyers to increase the visibility of their sites. However, these local devices often only increased their local reputation. They were therefore not as effective as the search engine P4P system in the RFD domain.

Florists who did not effectively exploit these devices ended up focusing their marketing strategies on product pricing. Positioned at the high end of the market, the first reputable floral platforms such as Salala were able to break even. However, as this market became increasingly competitive and due to the lack of funds to expand brand awareness in a short period of time, some smaller or late-established online florists began to attract more consumers through promotions such as discounts, coupons, and even direct retail price reductions.

As Internet devices were updated and Internet traffic was shifted and redistributed accordingly, online florists also adapted their marketing by mobilizing a new combination of devices. For example, realizing the low return on keyword investment on Baidu, many online florists quickly turned to Taobao, which was becoming a monopoly, to take advantage of its huge network effect. On the other hand, Taobao's new "form of intermediation" (Beauscart *et al.*, 2019: 184), based on a system of customer ratings and reviews, as opposed to that of search engines, has also impacted the rules of the game of the online floral field. In the past, the vast majority of online florists did not have a rating system. Even if there was a section for customer feedback, their interactions were not obvious. Moreover, as they acted as both matchmakers and distributors, customer reviews were suspected to be manipulated and filtered through their websites, so they were not credible "judgment devices" (Karpik, 1996).

On the contrary, with the democratic participation of customers, the ratings and reviews device on Taobao changed the classic "form of evaluation" (see Beauvisage *et al.*, 2013) based mainly on criteria such as brand and visibility, thus increasing the *jiedan* capacity of small connected florists. Nevertheless, Taobao did not question the rules of the game, as visibility on this platform was also available through the purchase of sponsored ads. As a result, as soon as the balance of power between Internet devices in the distribution of Internet traffic stabilized, florists found themselves competing again. Moreover, due to the high degree of homogeneity of the bouquets, low prices have been a major factor in the competitiveness of even the most reputable Taobao florists. Therefore, online florists have been caught up in the increasingly fierce price war, as they have engaged in the *jiedan* game to achieve economies of scale.

From portals to C2C e-commerce platforms, as the national online floral field took shape, online marketing moved from a discipline dominated by floral platforms to a common good for all online florists. The formation of these calculative agencies actually involved the "mediation" (Callon, 1998) of several other power holders. In addition to the state and the

e-commerce giants, there were also professional organizations. In 2012, after years of intermittent discussion about online florists, CFRC returned to emphasize that "2012 is the year of internet development, but also the year of action for floristry to fully improve *online marketing*." It then identified itself as "an effective platform for exchange between online and physical florists, helping this sector to enter a new era of 'E'"<sup>7</sup>. In doing so, the congress invited the head of the Taobao flower department, one of the most reputable floral platforms superimposed on the platform, as well as a connected florist experienced in *jiedan*, to give a live demonstration of the order taking and transmission processes and techniques they used. Thus, by emphasizing the worth of online marketing for the entire floristry, CFRC facilitated the realization of RFD e-commerce, while reproducing the power structure dominated by the incumbent online florists. Thus, it can be said that this 'non-profit' organization has served as a key market intermediary in the formation of the online marketing ideology.

#### **4. Uncertainty about the quality of bouquets and management conventions**

In fact, the frequent involvement of intermediaries such as CFRC was due to the uncertainty surrounding the implementation of online marketing. The order transmission networks of the first floral platforms were limited to large metropolitan florists, while flower shops had long been reluctant to use the Internet as a sales tool. These contradictions actually reflect the conflict between industrial logic and online marketing ideology, characterized by the uncertainty of bouquet quality in RFD practice. Therefore, in addition to holding the hand of physical florists through CFRC, online florists, especially floral platforms, have also entered the supply chain and developed management devices.

##### **4.1 On the uncertainty of the quality of RFD bouquets**

Besides the common problems faced by the e-commerce industry as a whole, such as the lack of reliable payment devices, the main obstacles to the development of online florists were the perishability of flowers compared to other goods and the uncertainty about the quality of RFD bouquets. There existed at least three types of uncertainty: Firstly, the bouquet delivered by the delivering florist did not match the photo and description of the bouquet ordered online by the customer. Secondly, the tastes of the customer and the recipient do not coincide. Finally, there is a service failure, such as a late delivery. While the last two are common concerns in the floristry industry, it was the first one that was specific to online florists: Due to problems such as the incorrect transmission of orders, lack of requested flower varieties, and limitations or differences in floral design, delivering florists were not always

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7 Kou, Y.寇亚琴. (2012), "相约彩云之南 共谋行业发展 第12届零交会精彩不容错过", *China Flower & Gardening News*, 10 April.

able to reproduce the bouquets on order; it was also possible that they deliberately used poor quality flowers in order to increase their profits. Furthermore, when online florists migrated to Taobao, their reputation became more vulnerable as the platform's rating system "materialized" (Beuscart *et al.*, 2015) it and made the crises caused by the asymmetry of the bouquet and the corresponding photo more visible (see Boistel and Laroutis. 2019).

Moreover, the discipline of online marketing has exacerbated this uncertainty. Firstly, due to a lack of expertise in floral design, floral platforms were inclined to overestimate the bouquet-making competencies of their partners, as some of them often created and published photos of pretty bouquets in order to capture the attention of consumers. Secondly, due to a shortage of experience in retailing in the offline market, these florists, who were simply in charge of floral transmission, may also have been unaware of the production and delivery capabilities of the delivering florists. Thus, some of them who overestimated online marketing often experienced a "loss of control", which resulted in failed orders and delayed deliveries, especially around calendar holidays such as Valentine's Day. In addition, if they did not work closely with the delivering florists, the latter usually prioritized the delivery of bouquets from their own shops, given the low profitability of online orders. Lastly, there was often a disagreement on the distribution of profits between the two parties. On the one hand, the asymmetry between the "price structure" (Boltanski and Esquerre, 2017: 145) of the online florist and that of the delivering florist made it difficult for the latter to execute the order exactly as the former wanted. On the other hand, in order to make more profit, online florists were sending bouquets at prices lower than the usual retail prices of their partners. In addition, many of them did not actively communicate their online prices in order to hide their profit, leaving the delivering florists to make bouquets only on the basis of the local price structure. As the competition between online florists became progressively fierce, the trend of lowering prices further widened the gap between the two, thus intensifying the uncertainty of the quality of RFD bouquets.

#### **4.2 The simplification of prototyping and the massification of aesthetics**

As a result, "taking more orders while maintaining a zero complaint rate"<sup>8</sup> was a challenge for online florists. In fact, in order to reduce this uncertainty, these florists have long advocated the implementation of a "flower delivery service standardization system" (*xianhua sudi fuwu biao zhun xitong* 鲜花速递服务标准系统). However, this system was never institutionalized, although there was a consensus to manage the supply chain. This management convention was twofold: on the one hand, to simplify the prototyping of bouquets to match the general skills of the delivering florists; on the other hand, to standardize the production of bouquets, so that the prototypes could be efficiently reproduced.

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8 See Yi, Q. 依群. (2012), "讲座交流 真诚务实", *China Flower & Gardening News*, 31 July.

In terms of cut flower varieties, floral design, logistical devices, and pricing structures, the affiliated florists of an online florist would be heterogeneous, even if they had a franchise agreement. Therefore, the simplification of the prototyping had to take three aspects into account: firstly, the use of common materials, *i.e.* flower varieties that are consistently available in wholesale markets throughout the country. Secondly, the schematization of the flower assortment and the making of the bouquets, avoiding the introduction of too many flower species and varieties in the same prototype. Lastly, the application of cut flowers that last a long time and are not easily damaged; furthermore, in order to be able to deliver more bouquets at a time, the specimens should not be too large and their shape should be easy to maintain.

The larger the market, the greater the uncertainty and the range of bouquets tended to be less diverse and more simplified. The same was true during the calendar holidays when highly symbolic rose bouquets were almost always the first choice for online florists. Thus, even if they did not produce bouquets, these florists, like other market intermediaries, were very much involved in their “valuation” (Bessy and Chauvin, 2013) or “qualcul” (Callon, 2017: 228) and collectively constructed conventions of quality appropriate to the bouquets circulating in the online market. However, in the face of intensified competition, they have had to innovate their prototypes. Some reputable floral platforms even tried to outsource their albums to the offline market in order to set the tone for the entire floristry industry. However, it was difficult to get away from these three principles, since it was mainly a matter of updating the packaging materials, photographing the prototypes, and retouching the photos.

As the price war in the online floral field worsened, the simplification of prototyping drew criticism. Since 2008, the online flower market has grown at a rapid pace, while many physical florists have seen their turnover increase slowly year on year. This dramatic contrast caused panic among the latter, who feared that online florists would take market share from them. In addition, the devaluation of online bouquets put double pressure on the whole industry: on the one hand, the low prices charged by online florists disrupted the original price structures of the industry, especially from the consumer's point of view, as online bouquets were no longer a luxury gift for urban white-collar workers but a commodity available to all. On the other hand, the low prices on the Internet risked further reducing the profit margins of brick-and-mortar florists.

As a result, these florists started to criticize online florists. They accused them of selling “junk” and defended their prices and profits through values such as flower quality and floral design. At the 2012 CFRC, some physical florists said that they had become increasingly cautious in recent years about accepting online orders, even refusing some in order to guarantee the quality of the flowers and the image of their shops, due to the contrast between online retail prices and rising labor costs. One florist who was reluctant to venture into e-commerce felt the strong impact of floral platforms and therefore fought for his peers who

had invested a lot of money and effort in floral training. On the other hand, many florists called for a better flower qualification system and a mechanism to evaluate floral design. For example, online florists were asked to clearly indicate the varieties and qualities of flowers used, as well as the packaging materials, so that consumers would be aware of the symmetry between prices and values while allowing flower shops, especially those at the top end, to maintain the legitimacy of their prices. Other florists suggested establishing a hierarchy of flower designers in order to distinguish bouquets. However, both of these values were ineffective devices for justifying prices (see Boltanski and Esquerre, 2017: 138) as they did not form the common good of the industry.

In fact, this downward price trend has been the result of a collaboration between online florists and many craft florists who have been involved in floral transmission by taking advantage of RFD e-commerce. In the face of this strong criticism, these florists have instead defended the legitimacy of low prices: First of all, despite low-profit margins, online florists have created a space for many new florists with fewer financial resources to survive. Furthermore, the argument that online florists have encroached on the offline market was alarmist. In fact, the two complemented each other because the former mainly processed RFD orders while the physical florists focused on the local market. In addition, the latter could take advantage of the opportunity to increase their income in addition to their original business, which was particularly important during the off-season. Secondly, the choice of different niche markets had to be free and it was against the market spirit for online florists to be prohibited from selling low-priced bouquets. Finally, this trend toward lower prices contributed to the mass consumption of flowers, which would ultimately benefit the entire sector. One of the leading online florists on Taobao, therefore, compared his contribution to society to that of companies such as Ford and McDonald's, saying that the primary goal of floristry should be to "make flowers affordable for most people", *i.e.* "massification"<sup>9</sup>. He also satirized florists who were demanding higher price points for reasons of floral design and labor costs, saying that they were "sticking to their old ways" and would be driven out of the market.

Nevertheless, the values of existential justice, freedom, and mass culture did not generate reflexive collective action or moral "grand narratives" (Boltanski and Esquerre, 2017: 502) either. Rather, the social fact of cheap online bouquets was an unintended and "irreversible" (Akrich, 2006) consequence of the many dispersed online florists and delivering florists who were involved in *jiedan* and transmission games, collectively creating digital economies of scale while pursuing their own economic interests in a pragmatic logic. In other words, these reflections on price competition and the increased uncertainty of the quality of online bouquets have not shaken the discipline-ideology of online marketing. As a result, especially with the network effect of some floral platforms and the lack of effective valuation devices,

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9 Zhang, L.张凌. (2012), "网络花店是在销售垃圾吗?", *China Flower & Gardening News*, 28 August.

connected florists who focused on flower quality and floral design were not only overlooked by their peers, they also became invisible in the results pages of e-commerce platforms where sales were the key indicator. Thus, online bouquets became commonplace, and the aesthetic quickly became massified.

### **4.3 The standardization of production and the rationalization of sales**

In addition to adapting to the average skill and production capacity of the delivering florists by simplifying prototyping, the online florists also made an effort to ensure that the specimens were reproduced as they were on the specification and delivered on time. In this way, they no longer simply acted as market intermediaries, but also actively participated in organizing the production of the delivering florists, albeit not as employees, but in formal or informal business partnerships. In doing so, they advocated the standardization of flower delivery services: on the one hand, the materials required for standard bouquets, such as boxes and wrapping paper, were standardized; on the other hand, the quality of the deliveries made by the delivering florists was monitored and even controlled, either by experienced counterparts in the larger cities or by a central order management system. Moreover, branded floral platforms have gone further by standardizing their logo on materials such as bouquet packaging, greeting cards, and receipts, publishing and upgrading catalogs for franchised florists, organizing training courses on floral design, shop management, service standards and staff qualifications, and even attempting to export their standards systems to the whole RFD sector. As a result, in order to take more orders, being unsalaried, delivering florists however experienced a similar alienation from the “separation of conception and execution” (Braverman, 1974) under Taylorism. Moreover, they were sometimes forced to accept unprofitable orders because online prices did not match those in offline markets.

Besides, floral platforms, especially internet traffic hubs, put in place punitive devices against their partners, which were largely focused on consumer benefits. If a customer complained, they would be blacklisted and required to compensate the customer or deliver a new bouquet; if there were further complaints, they risked having their partnership terminated. However, even these platforms have never been able to achieve a monopoly, and the constant innovation of Internet devices has made it more difficult. Indeed, the delivering florists always had an exit margin. They could leave the internet and concentrate on retailing in their own shops, find other online florists to partner with or open their own online shops on Taobao. In fact, many of them have expanded their market share by registering on several floral platforms.

Due to the simplification of prototyping and the standardization of production, online florists were able to reduce uncertainty while increasing circulation efficiency. On the other

side of the interface of their sites, the counterpart of these management conventions was the rationalization of the sale. In fact, efficiency has been a core value of floral platforms since their inception. They allowed consumers to simply choose a bouquet from their home or office, place an order online and have it delivered to their recipient the same day, without having to struggle to find a flower shop in the area where that recipient is located. Moreover, the convenience and efficiency of the RFD service became a symbol of modernity and civilization, as it met the needs of young urban people, especially those who worked and traveled a lot, to express their feelings. Although this service had already gained popularity in 2011, online florists have not stopped evolving towards these two goals by rationalizing the sale.

On the one hand, in order to make it easier for customers to read and select bouquets, websites were generally designed to be simple and clear, without publishing information not relevant to the sale. According to the social psychology of Chinese customers, a product classification system was often established based on indicators such as types of floral composition and occasions, complemented by corresponding label instructions to help them send the "right flowers for the right occasions"<sup>10</sup>. In addition, bouquets were also generally ranked based on sales, with best-sellers and promotional bouquets placed at the top of the site. On the other hand, an online customer service team was often set up to capture undecided consumers and help them make quicker purchase decisions. In contrast to the Weibo florists' business, this service was mainly focused on efficiency, recommending purchases based on the collection of products on the website, rather than consulting customers on their personal needs and creating specific bouquets. Furthermore, it has been largely proceduralized by online florists to aspects of flower knowledge, etiquette, sales techniques, and communication methods. In short, through the devices of standardization of production and rationalization of sale, online florists have simultaneously alienated offline florist-producers and rationalized donor-consumers, "McDonaldising" (Ritzer, 1996) the romantic within the RFD.

## 5. Conclusion: the socio-technical embeddedness of Weibo florists

Therefore, the success of Beast and the wave of entrepreneurship it has generated cannot be attributed simply to Weibo marketing and storytelling. On the one hand, the rise of the Weibo florists was not so much the result of exploiting the platform's specific form of intermediation as it was the result of a break with the RFD business practice of online florists, who used internet devices as tools for transmission and *jiedan*. In this practice, flower bouquets were not produced by a single local florist, but rather by a cross-regional socio-technical network of transmitters, executants and online consumers. However, the

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10 Gui, L. 桂琳, J. Gao 高晶. (2010), "莎啦啦鲜花网店的产品营销策略研究." *Shoujie Zhongguo Nongchanpin Luntan*.



Weibo florists, although social media-based and attracting users from all over the country, remained essentially local. It was difficult for them to overcome geographical limitations due to the perishability of flowers, imperfect cold chain logistics, as well as the time constraints imposed by the seasonal and festive nature of floral consumption.

Secondly, Weibo florists also ignored the common good of efficiency and economies of scale that online florists advocated and implemented. In response to the needs of young urban nomads to express their emotions efficiently, they not only offered convenient RFD service but also helped them make quick purchasing decisions by simplifying their website design, creating a product classification system, and proceduralizing their customer service team. Moreover, in the discipline-ideology of online marketing, which emphasized economies of scale, customers were seen as abstract orders and online florists as *jiedan* calculative agencies. Thus, from web portals to e-commerce platforms, no matter how up-to-date the internet devices were, online florists generally used them as *captation* devices to increase the visibility and traffic of their sites. In this case, although social media such as blogs and Weibo preceded Beast, imbued with this “conception of control” (Fligstein, 1993: 405), online florists did not change their usage frames of the internet<sup>11</sup>. Finally, this agencement of online sales and marketing devices had McDonaldised the consumption of bouquets while preventing the formation of personal relationships between these florists and clients that Weibo florists have valorized.

On the other hand, the experiential value of the bouquets produced by Weibo florists was not self-evident; it allowed them to raise prices and justify them, as it appeared relatively rare in the management conventions in the online floral field. Due to the uncertainty of bouquet quality, which manifested itself in the asymmetry of the actual product and the order photo in RFD practice, and which was further exacerbated by the online marketing discipline, online florists had to simplify bouquet prototyping to meet the general level of skill of partner florists and put in place standardization devices to ensure that orders were reproduced on time in the offline markets. As price competition in this field has intensified, these management conventions have transformed online bouquets from fashionable gifts to common commodities. This was particularly evident during the emergence of Beast. Despite the constant criticism, the online marketing ideology has hardly been challenged by online florists.

In summary, the Weibo marketing and storytelling of Weibo florists have been successful because they were embedded in the online floral field, which has been neglected by business experts. Precisely because of their lack of experience in floristry and their unfamiliarity with "online marketing", these flower amateurs from the press, the fashion world, and luxury

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11 See Wen, X. 闻西. (2009), "花艺博客决不该是“死胡同”" *China Flower & Gardening News*, 17 November. ; Zhou, W. 周伟伟, Y. Shao 韶月. (2011), "花木网销之昨天、今天与明天", *China Flower & Horticulture*, n°15.

shops<sup>12</sup> have taken the opposite approach, while unconsciously discrediting the orthodox conventions of valuation, production, and sales in the online floral field, and have thus created a new business model. These management conventions and this discipline ideology unexpectedly provided the institutional resources for their business.

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12 See (2013), "卖鲜花的野兽派", *Shangye Zhoukan*, n°5. ; (2015), "魔幻主义创始者, 时尚造型师岳岳", *Xiexie keji*, 18 September, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/UUB6f4K5c9X2iY60erf4jA>, consulté 4 April 2023. ; (2013), "一个战地记者的微博花店", *Tianxia Wangshang*, 25 January. ; Lin, Y.林莹. (2013), "熊的花园 1960: 文艺, 有诚意", *Zhongguo Guanggao*, n°8. ; (2014), "初见花店: 把顾客的故事变成一盒花", *Tianxia Wangshang*, 20 January.

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