China's E-Commerce: Empowering Rural Women?

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Abstract

This article employs a feminist political economy perspective to explore the connection between e-commerce, entrepreneurship and gender in rural China. It discusses gendered engagement with, and discourses of, the new digital economy represented by Taobao villages, and asks: how has the success of rural e-commerce impacted the evolving gender mandate and hierarchy in a competitive market economy in rural China? Has rural women's participation in digital economic activities changed their gendered roles and the patriarchal structure in their family and village? This article argues that women's socioeconomic enablement does not necessarily translate into cultural and political empowerment. The enabling potential of female entrepreneurship is tempered by traditional constraints on women and digital capitalist exploitation of their cheap, flexible and docile labour.

Keywords: gender; feminist political economy; Taobao villages; digital economy; courtyard economy; China

This article explores the connection between e-commerce, entrepreneurship and gender in rural China. It discusses gendered engagement with, and discourses of, China's rural e-commerce represented by Taobao villages (*Taobao cun* 淘宝村). Taobao.com is a customer to customer or C2C retail platform. Tmall is a business to customer or B2C retail platform. Both are owned by China's e-commerce giant, Alibaba. Taobao villages are those with at least ten per cent of their residents operating online stores, or with at least 100 active online stores opened by villagers and generating annual sales of at least ten million yuan (US$1.5 million), at Taobao or Tmall. This article asks: how has rural e-commerce impacted rural residents, who are the consumers, producers, operators and workers of the more than 200,000 active online stores at Taobao.com?[1] Has rural women's

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1 Alizila 2016.

© SOAS University of London, 2019 doi:10.1017/S0305741018001819 First published online 7 February 2019

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741018001819 Published online by Cambridge University Press

participation in digital economic activities changed their gendered roles and the patriarchal structure in their family and village?

It is common knowledge that innovation in information and communication technologies (ICT) and development in e-commerce have played a key role in poverty alleviation and socio-economic development in rural and less developed communities.[2] Under the universal access blueprint laid out by the Chinese state, even the traditional "information have-less" – people who have no or limited access to the internet and mobile phone communication[3] – are now able to access digital information and technology from their smart phones, internet cafés, community tele-centres, or computers and tablets in private and public places. More and more unlikely and "unimagined" internet users like women, farmers, unskilled rural-to-urban migrants and ethnic minorities have "caught up" with their educated, well-off, urban and male counterparts in accessing the internet and using it for communication, entertainment, information and even online shopping.[4] However, internal digital divide within villages and communities – based on social status, age, gender, occupation and one's migration experience – has seen digital empowerment unevenly distributed among rural residents in China.[5]

According to the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC), the urban-rural digital gap is still significant, with rural residents accounting for only 27.4 per cent of total internet users in China and with 33.1 per cent penetration rate (versus 69.1 per cent urban penetration rate) by the end of 2016.[6] The potential to reduce the urban-rural digital gap is promising. Rural residents have primarily used the internet and mobile phones to expand their social and entertainment networks.[7] Rural men and women are now using digital platforms to expand their economic networks, increase productivity and profitability, and improve their livelihood. E-commerce has expanded the range of employment opportunities for the "surplus" or "auxiliary" labour such as rural women. Many rural women have leveraged existing ICT resources to make strategic life choices and exercise their agency, despite the entrenched patriarchal power structure.[8]

The huge and under-cultivated rural market is now the new battlefield for China's e-commerce giants like Alibaba. As the world's leading e-commerce giant, Alibaba has spearheaded the expansion of e-commerce into rural areas. From 2014 Alibaba has vowed to invest over 10 billion yuan to build a comprehensive rural e-commerce ecosystem that spans from infrastructure (including

2 For example, Avgerou 2010; Boateng et al 2008.
3 Qiu 2009.
4 Oreglia 2013, 2014.
5 Guo and Chen 2011.
6 CNNIC 2017.
7 This is not to deny that even most mundane use of the internet and mobile phones, such as entertainment (reading e-novels and taking/sharing selfies) and communication (using QQ and WeChat) has its value for personal and economic development (Oreglia 2014).
8 Oreglia and Srinivasan 2016.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741018001819 Published online by Cambridge University Press

logistics, customer service and distribution centres) to technological and financial support, and training (especially for teenagers and young adults). Since their emergence in 2009 in Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces, the number of Taobao villages has continued to grow. Alibaba reported that by the end of 2016 there were 1,311 Taobao villages (an increase from 780 in 2015) and 135 clusters of Taobao villages (an increase from 71 in 2015) operating more than 11,000 super online shops (annual revenue over 1 million yuan) and creating 840,000 jobs.[9] Although Taobao villages are mostly concentrated in the eastern and south-eastern seaboard provinces, they have started to emerge in central and western provinces. Developing e-commerce in the western provinces is a strategic move for Alibaba in collaboration with local governments to meet the national 2020 strategy in poverty elimination.[10] Rural residents are mobilized as Taobao e-shop owners, operators, suppliers, designers, and providers of transport, logistics and customer services. The more internet-literate, entrepreneurial and ambitious young people have also been recruited as rural Taobao partners to run village-based Taobao service stations as a solution to the "last mile" problem for rural residents who would otherwise not be able to benefit from China's booming e-commerce.[11] Alibaba has already had 5,870 Taobao partners and aims to promote 200,000 Taobao partners in the next few years.[12]

The emergence of Taobao villages and Taobao partners has changed the perception of rural villages and villagers as lagging far behind in China's digital economy. Instead, they are active consumers and producers of e-commerce products and services. China's Taobao villages exemplify the community-driven approach in ICT-enabled development. The rural e-commerce ecosystem – from e-retailers, e-supply chain partners and third-party e-commerce service providers, to institutional supporters – developed from the bottom up via individual and grassroots initiatives. It thus empowers villagers to be agents of change through entrepreneurial practices.[13]

Existing literature on China's rural e-commerce in general and Taobao villages in particular has demonstrated a strong faith in the role of ICT toward community empowerment and social innovation.[14] It has moved away from simply discussing the issue of access in addressing various forms of digital divide to investigating the role of ICTs and e-commerce in rural economic and community development.[15] However, apart from the issue of access to the internet (and ICTs) and the use of e-commerce for social innovation and community

9 AliResearch 2017.
10 "Economic watch: how has e-commerce changed life in rural China?" Xinhuanet.com, 10 July 2017, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-07/10/c_136432492.htm. Accessed 10 August 2017.
11 The "last mile" refers to the final leg of telecommunication networks that deliver services to the end-users. In poor villages, internet network often stops at the village committee headquarters. Ordinary villagers do not have internet access.
12 Alizila 2016.
13 Leong et al. 2016.
14 For example, Yue et al. 2015; Sitoh, Pan and Cui 2014.
15 Cui and Pan 2016.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741018001819 Published online by Cambridge University Press

empowerment, there is a third level of enquiry that touches upon the fundamental value and culture of a society, especially when it is centred on gender.

This third level of enquiry examines people's engagement with e-commerce productive activities at the individual level for self-empowerment, social mobility and personal gratification. Demographic and socio-economic factors, which are often considered as key to the digital divide at the aggregate level, should be broken down into sub-categories. As one of the key predictors in discussing access to and engagement with ICTs and e-commerce, gender should also be broken down into sub-categories, as men and women of different ages and from different educational, family, socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds have different experiences in the digital enablement process. By "digital enablement" we refer to a developmental process of seeking solutions to complex social problems facilitated by digital technologies.[16] In this article we focus on the social inclusion/exclusion of rural women and the limits that gender imposes in the digital enablement process as exemplified by China's Taobao villages. We treat gender as integral to, rather than as an add-on category in, digital economic activities in rural China. We are less concerned about how many rural women have been included in China's e-commerce miracle (as consumers, producers and entrepreneurs), but focus on their gendered experience with ICTs and digital economy at the individual level as they negotiate their roles at the intersections of family, village and business.

Methodology

This research uses feminist political economy theory to guide project design and the collection and analysis of fieldwork data. A political economist takes a holistic approach to study social relations and the operation of power that underpins economic activities, including the production, distribution and consumption of material and communication resources. Unlike the usual economic approach that focuses on economic activities in a market system, a political economy approach is committed to the moral imperative to focus on the rights and responsibilities of individuals and communities when they interact with each other and with institutions. The moral imperative requires us to think about the idea of social justice and civil society in global capitalism,[17] and in the Chinese context to call for a greater role of social actors to ameliorate the negative impact of the market economy.[18]

The moral imperative of political economy prompts us to pay attention to the moral texture and implications in people's economic pursuit of wealth and power. Gender is a crucial dimension in problematizing the moral imperative of the political economy approach. Although gender is often equated with "women," it

16 Also see Yue et al. 2015.
17 Calabrese 2005.
18 Wang and Wang 2003.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741018001819 Published online by Cambridge University Press

should be viewed as an analytical tool and category to make visible the power relations and hierarchy in economic production and social reproduction. Feminist political economists and feminist economists have examined the implications of economic pursuits for the ethics of care, gender orders and gender positioning, not only between men and women but also among women; they have urged a "gender intersectionality" approach to examine structural hierarchies of class, caste, ethnicity/race and nation.[19] The gender intersectionality approach views gender as a social structure and institution, which is embedded in everyday life, social life and social organizations, just like politics and economics. It emphasizes human agency in choosing one's gendered paths, while acknowledging "the ability to choose is patterned by social structure."[20] Social structure is not static or rigid; it is in turn shaped and transformed by individuals. As this article demonstrates, women's entrepreneurial activities in rural e-commerce are conditioned by cultural norms and the patriarchal structure and at the same time can bring changes to gender politics in their family and village.

A feminist approach to political economy makes women and women's work empirically visible by adding gendered experiences to existing analytical frameworks in development studies and feminist economics. Moreover, it highlights the relevance of gender in economic redistribution and social systems, as an increasing amount of literature has critiqued the denigration of feminized labour (reproductive and care work as well as part-time, low-paid, flexible and informal jobs); the depoliticization of women's subordination in the family and workplace and their exclusion from equal access to resources and opportunities; and the structural bias and violence against women, especially when the society and economy are stressed.[21]

Guided by the feminist political economy approach, we take the position that statistics, such as female employment figures, the number of female micro-entrepreneurs, or the number of businesses started and/or owned by women, are insufficient to represent the value and relevance of women's roles and work in a digital economy. Adding gender/women to industry or market reports is the first step. We need to look into more crucial factors and dimensions to analyse the role of women as they move out of the domestic sphere into the business/production world. Gender politics is deeply imbedded in economic production and social reproduction with or without the internet.

We take a qualitative analysis based on 26 interviews – both small-group interviews and in-depth individual interviews – and multiple case studies through site visits and participant observations. These occurred over multiple fieldtrips to rural villages in the last five years, including an extended trip to three rural areas in Shandong Province and Jiangsu Province in June 2016. These rural sites include: Daiji 大集 in Shandong province (where we interviewed six couples

19 Peterson 2005; True 2010; Trauth 2013; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003; Rai 2013.
20 Risman 2004, 432.
21 For example, Cook, Roberts and Waylen 2000; McRobbie 2010; Gill 2014; True 2012.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741018001819 Published online by Cambridge University Press

who are Taobao store owners and operators in costume and garment manufacturing and sales); and in Jiangsu province, Shuyang 沭阳 (where we visited three family e-commerce businesses in gardening horticulture and conducted ten interviews) and Sihong 泗洪 (where we interviewed two partners of Taobao centres and two e-commerce entrepreneurs).

We channelled our conversations and interviews toward understanding the impact of rural e-commerce on women. We asked questions about the ownership, management and operation of online Taobao stores, and familial relationships and gender dynamics in running the Taobao business, with special attention to women's roles in carrying out their duties as daughters, wives, mothers and daughters-in-law. We sought responses from both men and women (often husbands and wives) to the same questions in order to attain gendered understandings and interpretations of women's work in China's rural e-commerce.

Gendered Enablement through E-commerce

This section examines the tangible (and positive) consequences of e-commerce for rural women, as articulated by women entrepreneurs themselves. The rapid spread of the internet and growth of e-commerce has prompted a radical change in the business world. Compared to the older generation of entrepreneurial women in the traditional bricks and mortar industries, rural female e-commerce entrepreneurs are younger, more resourceful and independent. They often play a key role in setting up family Taobao businesses from their courtyards, and employ and encourage other women to enter into the e-commerce businesses that were once considered the "outside" work and exclusive domain of men. Rural female e-commerce entrepreneurs have transformed domesticity into productivity and broken down the division between "inside" work and "outside" work. From their home and courtyards where their children play by their sides, they now sell to the whole country and aspire to sell their products to the world.

Most of the women that we interviewed are in their mid to late 20s (or early 30s) and married into their husbands' villages from outside (neighbouring villages or other provinces). Many of them have had experience as migrant workers in cities, and brought the experience, skills (including using standard Chinese to communicate via computer and the internet) and knowledge of city life with them, upon returning to their husbands' home villages to start their own Taobao stores.

Ms Zhou (in her 30s) from Daiji was a laid-off worker from a local township fabric factory and a full-time mother with no skills in agriculture, before starting her Taobao business in performance attire manufacture and sales in 2009 (Daiji is known for its costumes and performance attire industry). She experienced financial difficulties when her husband's job as a local electrician was the only source of income to supplement the meagre gain from growing crops on their land in the village. She also struggled to live with her parents-in-law, who complained about

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741018001819 Published online by Cambridge University Press

her "uselessness." Life was bleak, until Ms Zhou ventured to open a Taobao store in 2009 (when rural Taobao business started to boom and the first Taobao villages emerged) to sell costumes that she made at home, despite opposition from her husband and parents-in-law. It was an unexpected success. She now owns eight Taobao stores, operates 46 production workshops, and sells more than 300 types of costumes and performance attire.

Ms Zhou's life has changed since she became a Taobao micro-entrepreneur. Her success via Taobao.com has improved her relationship with her in-laws. Rather than complaining about her being "an extra mouth to feed," they now appreciate her business acumen and ability to improve their livelihood. They offer to help with house maintenance and care for their granddaughter. Ms Zhou's success has also changed her husband's life: he is no longer a rural electrician but the co-owner of their e-commerce business; he has recently been elected to be the Party secretary of the village committee. Ms Zhou has continued to run her Taobao stores and costume production and sales business, while her husband is now busy with village affairs. She has mobilized many young urban-to-rural returnees to start their own Taobao businesses, and given employment opportunities to women like her previous self: laid-off workers and left-behind wives.

In fact, it is not only left-behind wives, but also left-behind children and left-behind elderly that have benefited from rural e-commerce.[22] In the Taobao villages that we visited, people proudly announced that there was no left-behind population in their villages. Many women entrepreneurs took pride in the fact that they were not only successful in business but also in parenting, as they could stay close to their children rather than having to leave them behind with their grandparents.

Like Ms Zhou, Ms Zhao (also from Daiji, in her 20s) started her Taobao store to sell home-made performance attire for children at her own initiative and risk, in order to gain financial independence. She was joined by her husband a year later when he returned from working on a construction site in Qingdao to help her run the expanding business. She has turned the immobility as a left-behind mother with a young child into socio-economic mobility through e-commerce business. Ms Zhao and her husband run B2C as well as B2B business via Taobao and Tmall, and employ women with young children as sub-contractors and tailors for large orders, because she does "not want to see these women

22 It is estimated that in China more than 60 million children are left behind in the countryside. They are looked after by grandparents or have to live on their own, while their parents live and work elsewhere as rural-to-urban migrant workers. There is equally a high number of elderly people who are left behind by their adult children who live and work elsewhere. Women who choose not to follow their husbands as migrant workers are called left-behind wives, who get to see their husbands once a year. The left-behind population has been a perennial problem in China's industrial revolution. Problems such as depression, suicide, crime and delinquency are just some of the symptoms of much bigger and structural problems in China's urban-centred economic development.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741018001819 Published online by Cambridge University Press

become migrant workers, or their children left-behind children." When asked about her relationship with her in-laws, she laughed and said:

> We are too busy with the business to even have an argument with each other. We have too many things to discuss about business and making more money. It's the same with other families in our village. We used to have lots of time but little money. Now we rarely have time to visit each other or muck around anymore. In fact not only our relationship with our in-laws has improved, but also relationships among families in the village.

This was confirmed by women in other places we visited, such as Ms Jiang (in her 40s) from Shuyang and Ms He (in her 30s) from Sihong, who are the focus of discussion in the next section. Both are resourceful women who started their family Taobao businesses in horticulture and winter gear for scooter riders respectively. These women entrepreneurs take pride in their business and marketing initiatives that have brought financial independence and enabled them to be mothers to their children in presence, not absence.

Rural e-commerce has brought about tremendous benefit to men and women who are still labelled rural residents in China's household registration system.[23] Women's participation in e-commerce has proven to be the best route to overcome their economic and social subordination in the traditionally patriarchal and patrilineal family and village. Their e-commerce entrepreneurship has not only led to improvement in economic status and family relationships (particularly with the in-laws) but also provides a handy solution to social problems such as left-behind children that have plagued Chinese rural society for decades.

The rural female entrepreneurs that we interviewed all started their businesses in their homes and courtyards, and run their Taobao shops as family businesses, involving husbands, in-laws, aunties, uncles, nephews, nieces and other relatives. They work with women, especially mothers with young children, in their courtyard workshops as seamstresses, packagers and customer service staff. This configuration resembles the "courtyard economy" in the 1980s and 1990s, when women were encouraged to engage in income-earning economic activities such as handicrafts, livestock breeding and small-scale trade in the courtyard of the household.[24] E-commerce has revived the courtyard economy by expanding its impact and benefit through the online to offline or O2O model, from domestic consumption and limited market activities in the pre-digital era to medium-to-large scale commercial activities to target the urban consumers. The new digital courtyard economy has become an important if not main source of income for the whole family in the Taobao villages. From being known as "domestic sidelines" (*jiating fuye* 家庭副业) and courtyard economy (*tingyuan jingji* 庭院经济) or household economy to rural e-commerce and Taobao villages,

23 The household registration system (*hukou* 户口) in China segregates the rural and urban populations in geographical, social, economic and political terms. Under the system, some 700 to 800 million people are classified as rural residents and farmers and in effect treated as second-class citizens, without access to quality education, medical services, public facilities and other welfare that urban residents are entitled to. See Chan (2010) for a review of the *hukou* system in China.

24 Croll 1983, Chapter 4 "Socialist commodity production;" Judd 2002; Jacka (2013a).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741018001819 Published online by Cambridge University Press

rural household-based economic activities and commodity production have grown exponentially and formed an essential part of China's market-based digital economy, undertaken mostly by women in their family courtyards and homes.

Women are no longer passive collaborators but active agents in establishing courtyard-based e-commerce startups and advancing their own socio-economic status. Their husbands and local officials provide support and encouragement only after the e-commerce business has become viable and booming. Many of the women e-entrepreneurs have been rewarded by local governments with various titles (as role models), honours (lots of media exposure and presence at political or formal occasions), and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) membership. The internet and e-commerce boom has enabled them to solve familial and social problems that have emerged due to the draining of brains, labour and resources from the countryside in China's urban-centred development. What we have observed is a reverse migration as more and more young men have returned from cities as migrant workers to their home villages to join their wives to run Taobao businesses.

Low startup risks and costs, as well as the flexibility of work, autonomy and control over their time and labour, in running a Taobao online business, have enabled some rural women to enter the traditionally "masculine" world of business.[25] This is contrary to traditional entrepreneurial women, who are mostly older (in their 30s, 40s or even 50s) and started their businesses with their husbands.[26] These young rural women entrepreneurs have gained greater authority in the family as they become the main breadwinners and decision makers of the courtyard-based e-commerce business. ICT and e-commerce have opened up opportunities for rural female micro-entrepreneurs to communicate with the outside world, who are hence less compliant with the dictates of authorities in the family (parents, husbands and in-laws).

The success in e-commerce has empowered young women entrepreneurs in the Chinese countryside with agency and a voice of their own. We regard women's voice and their ability to express and command attention as essential to their sense of self. Women's power and ability to speak should be understood in the context of Chinese state-organized capitalism and postsocialist neoliberalism that encourages "docile, disciplined and cheap" labour.[27] The voices of women and their feminized counterparts (such as migrant workers) are somehow suppressed, and confined to the domestic sphere. Migrant and rural women, who are the most exploited and a stable supply of surplus labour, quite often feel inhibited from speaking. Their femininity is traditionally marked by their social dependency on male figures in the family who protect and represent them. *Neng*

25 Rural women tend to be much warier of cost and risk than their urban counterparts due to their limited resources. Therefore, with no establishment fee to open a Taobao store, e-commerce is particularly attractive to rural women.

26 Chen 2008.

27 Anagnost 1997, 6.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741018001819 Published online by Cambridge University Press

jianghua 能讲话 or *hui shuohua* 会说话 (both meaning "knowing how to talk") is often associated with masculinity, civility and urbanity.[28]

Contrary to the rural migrants who feel inhibited from expressing themselves in public,[29] in the Taobao villages that we visited, women entrepreneurs are articulate, especially those born in the 1980s and 1990s (the Generation Y). They have shown more willingness than the older women to talk about their experience, achievements, yearnings and aspirations. They are unashamed of their frustrations and dilemmas in quietly defying the patriarchal ideal of womanhood when starting their Taobao businesses. Their collective voice repels the perception that rural women are inefficient in "masculine" articulation and operation. Rather, rural female entrepreneurs have started to stamp their unique contribution to China's e-commerce boom with women's work, voice and agency.

Gendered Dis-enablement

The development of Taobao villages and rural e-commerce in general is based on the assumption that e-commerce will bring enormous benefits to rural residents, such as better economic status and narrowing the urban-rural divide in the digital economy. The above analysis has demonstrated that rural e-commerce can empower women entrepreneurs with agency and voice as active participants in profit-seeking activities. However, women's economic enablement does not necessarily translate into cultural and political empowerment. Their participation in village governance is limited and symbolic. Their involvement in the business world is conditioned on their domesticity and hence invisibility in the public sphere. At the same time, they are exploited for their cheap and flexible labour. Furthermore, even though rural women have the triple burden of the formal, informal and immaterial labour, their contribution to household finance (and national economy) is often devalued and trivialized by men. This is similar to the pre-e-commerce courtyard economy.[30]

Even though women are more visible in the public sphere as Party members and exemplar entrepreneurs, their representation does not translate into (actual) gender equality and gendered democracy. Scholarship on Chinese rural women has noted that the economic development or modernization paradigm since the 1980s has prioritized the masculine nature in village governance, which emphasizes the ability to engage in "outside" work and male bonding practices of heavy drinking, smoking and banqueting. Such a patriarchal culture of politics, combined with sexist attitudes toward women, has worked to keep political participation a male preserve; hence there has been a decline in women's representation in the leadership structure and participation in village governance, except in the area of family planning that is regarded as "women's work."[31]

28 Jacka 2006; Fu 2009.
29 Fu 2009.
30 Jacka 2013a.
31 Croll 1995; Howell 2006; Jacka and Sargeson 2015.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741018001819 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In the Taobao villages that we have visited, village affairs are still dominated by men who are mostly CCP members. Women are less likely to take on a leadership role in the political structure, although female entrepreneurs are happy to play an informal leadership role as role models when called upon by local authorities (such as local branches of All China Women's Federation) to share their experience and encourage more people to engage in e-commerce. The success of Ms Zhou from Daiji in selling performance costumes on Taobao.com, for example, has made her a CCP member and exemplar female entrepreneur. But it is her husband, the ex-electrician, who has experienced political empowerment through e-commerce by being elected to be the Party secretary of the village committee. None of the women entrepreneurs in our study has been involved in village governance or village committees. They share the view that, while a woman can domesticate and feminize Taobao.com, she should better leave political entities like village committees for men to run. "Going out in the public and the spotlight" (*pao tou lu mian* 抛头露面) is still viewed as unwomanly by rural residents.

Rural women's economic enablement through e-commerce has started to challenge the vicious cycle of their cultural and economic subordination, which has plagued rural women in China for centuries.[32] As argued earlier, rural women's engagement in e-commerce has opened up new space for economic enhancement and the opportunity to challenge conventional gender norms, such as women doing the "outside" work of trading commodities online. Such engagement is limited and mediated by the internet and men. The women entrepreneurs that we have talked to all expressed willingness to register their businesses under their husband's name, even though they play the dominant role in running the business. They are willing to be "hidden" in the public persona of their business and allow male figures (husbands, brothers, uncles and nephews) to engage directly with the "masculine" world of business in dealing with banks, government officials, suppliers, couriers and logistics companies. The following case of Ms He from Sihong (Jiangsu Province) is illustrative of how women's economic enablement through e-commerce has not overcome deeply entrenched gendered norms, and how women's lack of access to capital and social networks in turn reproduces female cultural and political inferiority.

Ms He uses her sewing skills to produce winter gear for scooter riders in China's chilly winter and successfully sells her handmade products on Taobao. She has also learnt the skills to run a successful e-commerce business with mass production of gear for scooter riders. However, she has chosen to refrain from venturing further into the masculine world of business, and has made her husband the sole legal representative of the family business. She has chosen to abide by the traditional division of labour, with men in charge of the "outside" affairs and women responsible for the "inside" work. Furthermore, like many

32 See Jacka (2013b) for an excellent discussion on rural women and development in China.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741018001819 Published online by Cambridge University Press

women that we have talked to, Ms He does not see it as a problem that she is not legally entitled to the family business or property.

Economic success has not enabled rural women to breach gendered roles and divisions of space that are so ingrained in the patriarchal, patrilineal and virilocal family and village structure in rural China. Following such traditions, rural women are mostly married out to neighbouring or far-away villages, where their entitlement to land and property is precarious,[33] and where they lack the social capital that is required to participate in village governance. The structural barriers and sexist norms against women are not eliminated with their economic empowerment. They are still expected to conform to traditional expectations of women being subordinate to their husbands and fulfilling their "inside" work.

Culturally and politically, Chinese rural women in general have not always benefited from the rural digital economy in the same way as their male counterparts. Furthermore, they have been unwittingly involved in the courtyard-economy-type Taobao workshops as a steady supply of cheap and flexible labour. It is true that rural e-commerce has created more opportunities for women to become micro-entrepreneurs or to earn a wage as casual or part-time labourers in productive activities. However, behind the successful stories or employment figures is the continued subjugation of women in traditional and patriarchal orders. Even more important is the cruel reality of capitalist exploitation of women and girls as cheap sources of labour in a poorly regulated digital economy of low pay, surplus labour and an insecure job market. This is illustrated by the cases of a 68-year-old woman working in a Taobao business in horticulture as a casual twig-sorter in Shuyang (Jiangsu Province), and a 14-year-old girl working in a costume/performance attire Taobao business as a customer service staff member in Daiji (Shandong Province).

The older woman enjoys the proximity and flexibility of the working space, the company of her female friends, and the time away from her husband, who is a horticulturist. Working as a casual in a horticulture workshop in the same village, the old woman can sign out, go home to cook her husband lunch, and come back to sign in again, as she is paid by the hour. She does not mind the low pay, but regards it as a bonus for fulfilling her wifely duties while giving herself a social space of her own. After fulfilling motherly and grandmotherly duties to raise their children and grandchildren, Chinese women often continue to contribute their surplus labour and value to the growth of the rural digital economy. Their contribution starts even before they reach adulthood, as in the case of a 14-year-old customer service girl in Daiji. We ran into her (still in her pyjamas) outside the washroom at almost 11am. The girl had had a late shift (12 noon to 12 midnight) the day before and was just getting ready for her next day's shift. She is from a neighbouring village, quit school after eighth grade, and started

33 The issue of women losing rights to land and property at marriage, divorce and widowhood has long been regarded as a major obstacle to achieving gender equality in rural China. See Liaw (2008), for example.

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working as a Taobao customer service representative six months before. The girl works seven days a week with only one day free per month, and earns 2,000 yuan or US$300 per month (with free boarding), which she sends to her family. She has a younger brother who is expected to attend university in the future, while her life is already arranged – getting married in two years and following the footsteps of her mother and grandmother.[34]

In the Taobao villages that we have visited, women and older men constitute the main workforce in manufacturing, packaging, customer service, book keeping, sewing and cleaning. They are paid either by the hour (in gardening and horticulture plants) or number of items (in costume production). Men are often out dealing with banks, logistics companies and suppliers. Their wives are in charge of managing the predominantly female workforce in their courtyards. The feminization of Taobao villages is obvious.

The feminization of Taobao villages seems to fit the rhetoric and hype surrounding the "she economy," or the role of women in driving economic growth as consumers and entrepreneurs.[35] Rural women's participation in e-commerce as micro-entrepreneurs and workers gives a false sense of gendered empowerment, as women are expected to not only conform to the gendered divisions of labour and space but also supply flexible, available, cheap and reliable labour for the expanding Taobao business. Unlike men who would come home from "outside" to put their feet up, women of all ages, including women entrepreneurs, experience no boundary or limit to their labour in the courtyard e-commerce business. It is common for our interviewees to deal with customers and process orders till midnight or the early hours of the morning. Not only do they constitute a steady supply of docile and flexible productive labour; they also generate surplus value through their reproductive labour, emotional maintenance and the domestic care economy as daughters, mothers, wives and daughters-in-law. In other words, the Taobao business has enabled women to fulfil their duties as caregivers while being productive workers in the rural e-commerce industry. As they transform domesticity into productivity and engage in economic productive work with their babies and young children lying or playing alongside, they are performing the "triple shifts" of productive, reproductive and care work at the same time. The boundaries between the private and the public, family and market, domesticity and productivity are blurred and reshaped by e-commerce, not necessarily all geared toward meeting women's desires and needs.

This lack of boundaries has pushed women into working overtime, on "three shifts," and into the precarious informal work that has sustained the growth of

34 We are told that girls marry early in rural villages, most between the ages of 16 and 18. When young couples register with the civil affairs office to be officially married at 22 for men and 20 for women, they are normally parents already. The traditional practice of early marriage, early motherhood, preference for boys over girls, and heterosexual patriarchal household still shape people's behaviours and set the boundaries. This has limited young women and girls' opportunities for education and skill acquisition for formal employment.

35 For example, Silverstein and Sayre 2009; Hu and Jiang 2017.

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Taobao villages and rural e-commerce in general. "Precarity" describes the limitation of gendered enablement in the production and consumption of cultural content and products, as women have to negotiate the space between agency/creativity and the power of policing/dominance.[36] Women's enablement through e-commerce is characterized by uncertainty, insecurity and unpredictability. This is consistent with a feminist critique of post-Fordist capitalism in glamorizing yet devalorizing the precarious, immaterial and affective labour of women and feminized men.[37]

While rural women make significant contributions to both the informal and care economy in the domestic sphere and the formal productive economy in e-commerce, their work and contribution is often devalued by men. The entrenched patriarchal structure of Chinese rural society has constrained women (including women entrepreneurs who "can talk") from publicly exercising their agency to define and justify their role in the "outside" work. This is illustrated by the following case of Ms Jiang from Shuyang (Jiangsu Province).

Ms Jiang, in her early 40s, is much older than other female micro-entrepreneurs in our study. She was a school teacher before quitting her job to run Taobao stores to sell bonsai plants cultivated by her husband. The Taobao business has become so successful that she has become a wholesaler as well as retailer of bonsai plants and other horticultural products, subcontracting orders to smaller business owners and fellow villagers. Ms Jiang runs several online stores at Taobao.com and Tmall.com, and deals with customers and contractors via online platforms and social media. She keeps her iPhone at hand all the time so that she can respond to enquiries in a timely manner and often until midnight. Ms Jiang has been given many honours like Exemplary Women Entrepreneur by the local branch of All China Women's Federation. She is highly regarded by the local community for her generosity in helping others to start up e-commerce businesses.

Despite her extraordinary achievement, Ms Jiang is viewed in her husband's eyes as doing the "inside" and low-value feminine work. When solicited for his opinion on his wife's role in the family Taobao business, the husband acknowledged Ms Jiang's contribution, but at the same time dismissed it with the comment: "Without me and my skills, she would not be able to do anything or go anywhere." Apart from crafting bonsai, he is in charge of the "outside" work such as ordering materials and engaging in business negotiations with lenders, suppliers, wholesalers, couriers and government officials. His contribution, in his own view, forms the backbone of the family bonsai business. Ms Jiang did not contest this view.

36 Liao 2017.

37 For example, McRobbie 2010; Gill 2014. Post-Fordism or post-Fordist capitalism is used to describe the flexible and decentralized specialization in production, labour process and work organization, often associated with information technologies and feminization of the work force. See Amin (1994) for debates on its interpretations, models and impacts.

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Ms Jiang's experience is typical of rural women, whose access to digital technology and participation in the e-commerce industry has not overcome gender essentialization and gender inequality. The devalorization of women's work is not contested (at least in public) because it is consistent with the masculine discourse in China's pursuit of wealth and power. The masculine discourse has continued to trivialize female roles and their contribution to the growth of China's digital economy. It has continued to equate China's Taobao villages with "He" rather than "She." While rural women can be empowered through their entrepreneurship and labour in the growth of China's Taobao villages, its enabling potential is tempered by the masculine differential valorization of work, space and power. Rural women face similar challenges as their marginalized counterparts (migrant workers, ethnic minorities, sexual minorities and disabled people) in negotiating the space between individual agency and social structure.

Conclusion

Ellen Judd once commented that "there is no differentiating feature of Chinese life that is more profound, continuing and asymmetrical than gender."[38] We concur with this view and emphasize that the restructuring of Chinese economy and reconfiguration of state-society-market power structure draw immanent force in the politics of gender. This article has made women, women's work and feminized labour empirically visible in the discussion of Taobao villages and rural e-commerce in China. It has discussed the inclusion of rural women as micro-entrepreneurs and productive labour force in the courtyard-based rural e-commerce; their socio-economic enablement as well as its precarity in cultural and political terms. Underpinned by the feminist political economy approach, this article has de-mythologized and de-glorified the discourse around "she" commerce by exposing the cultural and structural hierarchies that disenable rural women (and feminized others) from translating their economic capital into political empowerment.

The feminist political economy approach calls for an investigation of the intersectionality in structural hierarchies and stratifications such as class and age/generation as well as gender. It urges us to question the validity of the representation and inclusion of women and feminized others in socio-economic activities. This approach asks us to pay attention to the "effect" (how people's lives have changed) as well as "affect" (how people feel about and respond to these changes) of economic opportunities. It enables us to not only examine the inclusion of women and other disadvantaged groups of people, such as people with a disability and the elderly, in rural e-commerce activities in the Chinese context; it also guides our analysis of how power operates within the village, family and family business (in the current discussion, Taobao stores and partners). The feminist

38 Judd 1994, 257.

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political economy perspective pays attention to subaltern voices and views, and takes feminized identities, practices and agency seriously. This article hence is less concerned with the internet than the "outernet" – "the network of social, cultural and economic relationships that crisscrosses and exceeds the Internet"[39] – and how the latter conditions and channels the flow of money, power and knowledge.

We have argued that the growth of female Taobao storeowners and operators in rural China is symbolic of the feminization of the Chinese e-commerce industry. E-commerce has enabled rural women to participate in productive activities and enjoy the freedom and flexibility to manage their own working time, space and pace.[40] According to a report on female entrepreneurs released by AliResearch, the growth of female entrepreneurs is clear: more than 50 per cent of Taobao stores are founded by women (in contrast to 3.6 per cent in traditional industries); more female entrepreneurs have ventured into the so-called "he-sectors" such as digital products and furniture from the "she-industries" such as garments and beauty products.[41]

Such an urban-based "she economy" celebrates consumerism, entrepreneurship and innovation. Women are valorized and devalorized at the same time, as *wanghong* 网红 (internet celebrities),[42] fashion influencers or fashionistas,[43] *daigou* 代购 (personal shoppers and resellers of foreign products),[44] or *duoshoudang* 剁手党 (budget online shoppers). The story of their rural sisters is often subsumed in the celebration of Taobao villages by Alibaba or the poverty-alleviation-through-e-commerce discourse of the party-state. The participation of rural women in China's e-commerce boom is not only gender specific but also laden with cultural codes imbricated in the discourses of class and rurality.

The issue therefore is not that rural women are excluded in the Chinese e-commerce boom. Rather, most of them have been incorporated into the growing e-commerce industry in exploitative ways as cheap, underpaid, unpaid and devalorized labour. Compared with urban women, rural women are more confined by traditional patriarchal codes of self-sacrifice, domesticity and subordination. The women we talked to – successful entrepreneurs and low-end production workers in Taobao villages – all mentioned their subordination to patriarchal figures in their family (at least in appearance); their nonmaterial, reproductive, and caring labour within their households toward both the young and the old; and the sacrifice they have to make at the cost of their own desire and agency to maintain the established power structure of the family and the village. Women are under

39 Terranova 2000, 34.
40 Xu 2016.
41 AliResearch 2015.
42 CBNData 2016.
43 Liao 2017; Li 2017.
44 Zhang 2017.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741018001819 Published online by Cambridge University Press

greater pressure than men to withdraw or quit from the business and productive world, especially when facing familial difficulties, social bias or economic stress.

We have also argued that women's employment opportunities and economic enablement do not necessarily translate into cultural and political enablement. Their entrepreneurial and consumer citizenship, which is encouraged by the state and the market, has not posed any serious challenge to the patriarchal gender norms that have resurged in the reform era.[45] Digital communication and e-commerce has bestowed rural women with the "immobile mobility" to "surpass[ing] spatial, temporal, physical, and structural boundaries."[46] Similar to the experience of the *dagongmei* 打工妹 (female rural-to-urban migrant workers), such immobile mobility "can be liberating and constraining, creating new opportunities for empowerment and disempowerment."[47] It testifies to women's precarious potentiality in pursuing social mobility through entrepreneurship.[48] After all, women's entrepreneurship is not just about the role of entrepreneurship but also about "women's position in that society."[49]

This article concurs with the view that "research into e-commerce should include not only economic and technological aspects, but also social aspects and their consequences."[50] Gender is used as an index to examine the impact of rural e-commerce on existing power structures that define and govern people's behaviours in the Chinese countryside. Although we are critical of the role of e-commerce in transforming rural women's lives, we can see a glimmer of hope in the younger generation of female entrepreneurs as they quietly challenge the masculine order of things through their own voice and agency. The findings of this study are emblematic of subtle but important social changes that are underway in the world's biggest e-commerce market.

Acknowledgement

We thank Professor Shan L. Pan from the University of New South Wales, Sydney, for his help in facilitating this research, and the women who welcomed us to their villages and homes and shared their stories with us.

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45 Wang 2000.
46 Wallis 2013, 6–7.
47 Ibid.
48 Liao 2016.
49 Véras 2015, 60.
50 Janson and Cecez-Kecmanovic 2005, 312.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741018001819 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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摘要: 本文采用女性主义政治经济学的视角，分析了中国农村社会中电子商务、企业家精神和性别之间的联系。我们探讨了以淘宝村为代表的新兴数字经济中，女性的参与程度和话语权。文章围绕以下问题展开讨论：（1）农村电子商务的发展和成功如何影响女性在市场经济中的作用和地位？（2）农村妇女积极参与数字经济活动，这能否改变她们在家庭中的地位，并撼动中国农村的父权制结构？本文认为，妇女在社会经济上的赋能并不必然会带来文化与政治上的赋权；通过农村电子商务而产生出来的女性企业家精神，受制于传统结构中对女性的限制，女性同时沦为受数字资本剥削的廉价、灵活且温顺的劳动力。

关键词: 性别; 女性主义政治经济学; 淘宝村; 数字经济; 庭院经济; 中国

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