

Jack Ma: English teacher turned Internet billionaire

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After being knocked back by American venture capitalists in 1999, Jack Ma -- a cash-strapped entrepreneur -- convinced friends to give him \$60,000 to start Chinese online retailer Alibaba.com.

Thirteen years later, the company owns one of the world's biggest trading sites for small businesses and Ma, a former English teacher, is among the growing ranks of billionaires in China.

In 2005 he sold a 43 percent stake in Alibaba to Yahoo! for \$1 billion, but relations between the struggling US Internet pioneer and China's top e-commerce player have deteriorated in recent years.

On Monday, after more than a year of tedious negotiations, Yahoo! said it had agreed to sell its stake in Alibaba back to the company for at least \$7.1 billion.

Alibaba Group includes Alibaba.com and Taobao, China's largest online marketplace for consumers with more than 800 million product listings and 370 million registered users.

Ma, 47, gave up his university teaching job after discovering the Internet in 1995. That same year he launched his first Internet company -- an online directory for Chinese companies called China Pages.

"The first time I used the Internet, I touched on the keyboard and I find 'well, this is something I believe, it is something that is going to change

the world and change China'," Ma later told CNN.

Seeing an opportunity for small businesses to buy and sell their goods online, he later started Alibaba.com, initially running the company out of his apartment in the eastern city of Hangzhou.

David Wolf, Beijing-based chief executive of corporate advisory firm Wolf Group Asia, said Ma had proved an "impressive businessperson" in China with his ability to "understand how the winds are blowing both from the market and regulatory standpoint".

His success was evident when US auction site eBay decided to largely withdraw from China in 2006 after Alibaba's Taobao won the lion's share of the country's market, which now has more than half a billion Internet users.

Hong Kong-listed Alibaba.com now has a market capitalisation of more than HK\$66.7 billion (\$8.6 billion), and posted a net profit of 1.71 billion yuan (\$270 million) in 2011, up 16.6 percent over the previous year.

"The money we make is helping small businesses to survive," said Ma in a speech he gave last year at Stanford University in California.

"Before the history of the Internet, no company could help over 50 million SMEs (small and medium sized enterprises). Today we are trying, and I feel proud of that."

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