

Extraordinary Success in the Sales Profession: Three Case Studies in China

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Success is elusive for some people who pursue sales careers. For a few privileged others, it is extreme. What is it about those few who achieve exceptional success that empowers them? This paper examines the sales careers of three sales superstars who have achieved extraordinary sales success in an unexpected place, China, where Western capitalism is not championed to the extent that it is in many other parts of the world. These three case studies combine to offer some insights that can lead others to higher levels of sales success. Characteristics common in all three cases examined here were found: exceedingly long hours of work each week; complete devotion to the job, the company, and/or the industry; very high levels of intelligence; willingness to take risks; and the ability to bounce back after setbacks.

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Introduction

The past offers us great insight into the future, if only we take the trouble to look. The tendency to overlook the opportunity to learn from what happened earlier is not new. Indeed, over a hundred years ago, the great philosopher George Santayana (1905 p. 284) stated: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” In business, post-mortems are more often performed when a major failure occurs (Collier et al., 1996), but there may be even more value in examining high levels of business success, particularly great people and their careers. From a business management perspective, Lamond (2005) supports this notion of examining the past very effectively in his editorial titled “On the Value of Management History.” Indeed, examining success stories can lead the way for others to identify role models, adopt similar actions, and to consequently experience higher performance levels. Studying high achievers and developing generalizations can provide much insight.

For proof of the popularity of this method, look no further than Peters and Waterman’s (1982) book *In Search of Excellence* which sold over 3 million copies in its first four years and was the most widely held monograph from 1989 (the first year the list was compiled) to 2006 (McClain, 1997). In

that now classic book and the associated educational products and services that sprang forth from it, stories of successful American firms were described, examined, and then developed into a framework for improving business practice. In this paper, we utilize a similar methodology but on a much smaller scale. We humbly examine the success of three tremendously successful salespeople in hopes of developing some insight into how other salespeople can also become successful. Using case study research to begin building theory is a well developed notion in management research (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Eisenhardt, 1989) and we modestly engage in that process here with three case studies of salespeople who thrived beyond the highest of expectations.

Biographies and Case Studies of Exceptionally High Achievers

Examining success stories, including the study of biographies of great leaders, can be especially useful for young people looking to learn about a profession as they progress in the socialization process for that career (e.g., Engelland et al., 2006; English, 1995; Jacobs, 2007; Rubens et al., 2016). In addition, all of us need positive role models to inspire us and to motivate us to do our best (Gronn, 1993; Morgenroth et al. 2015). Examining case studies of success contributes to this form of education and serves as motivation to emulate that high level of performance when we learn about the extraordinary accomplishments of others.

In the popular press within the field of sales, much attention has been directed to sales superstars or sales heroes. These elite salespeople are said to constitute only about 4 percent of the sales force, yet accounts for a disproportionate share (64 percent) of company sales (Pipedrive Blog, 2020). This is far beyond the level of concentration suggested by the Pareto Principle's 80/20 ratio (Kim et al., 2017). There are many articles in business trade magazines about how to hire sales superstars, how to develop them, how to keep them, etc. (e.g., Allen, 2002; Hallenbeck, 1999; Southerst, 1992; Graham, 2016; Wayshak, 2016).

Let's brainstorm for a moment. Think of some great superstars of selling - perhaps your sales heroes. Where do they sell? Where do they live? Many would predict that they would work in a highly competitive and free-market economy. In addition, many would expect sales superstars to work in countries with advanced, highly developed economies, probably one of the G7 which includes: Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Bampatsou & Halkos, 2019, p. 357). Furthermore, if you currently live in one of these G7 countries and have even an ounce of ethnocentrism, there is a good chance you would expect sales heroes to be from your homeland.

The senior author is from the United States and pleads guilty for his expectation that many sales superstars are American. But while many do, in fact, work in the United States (*Inc.*, 2011; Nguyen, 2011), they also live and work all around the world. In fact, sometimes sales superstars can be found in unexpected places, even in China, one of only a few currently existing communist states in the world! If you had to guess where in the world sales would not be expected to flourish, a communist country might be a good guess - but you could be wrong! If sales superstars can be found in China, where one would not expect sales to thrive as a profession given the stereotypical view of a planned, communist economy, then certainly sales success can be found in your market, too. Indeed, as it has so often been said, "if you can make it there, you can make it anywhere."

This paper describes three of China's most successful sales superstars in hopes that these stories provide an opportunity for others to learn from their triumphs. Our goal in writing the paper is to demonstrate that humble backgrounds do not necessarily lead to mediocre careers, even when the

environment seems less than ideal for business success. We also hope to provide inspiration to others to strive for high levels of achievement no matter where in the world they may work.

Case Selection

The senior author recently had the privilege of teaching as a visiting professor a section of an Advanced Sales class to a group of highly talented undergraduate exchange students from China studying in the United States. One of the class projects was in the form of “Problem-Based Learning” (Marra et al., 2014). This project involved selecting a person who achieved extraordinary success within the field of sales, justifying that selection, writing a paper analyzing the career of the individual, and presenting the findings to the class. They could choose from a list of well-known sales superstars or “sales heroes” mostly from the United States but were very strongly encouraged to identify a person from their home country of China and to seek then instructor approval.

Prior to the beginning of the course, the instructor had searched extensively using many different search terms on various major U.S.-based search engines to identify the people in China who were thought of as sales superstars or sales heroes. It was thought that this might make the project more meaningful for these students who grew up in China. After almost a full week of futile searching, no one had been found.

The Chinese exchange students, on the other hand, had access to a wider variety of Chinese-based search engines and to Chinese media. Even more importantly, they were able to read Chinese (their primary language) in which much of that material is written. As a result, they were successful in finding some very worthy sales professionals in China who met the criteria for being classified as a sales superstar or as their sales hero.

Three of the more interesting sales superstars chosen from their home country by these excellent Chinese students and their findings are provided in this paper. This is not intended to be a random sampling of salespeople from China. In fact, it is a purposefully selective choice of what were considered the most interesting cases, primarily due to the extreme level of success along with access to information about these salespeople. In the social sciences, this is sometimes called deviant or extreme case study (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). While sweeping generalizations would be unwarranted, valuable insight can be gained from the study of these extreme case studies in qualitative studies. Here are some of the highlights of this research.

Case 1: Mingzhu Dong

Our first case is Chinese sales superstar Mingzhu Dong. She was the youngest of seven children born into a working-class family in Nanjing city, located in southeastern China. Her parents named her Mingzhu, a name which conveys the meaning of a shiny pearl. From that humble origin, they certainly never expected their daughter to grow up and be widely thought of royally as China’s: “Home Appliance Queen” (Ren, 2019), “Marketing Queen” (Tatlow, 2011), “Sales Queen” (Hongwen, 2017, p. 64), or as “The Sales Empress of China.” (Lanhee & Naville, 2008).

Mingzhu Dong graduated from Wuhu Institute of Technology, a vocational school, with a major in statistics. She considered a career in the military, but instead, after graduation, became a manager in a small chemical research center in her hometown. Life was ordinary and routine, the same as for millions of other Chinese traditional families. Mingzhu Dong married and then gave birth to a son. Life was good. But tragedy struck. Her husband got sick and died when she was only 30 years of age and her son was two years old. Without her husband’s source of income, the family

needed money to pay back loans for his medical expenses. This led to her decision to move and seek a higher paying job in Zhuhai, a city with some of China's biggest manufacturers which provided many employment opportunities, especially for young adults who could endure extremely hard work.

Figure 1 - Mingzhu Dong



In 1990, Mingzhu Dong, at age 36, transitioned to a sales job at Haili Electric (the former name of Gree Electric), which was a small, state-owned air conditioning company that only made air-conditioners. In addition, one must remember that selling was a new profession in China at that time (Hongwen, 2017, p. 31). Furthermore, only about one in 300 urban homes in China then had air conditioning, even fewer in rural areas. By 2010, in large part due to Dong, about half of the urban homes did (Financial Times, 2010). Compared with other females in the early 1990s in China, Mingzhu Dong was much braver, more decisive, confident and powerful. What's more, she was not afraid of any obstacle and pressure from supervisors. She never worried about making mistakes. As she has often said, "I don't make mistakes" (Ho, 2019).

What truly astonished all the people who worked there at the time was that she attempted to negotiate with a large organization and succeeded in making a deal worth 2 million Yuan in total revenue during her first year in sales. In 1992 Mingzhu Dong achieved a record 16 million Yuan annual sales while earning a 2% sales commission. She was then transferred to the Nanjing district to try and expand market share in that under-performing region. At the end of the next fiscal year, her sales surpassed 36 million Yuan, which was more than any other salesperson had achieved at Gree (Jie, 2018).

By 1994, the market had turned highly competitive and there was a plummeting of demand, mainly due to China's exploration of a more market-based economy, government regulatory changes, and social changes. Gree failed to sell all that they manufactured and had a severely overstocked inventory. Dong realized that under those conditions, upper management would expect even more from its salespeople.

When she was voted to become the new Gree head of sales in 1994 (Hongwen, 2017), Dong knew she must begin by building the brand and enhancing customer loyalty as well as promoting products. Mingzhu Dong built a professional sales team with only 23 elite salespeople in Gree, while comparably sized competitors had hundreds of salespeople, many of them mediocre at best. She started reforming the whole organizational structure, including management of the sales team, demanding better product quality from manufacturing, setting higher product standards, changing suppliers, and applying rational and scientific decision-making processes.

Mingzhu Dong proposed several new selling principles in 1995 when Gree built the first air filter factory seeking better quality control. She put forward the idea that sales revenue promotes quality and that sales also promotes the enterprise's growth and development (Jie, 2018). By this, she meant that sales generated revenues and that the profits coming from those increased revenues were the basis and the motivation for improving quality throughout the firm.

In 2001, Mingzhu Dong became the general manager of the company and Gree began to flourish under her leadership. In 2003, sales reached a record of 10 billion Yuan. Dong was named Gree president in 2007. Growth continued at a fast pace, and in 2018, Gree's annual revenue surpassed 200 billion Yuan (about US\$29 Billion), a 33.6% increase over 2017 (Xia, 2019). In 2019, Mingzhu Dong was the leading shareholder of Gree stock.

During 2010, "Sister Dong," as she was called at Gree, ranked 5th in the world by the *Financial Times* in their Women at the Top program in which the 50 most prominent businesswomen around the world are honored (Financial Times, 2010). In 2015, she was recognized as an "AACSB Influential Leader" (AACSB Influential Leaders, 2015). During 2019 Mingzhu Dong was also listed among China's Top Multinational Leaders by *Forbes* (Li, 2019), and she was ranked 44th by *Forbes* in their list of the world's Most Powerful Women (Forbes & McGrath, 2019).

Case 2: Hong Jian

Our second case is Chinese sales superstar Hong Jian. He was born in 1963 and studied hard during his early years. There is nothing unusual about that. Many people study hard, especially in China where education receives such a high priority. In 1980, he entered Wuhan University, a well-known university in China, as an economics major and studied a series of economic principles and applications. After graduation, he was assigned to work in the Guizhou Provincial Development and Reform Commission (Success Network, 2020a). In 1986, his passion for economics and finance led him to give up that job and go back to Wuhan University for graduate studies in finance and insurance.

Figure 2 – Hong Jian



Hong studied in graduate school until 1987. At that time, there was a substantial investment boom in China (Baidu, 2020). Hong's recently gained knowledge of economics and finance had improved his understanding of these financial markets and he decided to seek business opportunities in Hainan Province. He left graduate school and went to Hainan for employment. There, Hong worked for a variety of hotels, import and export companies, the mining industry, and with real estate companies. In these jobs, he accumulated management experience and, in 1992, founded his own real estate company as its CEO.

In 1992, Hainan's real estate boom was surging. Hong earned tens of millions of Yuan in that year by doing real estate speculation. The money came quickly, but it also left quickly. Due to a new government stipulation in 1997 that a bank's funds must not be used for real estate speculation and that the loans needed to be recovered, all of Hong's funds were invested in real estate speculation and, therefore, could not be repaid. His company could only be liquidated.

He was once a wealthy man, but now, almost overnight, he had become a poor man (Success Network, 2020a). Such a tragic turn of events, however, did not discourage him. Instead, it spurred Hong's interest in nontraditional business practices. That spirit supported his continuous climb and his upward progress which soon followed.

By chance, Hong, who now had nowhere to go but up, joined an insurance company and became a salesperson. It surprised many people when Hong began selling insurance. He had no experience nor training in sales. His education focused on the quantitative aspects of finance, not about marketing, persuasion, or sales.

Nevertheless, he passed the probationary period in only ten days and soon reached a premium level of more than 300,000 Yuan during his second month. In less than half a year, he sold enough to win almost all the company's sales awards (Success Network, 2020a). As he progressed in his career, however, continued success was not always easy.

At first, Hong, like most people, started his insurance sales career by visiting with prospects one at a time. On a pedestrian bridge in Shenzhen, he once tried to strike up a conversation with a woman about insurance. But he only got a short and powerful response from her when she called him "disgusting." He tried cold calling by setting a goal of knocking on the doors of eighty-six houses in one morning, but that day only one house would even open the door. In addition, the male owner of that house told his child, "In the future, if such uncles and aunts knock at the door, don't open it." Hong would also hold an umbrella for shoppers at the entrance of the mall on rainy days, hoping to gain an opportunity for a sales call, but that was almost always futile.

With an ever-increasing number of rejections, Hong realized that there was a problem with his sales practices for insurance. When a person like Hong has high sales targets, other sales techniques must be used. So, the goal must be established first: how much money you want to make should lead to the use of a sales method that can result in that level of income.

At the beginning of his sales career, Hong had been selling insurance to individuals. He was always looking for anyone willing to talk to him about insurance. Finding viable clients was like looking for a needle in a haystack. He gradually learned to target his insurance business to more wealthy people, such as entrepreneurs and managers of large companies.

Also, he understood that no matter what kind of person the customers are, they only care about *their* issues—not *yours*. Every sales conversation should take place from the customer's perspective rather than from the salesperson's perspective. It's never "my product is great." It's always "here's how I can help you."

Hong learned quickly and set specific stretch goals for himself. He became very successful. In 1998, Hong won the Young Professional Award from Shenzhen Financial Systems Department. Soon, he was qualified to participate in the 1998 World Chinese Life Insurance Conference and was awarded MDRT (Million Dollar Round Table) membership. Hong was the first MDRT member in mainland China. In 1999, he won the top spot in the nation of China by selling 17.45 million Yuan. In 1999, 2000, 2001, and 2002, he won the top membership of MDRT for four consecutive years (Insurance Experts, 2020). In 2001 and 2002, he was appointed by MDRT as the local chairman of

MDRT China.

Compared to his peers during that time, the reason why Hong was able to achieve such an exceptional level of success is not because of luck, but perhaps because of the following explanations. First, he received an excellent education. During his studies at Wuhan University, he learned about economics, finance, insurance, and consumer psychology, which enabled him to have a deeper understanding of the insurance industry.

Secondly, Hong's years of investment experience in Hainan, no matter whether it brought him profit or left him to face bankruptcy and liquidation, gave him the opportunity to accumulate a lot of relevant industry experience. It also honed his mind and helped him develop perseverance. That built character and supports him now in his career. Even though he is constantly encountering the potential to be rejected, he knows that he can always again start from scratch, renew his skill set, and achieve success.

Thirdly, his interest in new business opportunities and his courage to try new things led him to founding the first Ping An Jian Hong Source Club in the 1990s. The network continued to develop and effectively serves the needs of policyholders. He also founded a personal life insurance business website. He called it Life-First Life Insurance, and that website opened as a precursor of the online insurance business. Soon, he had received the first online order of Ping An insurance. To the best of our knowledge, this was the first online sale of life insurance in China ever. In just two months, the website was visited by more than 18,500 people, with as many as 2,900 daily visits (Success Network, 2020a). This was a small step for Hong as a salesperson but a significant step in the development of the online life insurance business of the future.

Finally, his precise interpretation of the insurance industry and customer service is an important part of his success. Some people asked him how he could make insurance so popular. Hong shared his secret of success: he tries to do his best to serve his own customers and create his own brand of customer service. In other words, he tries to cultivate a good relationship with customers. "Customers are in my heart" (Success Network, 2020a).

With that mantra, Hong injected a new concept into customer service. In 1999, Hong set up his own client club to provide benefits for his customers. His customer service covers a wide range of areas, such as the ability to purchase tickets or food, provides medical information, helps introduce policyholders to babysitters, moving companies, and even tutoring service providers. Hong said sincerely: "I have been thinking about doing something for them. I know all my successes are based on their concerns, support and help" (Success Network, 2020a, para. 13). The relationships established with customers have become increasingly deep, and these long-term customer relationships help Hong broaden the scope of his business, enabling it to become stronger and more stable. For these achievements and so many more, Hong has been called "The First Person in China's Insurance Marketing" (Success Network, 2020b).

Case 3: Lei Jun

Our third case is Chinese sales superstar Lei Jun, currently CEO of Xiaomi, a large cell phone company based in China. He has changed the Chinese market for cell phones in many ways. For example, the role of hundreds of salespeople in brick-and-mortar retail stores has been replaced with extensive use of social media in which video of Lei Jun is used to promote cell phones that can only be bought over the internet. Lei Ju became the sales voice and the visual image of the company. While competitor Samsung spent 5.4% on marketing, Xiaomi spends only 1 percent

(Einhorn & Larson, 2014). His sales innovations have been so profound that Jun Lei has been called the “Chinese Steve Jobs” (Montlake, 2012).

Figure 3 - Lei Jun



So, what made Lei Jun so successful? He was born in 1969 and entered Wuhan University in 1987. Lei was so smart that he earned a bachelor’s degree with a major in computer science in only two years instead of the expected four years (Einhorn & Larson, 2014). During this time, he worked in a variety of technology roles and obtained extensive experience in writing encryption software, anti-virus software, financial software, CAD software, Chinese system, and various practical gadgets. He also worked on circuit board design and did some soldering of circuit boards.

He started his first technology company during his second (and final) year of college to produce computer chips, Gundugoms. The firm’s goal was to make it easier to process data in Chinese, but it failed. There was already tough competition from Kingsoft and Lenovo when he entered the market, and his firm did not have enough capital to fight it out with wealthy competitors (Horwitz, 2018). Two years later, Lei Jun had become familiar with the leaders of various computer companies in the area. In fact, he had become a well-known figure in the Wuhan Electronic area.

Although Lei Jun’s first company failed, industry people recognized that Lei Jun was a genius. Of course, it also did not hurt that he worked 100 hours a week, too (Flannery, 2015). So, in 1992 Kingsoft, one of Gundugom’s former competitors hired him as an engineer. He rose through the ranks to CEO in 1998. While working there, during 2000, in his “spare time,” he founded another company on his own called Joyo.com, an online bookstore. He sold that firm to amazon in 2004 for US\$75 million. He left Kingsoft in 2007 under troubling and contentious circumstances to become an angel investor. Lei Jun created a unique way to differentiate among applicants for his capital. In fact, Jack Ma (later well known as the founder of Alibaba and now one of the world’s richest people) tried to borrow money from Lie Jun during that time.

In 2010, a phone called iPhone 4 was released by Apple and championed by Steve Jobs. Soon, people fell in love with the phone and Apple quickly became the most successful company in the world. At about the same time, a man called Lei Jun was starting a new cell phone company in China called Xiaomi (Dou, 2015). He had previously been serving as the CEO of Jinshan Software, a powerful company in China, but decided to establish his own company (Junyi, 2018). Although he had been a successful manager at Jinshan, he felt the need to jump out of his comfort zone, even though his family and friends thought it was a big mistake.

When Apple and Jobs were enjoying their early success, Jun Lei was still dealing with people’s doubts about his cell phone products at Xiaomi. His goal was to target an emerging class of Chinese consumers who wanted technology but could not yet afford top-of-the-line products (Vella, 2015).

He had a plan and was going to follow it.

When he started Xiaomi in 2010, Lei did three things which few others do prior to starting a company. First, he decided to use his team's software-creating ability to build a new operating system called miui. Second, he asked his team to create a relationship with those people who tried miui, then asked them what new functions and features they would like. This process tied the new company and its users even closer together to build a solid business foundation for their system and the smartphone they would release later. Thirdly, they conducted a survey about what Chinese consumers really wanted from a cell phone and how they planned to use it. These three actions enabled the new company to learn what consumers truly needed, and they then built a cell phone designed to provide those benefits for them. It was not too much, not too little, but just right.

After one year's preparation, the company released the Mi1. It was equipped with almost the very best hardware and was priced at only 1999 Chinese Yuan (about US\$300). Most people who saw that price tag were astonished. That was about half the price of other companies' cell phones at that time. Xiaomi also proudly announced their new system and Lei Jun was the spokesperson. During 2011 and 2012, sales levels for the Mi1 were phenomenal. Because of Xiaomi's pricing strategy, they also did not make any profits. But they sent a message to the entire phone industry that they can no longer price their products as they want. Xiaomi was a force to be reckoned with.

Xiaomi soon became a company that consumers loved, and competitors hated. Not long after this, Xiaomi even launched a device called the Xiaomi Redmi Note 2 at about half the price of the Mi1. Xiaomi had disrupted the entire mobile phone industry and accelerated the popularity of smartphones.

Now, Lei Jun has become a name known by nearly every young Chinese person. He has received many recognitions, including being named by *Forbes* magazine as Asia's Businessman of the Year (Flannery, 2015). As his success and recognition has grown, so has his personal wealth. He recently ranked 25th on *Forbes* list of China's wealthiest people (Flannery, 2020).

Xiaomi's success was due to its good quality, favorable consumer attitudes, and Lei Jun's incredible marketing and sales techniques. Here are some of those innovative sales and marketing methods.

Technique 1: Lei is someone who loves to talk with his customers, and he knows that his company needs to build long term relationships with them in a variety of ways. Consequently, he decided to become the voice of his company. Not only because he was the best sales representative of Xiaomi, but he also wanted to be the symbol of the young company.

Technique 2: Lei Jun changed the traditional way of selling cell phones or other electronic products which had been sold in retail stores. Companies like OPPO Mobile and Vivo preferred to use traditional face to face communication to attract consumers. By doing so, they had to hire a lot of employees and it was expensive to train and compensate them. On the other hand, Xiaomi's unique way to promote product was letting Lei Jun show their products on the internet and use his popularity and passion to win even more consumers. Lei Jun's personal show on live streaming platforms and at events held by Xiaomi let him be himself and he was much more effective than competitors' in-store sales employees.

Technique 3: after building their reputation through their operating system over the internet, they decided to have a launch event in Beijing and do a live stream video to promote the new cell phone system. Please realize that at that time, phone companies primarily used recorded tv commercials and other mass media to promote their products. The live stream was more like a real-

time face-to-face communication than those boring tv advertisements. As a new company, Xiaomi did not have any retail stores, so they decided to use the internet only as their selling channel and this had yet to be proved as a success. No matter whether you lived in a big city like Shanghai or in some suburban area, you could get a Xiaomi phone with a simple mouse click.

Technique 4: hunger marketing was used. Xiaomi always has experienced great sales performance since 2011, but this makes us forget that they are still a relatively young company. It doesn't yet have the strong muscle of BBK (formerly BuBuGao) or Huawei. Some people have criticized Xiaomi for being unable to fulfill the markets' demand. Others suggest that Lei Jun and his team invented a practice now called "hunger marketing" which means that planned scarcity makes a product even more desirable. Examples of hunger marketing include: (1) increasing desire for a product by making it available for only a limited time, (2) creating an expectation of selling out quickly, (3) providing price discounts but for only a limited time, or even (4) the short-time excitement created in the US for shopping on the day after the country celebrates the Thanksgiving holiday which is known as Black Friday. Each of these tactics is an application of the persuasion principle of scarcity. Interestingly, when one looks up hunger marketing on *Wikipedia*, there is a reference to Xiaomi as they sold out of the Mi Note 2 within only 50 seconds of its availability (Hunger Marketing, 2020). In addition, Xiaomi's first release of 100,000 Mi3 Smartphones sold out in only 86 seconds (Einhorn & Larson, 2014).

Technique 5: Lei Jun directly used a sheet to compare the specs of Xiaomi and competitors' phones at the launch event. He waited to reveal the price until the last minute and used that aspect of his presentation to build suspense.

Technique 6: in addition to the smartphone itself, Lei Jun knew that the operating system of the phone was very important when selecting a smartphone. Lei decided to let everyone freely use the miui system. Which means that even other brand's phone could also run on the miui system at no charge. This enabled a wider base of customers to become familiar with the system and they came to appreciate its advantages. As we know, Xiaomi's target customers were in their 20's or 30's and are more likely to try new things than older consumers.

Research Findings

These three brief biographies of sales heroes in China present much useful information for those of us not yet in the "superstar" category. While we must be cautious about trying to generalize too widely, are there some "golden threads" of knowledge that we can glean from these stories? By golden threads, we mean characteristics or behaviors which all three of the Chinese sales superstars have in common. Once identified, we can try to emulate those actions for our own personal use and improvement.

The first of these golden threads is working exceedingly long hours each week over an extended period of time. There seems to be no secret alternative or shortcut here. Lei Jun routinely works about 100 hours per week (Flannery, 2015) and Mingzhu Dong has not taken a vacation in nearly 30 years. As she says, "I can rest when I retire" (Tatlow, 2011).

Another central theme or golden thread of all the sales superstars profiled here is their complete devotion to the job and their company. Instead of working to earn a living, working is their life. Jian Hong "believes in life insurance" (Success Network, 2020a). To him, it is a calling, his way of serving others and helping them create a better life for themselves. For Mingzhu Dong, Gree is central to her life. In order to pursue her career at Gree, she let her mother do most of the work of raising

her son. Indeed, she has a calligraphy scroll hanging in her office that reads “Selflessly committed to Greece; Heroically conquering the business world” (Hongwen, 2017, p. 24). Clearly, there are sacrifices to be made in personal lives to achieve the kind of success demonstrated by these three superstars of sales.

All three Chinese sales superstars profiled here possess very high levels of intelligence. For example, Lei Jun completed his undergraduate studies in computer science at Wuhan University in only two years and has been described as a “genius” (Lahiri & Tang, 2018). Even as a child, Lei was called “the smart kid” by his neighbors (Jin, 2016). Mingzhu Dong has also been described as a genius (McDonald, 2011, p. 639).

All the Chinese sales superstars profiled here were willing to take risks. Jun Lei even started a technology firm called Gundugoms while he was in college. He thought if Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak could do it, so could he. Jian Hong dropped out of graduate school to become an entrepreneur and engaged in real estate speculation which is about as risky a business as there is. Mingzhu Dong left her family and moved away from home to take a commission only sales job for a firm that only sold air conditioners in a market where fewer than one percent of homes had them. All demonstrated a determined readiness to assume risks. Some of the adventures worked out, some did not.

That leads us to the final golden thread to be identified here. While all were willing to take multiple risks in their careers, all faced serious setbacks, indeed tragedies, in their lives and fought back with vigor to overcome those severe challenges. Mingzhu Dong had to subjugate the tragedy of becoming a widow and the necessity of providing for her family at a very early age in life. Lei Jun’s first company, Gundugoms, went bankrupt and he left Kingsoft amid controversy. Jian Hong lost a fortune in real estate speculation and went from great wealth to poverty in a matter of weeks. Nevertheless, all the salespeople profiled here overcame their challenges and became even more successful afterwards. We are not proposing that their later success was *because* of their earlier failures, but they certainly did not lose their courage to take new risks and to pursue new opportunities because of their previous setbacks.

Contributions to the Field

This paper makes an important first step in describing successful salespeople within the country of China. For many Americans, the notion of salespeople thriving in a communist country is unexpected - to say the least. The field of selling is so tied to the concepts of capitalism, free enterprise, and the economic freedom to succeed or fail based on your own efforts. Nevertheless, we portray three highly successful people who amassed great wealth through professional selling in China. This certainly offers an insight into the Chinese economy that some Americans will find surprising.

Beyond the shattering of these stereotypes, this paper advances the field of professional selling by offering insights into what led to high achievement across these three case studies of extreme sales success. These characteristics can now be tested empirically in large samples to examine how robust those characteristics are across different individuals in various markets.

These descriptions of three Chinese sales superstars also serve as important reminders that while each culture is different, the determinants of success could be surprisingly stable across cultures. As one reviews the conclusions of the study shown above, it is interesting to note that perhaps these factors which led to success in China could have occurred in many other countries

located anywhere in the world. Possibly we are not as different as we often believe ourselves to be.

The results of this study also provide evidence of the value of secondary research as a starting point in a field of study. It is often surprising to see how much useful information can be secured from these sources. When examined carefully with a purpose in mind, these materials provide vivid descriptions useful in the establishment of a base from which further empirical work can proceed.

Future Research Directions

We hope that this research will encourage others to study people who have experienced exceptional success. All too often, post-mortems are conducted on failures (Collier et al., 1996). While such examinations are useful, there is also much to be learned from success. For example, future research should examine high levels of success within other countries. Systematic studies in countries which are at various stages of development may offer insights. Perhaps a team of researchers can compare success stories in highly developed, developed, developing, and less developed countries then search for differences across these categories. Beyond stages of economic development, there would be value in examining sales success across populations based on the extent to which each economy was free of government involvement (Warnecke & De Ruyter, 2010).

Another avenue for future research is to examine success across high tech vs. low tech industries. In addition, there may be different reasons for success in high growth vs. low growth sectors of the economy. Furthermore, examining differences across goods versus service sectors may also bear important findings. There could also be differences by career stages. Entering a field of employment at a later age may pose additional and meaningful challenges (or opportunities) for mature workers.

Of course, there is also much value in comparing worker behaviors across a wide range of success levels with a goal of identifying opportunities for improving the performance of currently underperforming employees. Some of the research conducted within educational settings may have opportunity for application here as well. For example, the development of success coaches and the use of aggressive or intrusive career advising might move some marginal performers into higher performance categories.

While we believe there is much to be learned from examining these three sales heroes, we again caution about the tendency to overgeneralize. Instead, other leaders in a variety of industries and in other areas of the world should be studied with the goal of further identifying common themes and finding variations from those that are described here. Remember, as was mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the past can offer great insight into what the future holds. We can learn from it and attempt to emulate the practices of successful people who led the way for us.

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