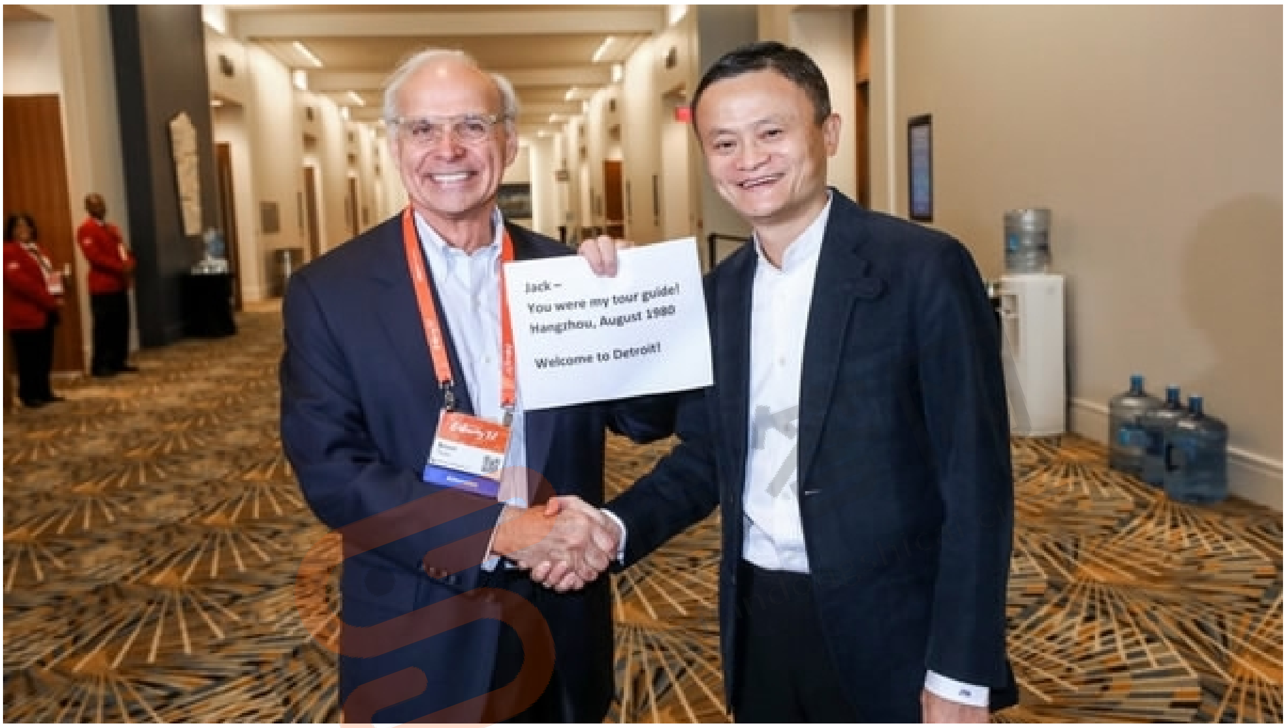
《这个美国律师为何坚持要在底特律见马云？》

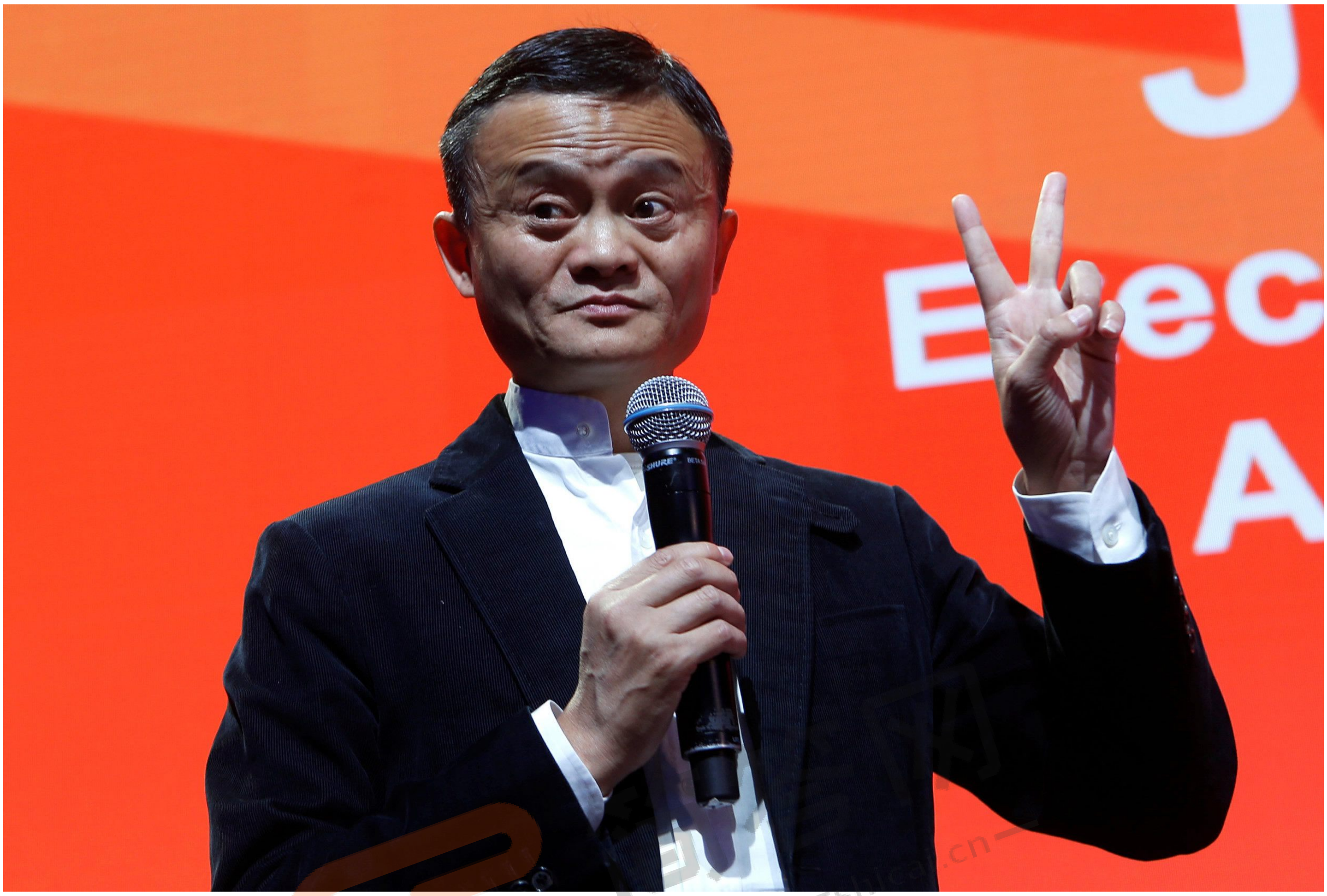


An unexpected encounter in Detroit this week brought Alibaba's founder and chairman Jack Ma back 37 years in time to his teenage days in the eastern Chinese city of Hangzhou.

The business magnet was visiting Detroit, Michigan, to attend the Gateway '17 conference, a two-day event organized by Alibaba to help US-based small- and medium-enterprises (SEMs) explore opportunities in China.

When Ma stepped off the stage after his opening remarks at the forum on Tuesday, he was informed that a lawyer was asking about him.

But the reason for the meeting was neither legal nor for business purposes: Bruce Thelen was seeking Ma to rekindle an old friendship.



Jack Ma at the Gateway '17 Conference. /VCG Photo

Thelen met Ma in the summer of 1980, when the tech Tsar was a 16-year-old boy showing foreigners around Hangzhou.

“Jack, you were my tour guide in Hangzhou, August 1980. Welcome to Detroit,” read a paper the 65-year-old held up, hoping to come across anyone who might lead him to Ma.

Jack Ma (R) and Bruce Thelen. /Ifeng News Photo

Ma did not hide his excitement to meet the familiar face from the past. Thelen was one of over 2,000 foreign visitors Ma befriended when he was taking up an unpaid job as a tour guide in Hangzhou, just to practice English.

Bruce said the rags-to-riches tale of the Chinese billionaire came as no surprise to him, as he knew from the very beginning that the charismatic teenager was unlike his peers.

“He was only 16, hovering around the hotel and looking for anyone appearing to speak English,” he said, “he didn’t ask for money, but to practice his English…he wanted to know what is going on in the world, his ambition and passion impressed me.”

Jack Ma and his partners who helped set up Alibaba. /VCG Photo

But maybe even Bruce did not have the least idea that the teenager's ambition would take him to the highest echelons of the tech sector.

In 1999, Jack Ma started China’s first online business-to-business marketplace site from his apartment. Three years ago, the company claimed a world record for the largest global Initial Public Offering (IPO) by raising 25 billion US dollars. Forbes’ May report said Ma is now the richest man on the Chinese mainland, with a net worth of 31.1 billion US dollars.

Jack Ma attends Alibaba's IPO in New York. /VCG Photo

The billionaire entrepreneur is now sharing the advice he gave himself with small businesses, in an effort to inspire them to go big by going online.

"Small business, you have nothing to lose," he told the 3,000 listeners who were in attendance at the event's opening.

"The only thing you have to lose is the opportunity. Lose the hope, lose the future".