

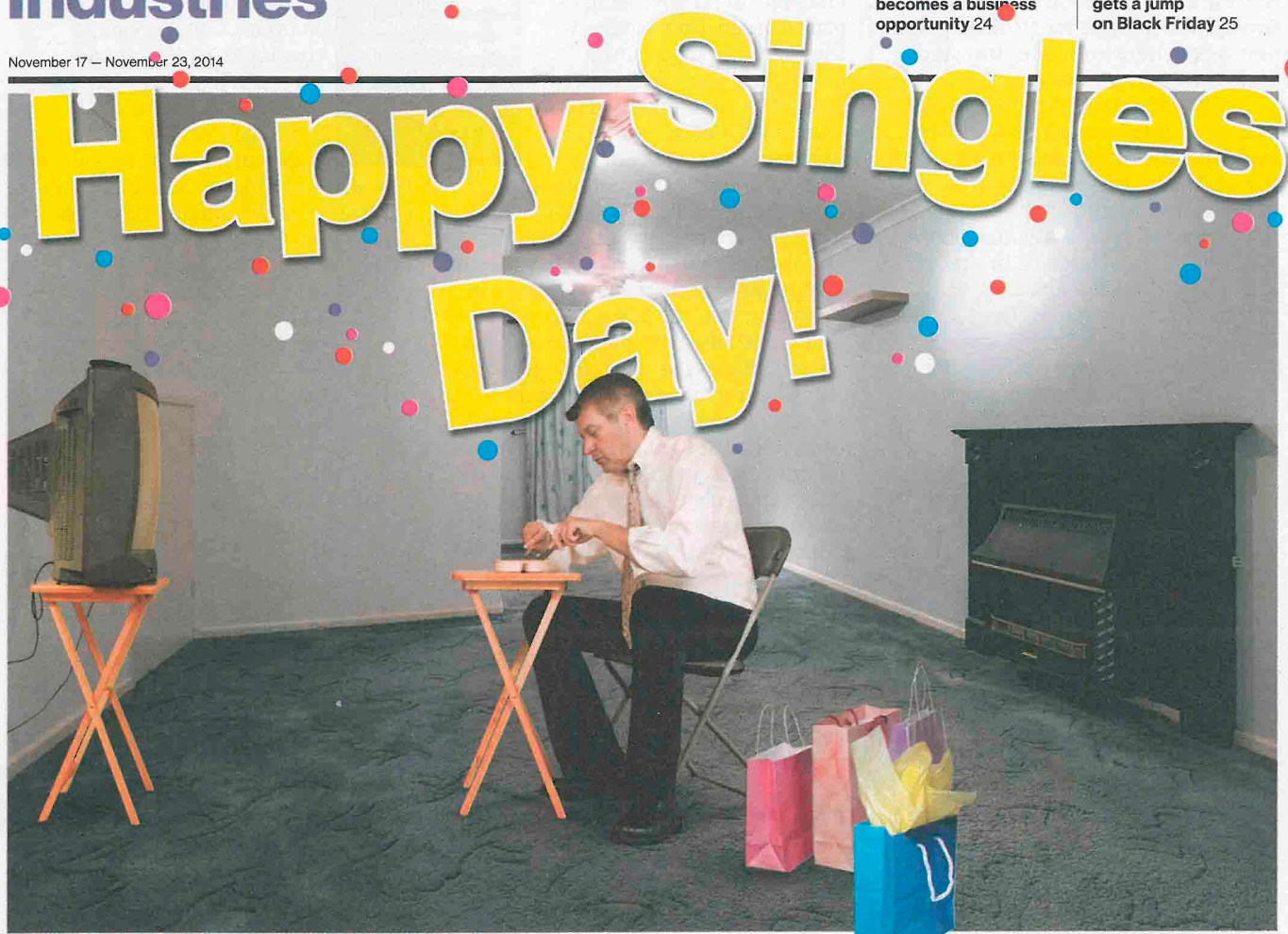
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Jeffrey Wu, a college student in Beijing, went online in the early morning hours of Nov. 11 to participate in a ritual of recent origin and immense popularity: bargain shopping on Singles Day in China. Wu bought Levi's jeans, Nike sneakers, and an espresso machine; his girlfriend picked out skin cream. "We're celebrating Singles Day as a couple," he jokes.

It's fair to assume that many of the millions of Chinese who purchased \$9.3 billion worth of discounted mobile phones, refrigerators, down jackets, hoodies, mixed nuts, Wagyu beef, stewpots, diapers, laundry detergent, and even silkworms in only 24 hours aren't single either. "The day doesn't have anything to do with singles anymore," says Bai Tiantin, who's in her 20s (and single). "It's just a shopping holiday."

That's an understatement. It's the

biggest online shopping holiday in the world, more than four times larger than America's Cyber Monday. Merchants had to offer at least a 50 percent discount to participate. Some 278 million Singles Day orders were placed this year, 43 percent via mobile devices. Alibaba says about 260 million packages will be delivered in the five days afterward.

"When you hear the biggest online shopping day in the world is Singles Day, you think, 'That must be coming to the U.S., then,'" says David Rogers, a branding expert who teaches digital marketing strategy at Columbia Business School. "Certainly you couldn't have the biggest thing out there without the U.S. involved, but that's actually already the case."

Alibaba Group, China's biggest e-commerce company, is to thank for that. And although there are

360 million online shoppers in China—more than the entire U.S. population—Alibaba would very much like to have America and lots of other countries involved in Singles Day, too. "We try to create a real global consumer day," Daniel Zhang, Alibaba's chief operating officer, said at a news conference as the countdown began at the company's headquarters in Hangzhou.

Sales during last year's "shopping festival," as Alibaba likes to call Singles Day, reached \$5.8 billion, so it didn't take much to persuade international companies to participate this time. Many opened virtual stores on Alibaba's Tmall site weeks before the holiday. **Costco, Juicy Couture, Uniqlo, Old Navy**, and jeweler **Blue Nile**, among others, all offered discounted items. "If you're not on Tmall, you're being remiss," says Nick Woodhouse, the

◀ president of **Authentic Brands Group**, which owns Juicy Couture (its best-selling item on Singles Day, and every day: velour track suits).

Could Singles Day come to the U.S.? Stranger things have happened. Cyber Monday, for example. In 2005 the National Retail Federation bestowed the name on the Monday after Thanksgiving. Now, Cyber Monday is a global “shopping festival,” too, bringing in a record \$2.1 billion in the U.S. alone last year. “Maybe retailers could promote Singles Day as celebrating yourself,” says Artemis Berry, the vice president for digital retail at the federation. “Another chance to indulge yourself. Why not?”

Still, it’s unlikely that Alibaba alone can bring its shopping frenzy to America, nor would competitors such as **Amazon.com** or **EBay** want it to. Among 3,500 U.S. online shoppers surveyed, 63 percent said they were unfamiliar with Alibaba, according to marketing consultant Connexity. “However strong it is in China, it’s unknown in the U.S.,” says John Quelch, a professor of business administration at Harvard Business School.

Popular lore in China has it that Singles Day began as a lark in the mid-1990s. University students created the holiday, which they called *guanggun jie*, or bare branches festival, and picked the date 11/11 for its visual symbolism. They used to go to karaoke bars, eat *youtiao*—fried dough strips that resemble the number 1—and celebrate being unmarried in a culture that doesn’t generally. Alibaba appropriated the idea and introduced the first Singles Day sale in 2009. Twenty-seven Chinese brands participated, selling \$8.1 million worth of goods. This year almost 27,000 merchants joined the sale, including 200 from 20 other countries. Alibaba set up servers and warehouses overseas for the

first time. Although customers placed orders from 217 countries this year, sales outside China likely weren’t significant. “The numbers could be quite small, because we’re in the beginning stage,” Zhang said. Alibaba has a 10-year plan for world domination. “I think with four more years of preparation, globalization should come naturally,” Jack Ma, the company’s chairman, told reporters in Hangzhou after the sale ended.

Some of Alibaba’s smaller rivals also offered Singles Day discounts. **JD.com** got attention for advertising apartments in Beijing and other cities that were valued at 1 million yuan (\$163,231) for only 111,111 yuan. Alibaba apparently didn’t appreciate the competition; the company has trademarked the name “Double Eleven.” JD.com is displeased but stopped using it. “Just because you trademark the name Benjamin Franklin doesn’t mean you have a monopoly on electricity,” says company spokesman Josh Gartner. JD.com extended the sale, starting it on Nov. 1. On Singles Day itself, the site received 14 million orders for various goods, more than double last year’s total. Almost 180,000 people put down deposits for the apartments, which will be sold by lottery.

At Alibaba, \$1 billion worth of goods were sold in the first 20 minutes after midnight. That figure was boosted by the company’s practice of advertising Singles Day prices during the past month; shoppers could put down deposits early to reserve items available in limited quantities and then pay in full on Singles Day. Alibaba said that four of the top five best-selling brands were Chinese: **Xiaomi**, **Haier**, **Huawei**, and furniture retailer **Linshimuye**. Xiaomi sold 720,000 phones, worth \$163 million, in the first 12 hours of the sale, according to Hugo Barra, the company’s vice president.

The other brand in the top five was Uniqlo, which is owned by **Fast Retailing**, the Japanese company that is Asia’s biggest apparel retailer. Uniqlo played by Alibaba’s rules, too. For 364 days a year, it sells clothes to Chinese consumers on Alibaba as well as on its own website. On Nov. 11, Uniqlo could sell only on Alibaba’s websites. It also had to offer discounts of

“Maybe retailers could promote Singles Day as celebrating yourself. Another chance to indulge yourself. Why not?”
—Artemis Berry

at least 50 percent and free shipping. Usually, Uniqlo customers have to spend 200 yuan to get free shipping. Blue Nile, a company in Seattle known for its diamond engagement rings, introduced

its website in China in 2012 but didn’t open shop on Tmall until the end of September. “Every e-commerce player in the U.S. took notice of 11/11 sales last year,” says Jon Sainsbury, the vice president of Blue Nile’s international business. “It’s a chance to be in front of 200 million shoppers.” Blue Nile sold lower-priced items for Singles Day, just as it does for Black Friday and Cyber Monday back home. “We worked to source products that we can be more aggressive on, items that we wouldn’t normally have on the site,” Sainsbury says. That included a small selection of diamond stud earrings and engagement rings and a bigger collection of jewelry without any diamonds. Blue Nile did offer a \$4 million, 20-carat diamond from Botswana. “Tmall was very excited about that,” he says. It didn’t sell.

With its big discounts and free shipping, Singles Day sounds perfect for American shoppers. Nov. 11, of course, is Veterans Day, and there are plenty of sales to mark the holiday already. This year, **Macy’s** offered 20 percent discounts; shoppers at **Neiman Marcus Last Call** and **Kohl’s** also got price-off deals.

So could retailers somehow combine Veterans Day with Singles Day? **Overstock.com** already has. Its website said, “Proud to Support Our Nation’s Veterans.” And then: “I ♥ Me. Singles Day 11.11 Take an extra 11% off 11 awesome deals.” Covering all its bases, Overstock.com also advertised its Black Friday sale.

If Nov. 11 seems too complicated a date, how about Jan. 11? That’s been designated National Singles Day by a small group of people in West Hollywood. Karen Reed, an entrepreneur who calls herself the director of National Singles Day, says she got the idea after hearing about Alibaba’s huge haul last year. She decided to organize a celebration on 1/11, which included music, dancing, a performance by a comedian, and discounts at local bars, restaurants, and shops. “Single is a huge category. More than half of American adults are single. This is for everyone.” Reed says she’d be thrilled if a national retailer or two got involved, and retailers might like the chance to sell holiday leftovers. She sent a note to Jeff Bezos, the chief executive officer of Amazon, about the possibility. So far, he hasn’t replied.
—Susan Berfield, with Bruce Einhorn, Christina Larson, and Lulu Chen

The bottom line Singles Day sales in China this year were more than four times those of Cyber Monday in the U.S. in 2013.



Alibaba says about 260 million packages will be delivered in the five days following the shopping fest