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Little Rice: Smartphones, Xiaomi, And The Chinese Dream



Synopsis

Almost unknown to the rest of the globe, Xiaomi has become the world's third-largest mobile phone manufacturer. Its high-end phones are tailored to Chinese and emerging markets, where it outsells even Samsung. Since the 1990s China has been climbing up the ladder of quality, from doing knockoffs to designing its own high-end goods. Xiaomi's name literally means "little rice" is landing squarely in this shift in China's economy. But the remarkable rise of Xiaomi from startup to colossus is more than a business story, because mobile phones are special. The common desiderata of the global population, mobile phones offer the kind of freedom and connectedness that autocratic countries are terrified of. China's fortune and future clearly lie with "opening up" to the global market, requiring it to allow local entrepreneurs to experiment. Clay Shirky, one of the most influential and original thinkers on how technological innovation affects social change around the world, now turns his attention to the most populous country of them all. The case of Xiaomi exemplifies the balancing act that China has to perfect to navigate between cheap copies and innovation, between the demands of local and global markets, and between freedom and control.

Book Information

File Size: 1824 KB

Print Length: 128 pages

Publisher: Columbia Global Reports (October 13, 2015)

Publication Date: October 13, 2015

Sold by: Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B013AH5IUQ

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Not Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #473,290 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #51

in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Business & Money > Industries > Manufacturing #163

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Telecommunications > Radio & Wireless #225 in Books > Business & Money > Industries >

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Customer Reviews

This is more like a New Yorker article than a typical book. The central topic is the rise of Chinese smartphone giant Xiaomi, but it is interspersed with accounts of the author's year in Shanghai, a short history of Communist China, descriptions of state surveillance and Internet regulation in China and discussions of East Asian business attitudes toward fashion and technology. The topics are all related to Xiaomi in some fashion, but not in any other respect to each other. The book is published by Columbia Global Reports which aims, "to combine the immediacy of narrative power of journalism with the intellectual ambition and acuity of scholarship." The book succeeds in one out of four, it harnesses impressive narrative power to communicate a lot of important information in a more or less coherent story. That's much more pleasant to read than dry analysis, and much easier to understand and retain. It's not as good on immediacy, most of the direct reporting is from 2011 to 2013, and is good story telling to illustrate points in the more serious accounts, but all the important stuff is from the general business press, not direct experience, not primary sources. The lack of primary sources also disqualify it as scholarship, but in any event, it's neither ambitious nor acute. It's a description of the Chinese technology business at a point in time, with a lot of context, but there are no conclusions or insights.

Unless you've lived or worked in China since 2010, you've probably never encountered Earth's third-largest mobile phone company, Xiaomi. The company, whose name translates as "Little Rice" in Chinese, currently dominates China's mid-range smartphone market. Despite having no market presence in North America or Europe, Xiaomi's global aspirations have flourished, and in five years, it has progressed from geek-oriented software startup to punching above its weight class. Clay Shirky, NYU professor and new media cheerleader, sees Xiaomi as emblematic, not of the mobile phone industry, but of China's changing place in global technology leadership. China has a lengthy reputation as America's favorite offshore dumping ground; Apple famously labels its products "Designed In California; Assembled In China." But as Chinese manufacturers become increasingly comfortable with American designs, many have assumed the design role and created native products domestically. If you've experienced the existential dread of realizing you've forgotten your phone, you understand how important networked mobile technology has become. This goes double for poor countries. As rising technology puts mobile phones within mass customer reach, villagers in Africa and Asia who cannot afford laptops, cars, or books, nevertheless have global access with affordable phones. Networked mobile access puts poor, distant villagers on (theoretically) equal footing with everyone else. Shirky

quotes technology maven Jan Chipchase that mobile phones have joined money and keys as the three things without which we cannot leave the house. This presents China unprecedented opportunity and unique obstacles.

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