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Return migration, online entrepreneurship and gender performance in the Chinese '*Taobao* families'

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Abstract: *This paper centres on analysing how return migrants' participation in online businesses impacts marital power dynamics in rural families alongside the rise of e-commerce in rural China. During 2016 and 2017, I conducted an ethnographic study in a Chinese 'Taobao village' which I have termed 'Xinyi' whereby the majority of villagers make their livelihoods by selling furniture via the online marketplace Taobao. The boom of e-commerce has attracted many migrants to return to the village and start their online businesses. Inquiring into whether and how rural women's increased access to online entrepreneurship challenges the gender norm that upholds male dominance in marriage, I delineate the power relations in 'Taobao families' within which rural women jointly operate online shops with their husbands. Drawing from my ethnographic data, I propose a conceptual framework incorporating the lenses of returnee entrepreneurship, flexible inner-outer boundary and performance of gender to examine discrepancies between the gender norm that upholds gender hierarchy, and the practice regarding the husbands and wives' equal engagements in online merchandising. This framework is developed to shed a more positive light on the nuances of women's exercise of agency that entails nominal conformity to the gender norm.*

Keywords: *China, e-commerce, gender, migrant returnees, return entrepreneurship*

Introduction

In the last decade, many Asian countries have experienced the diffusion of the Internet and media technologies. The rapid growth of accessibility of mobile phone technologies, mobile data and domestic and transnational e-commerce market in East Asian countries are exemplary cases to show such a trend (Westland and So, 2009; Alibaba Group, 2015; Ma *et al*., 2016). In particular, since 2013 China has overtaken the United States becoming the global largest e-commerce market (Ma *et al*., 2016:6). Although there are ample studies centred on accounting for the rapid growth of e-commerce in China (Lu *et al*., 2015; Ma *et al*., 2016; Li, 2017; Couture *et al*., 2018), there has not been adequate scholarly attention given to whether and how the boom of e-commerce has reshaped gender norms and gender relations (Yu and Cui, 2019).

This paper aims to shed new light on the relationship between returnee entrepreneurship and marital power dynamics in the rural families by looking into a 'Taobao village' in China. In such a village, migrant returnees play a crucial role in developing the e-tailing industry by transferring the idea and skills of selling goods online from the cities to the countryside (Koo and Liu, 2015; Lu *et al*., 2015). I suggest that this a new form of returnee entrepreneurship (Murphy, 1999, 2000) which is built on the boom of rural e-tailing industry. To contribute to the scholarship on family and migration in East Asia, this paper serves to facilitate scholarly understanding of the interplay between return migration, reconfigured family ties and related dynamics in the digital era. It captures both individual agency and the rural family's ability to adapt to broader socio-economic changes in the context of return migration and the boom of rural e-commerce in a Chinese Taobao village.

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The Taobao platform established by Alibaba Group has replaced 'eBay' becoming the most popular online marketplace in China since 2005 (Westland and So, 2009:173). Since 2008 the scale of e-commerce has considerably expanded in China's rural areas; the flourishing of 'Taobao villages' across rural China takes place in such a context. Coined by Ali-Research Centre affiliated to Alibaba Group in 2009, the term of 'Taobao village' denotes an administrative village whereby more than 10% of the population engage in online businesses via the Taobao platform, and the annual transaction of the village exceeds RMB ten million (Li, 2014). According to the surveys conducted in subsequent years by Ali-Research Centre, since 2016 the number of Taobao villages has exceeded over a thousand. In these Taobao villages, selling agricultural products or light industrial products has become the main livelihoods for a high number of rural families.

This research is conducted to extend the scholarship on migration, return migration and female agency in China (Murphy, 2002, 2004; Ge *et al*., 2011; Zhang, 2013). The issue of how female migrants and female migrant returnees exercise marital power in their marital families remains rarely explored. To fill this research gap, I analyse marital power dynamics in these 'Taobao families' within which young women operate online shops with their husbands as joint owners. Specifically, this paper addresses the research question as to whether and how rural women's increased access to the Internet-based returnee entrepreneurship has challenged the gender norm that upholds men's prescribed position as family heads in the Chinese patrilineal-patrilocal family. I focus on exploring the possible changes and continuities of the gender norm of 'men dominate the outside and women dominate the inside' (*nanzhuwai, nuzhunei*) which underpins men's status as family heads in the public sphere with the advent of the couple-run online businesses. To address my research inquiry, I draw from ethnographic data collected in a Chinese Taobao village recently experiencing the transition from the industrial economy to a digital economy initiated by migrant returnees. With the development of e-commerce, young women are granted wider access to entrepreneurial opportunities, like their male counterparts. During 2016 and 2017, I conducted fieldwork in a Taobao village, which I have termed 'Xinyi', in southern China.

In what follows, first, I show how this study can fill the research gap in literature focusing on migration, return migration and female agency in China. Then, I present the conceptual framework incorporating the lenses of returnee entrepreneurship, flexible inner-outer boundary and performance of gender. It is followed by elucidating processes of collecting and analysing ethnographic data. After delineating these findings and analyses of this paper, I conclude by encapsulating the empirical and conceptual implications of researching the marital power dynamics of Taobao families.

The study of how migration and return migration affect rural women's position of power

This research studies both female/male migrant returnees and their spouses within a Taobao village. The existed literature has shown inconclusive findings as to how migration and return migration have impacted women's position of power in rural families. On one hand, it is demonstrated that migratory experiences enable an increase in women returnees' bargaining power with respect to the demand to reduce agricultural workloads and to pursue personal aims such as resuming education and starting businesses (Fan, 2004; Murphy, 2004). Nevertheless, Murphy (2004:271–272) notes that the bargaining power held by women returnees could be mitigated by social norms in these women's natal or marital communities that uphold gender and generational order.

On the other hand, other research documents how female rural migrants have encountered difficulties of adapting to the native communities or marital villages after they return to the countryside because of the significant gap of gender norms and lifestyles between the rural and urban areas (Murphy, 2002;Ge *et al*., 2011; Zhang, 2013). It is argued that that these women encounter more constraints in terms of socialising with male non-kin members because developing friendships with men is considered disgraceful for married rural women (Murphy, 2002; Ge *et al*., 2011; Zhang, 2013).

Moreover, similar to other rural women without migratory experiences, albeit their increased socio-economic capitals through migration, female migrant returnees are expected to participate in decision-making in village public matters through 'backstage' activities, rather than via open and direct engagements (Ge *et al*., 2011; Zhang, 2013). For instance, Ge *et al*. (2011) reveal that migration experiences of women returnees cannot be translated to substantial resources used into bargaining with senior clan members when it comes to fighting for their household welfare, which is undermined during migrating outwards.

My findings in the Taobao village are consistent with Ge *et al*.'s (2011) research as regards how women returnees are expected to participate in the decision-making of public affairs through informal channels. However, I also found that many female online sellers in the Taobao village were able to exercise power in interacting with their husbands in the private sphere explicitly and effectively. Among the studies of migration, return migration and women's position of power in rural China, the issue of how female migrants and female migrant returnees exercise power in their marital families in the countryside has not received adequate scholarly attention. In addition, Ge *et al*. (2011) suggest that female returnees' acts of drawing bargaining power from their roles in the kinship line of their marital families reinforce patriarchy. I will contest this view based on my findings because it fails to tease out the nuances and complexities of women's tacit, or indeed, tactical form of agency.

With a view to highlighting more positive and nuanced aspects of women's agency, I suggest deploying the conceptual lenses of flexible inner-outer boundary and gender performance to tease out the complex power relations between female online sellers and their marital families in the Taobao village, and their relationship to the boom of returnee entrepreneurship (Murphy, 1999, 2000). Drawing on these concepts, I aim to highlight that the subject positions of the male controlling role vis-a-vis female subordinate are not as rigid as the previous studies of female rural migrants and returnees theorise. Rather, interpersonal power and efficacy derived from these subject positions could be varied, depending on the context, and thereby allow individuals to exercise agency.

Returnee entrepreneurship, flexible inner-outer boundary and performance of gender

Drawing from the ethnographic findings, this article aims to shed fresh light on the study of family and migration by grounding analyses of the findings on the intersection of returnee entrepreneurship and gendered entrepreneurship. I will not only vividly reveal the lived experiences of the female online sellers who used to be migrants, but also their power relations with their husbands by unpacking their day-to-day interactions in undertaking work activities and in maintaining the household upkeep. Echoing Choi and Peng (2016:12), this study pays equal attention to male migrant returnees and male marriage migrants in the Taobao village. Building upon the scholarship on returnee entrepreneurship and rural female entrepreneurs (Murphy, 1999, 2000, 2004; Song, 2017; Yu and Cui, 2019), I will elucidate how returnee entrepreneurship develops hand in hand with the rise of rural e-commerce, as well as how and why female online sellers are able to exercise decision-making power in various business matters in such an Internet-facilitated entrepreneurial setting. Related to this, I will also delve into how the female online sellers' increased decision-making power is influenced by the division of labour in work activities in running online businesses with their spouses. Lastly, I am also interested in exploring how the female online sellers and their husbands negotiate their gender roles in relation to gender norms in working at home-based offices in the countryside as opposed to working in factories or shops in cities.

In this study, gender is conceptualised as norms that denote a set of behavioural prescriptions, which men and women are expected to fulfil respectively in order to be accepted to a given social community (Harris, 2004:15). In the context of Chinese family, the expression of 'men dominate the outside and women dominate the inside (*nanzhuwai/nuzhunei*)' encapsulates a long-standing gender norm that underpinned men and women's gender role prescriptions and gave cultural meanings

associated with gender hierarchy to activities undertaken in the public and private sphere (Jacka, 1997; Rofel, 1997; Evans, 2008; Liu, 2016; Song, 2017). In a patriarchal family before 1949, the norm of *nanzhuwai* and *nuzhunei* also correlated with differential position of power ascribed to family members of different gender and age. More importantly, the gender hierarchy embedded in the boundary between the inner and outer sphere is not indestructible. As Evans (2008:101) suggests, the cultural meanings and practices associated with this inner-outer boundary have shifted alongside wider political and socio-economic changes in China from the early twentieth century onwards. In the Mao-era, women were mobilised into social production, which was in marked contrast with how women's engagement with outer activities had not been considered as work before 1949 (Rofel, 1997, cited in Evans, 2008:103). Nevertheless, gender inequality embedded in the private sphere in the form of gender division of labour in housework and care duties was never addressed by socialist campaigns (Evans, 2008:104; Hershatter, 2007:62). As Evans (2008:104) notes, *'the idea that women's liberation lay in female participation in the public sphere excluded attention to the production of gender inequalities in the inner sphere of the family and domestic life.'*

Since the reform era, women's domestic-oriented roles as virtuous wives and dutiful mothers have been portrayed and widely represented in the official press and commercial magazines (Wallis, 2006:98). This is an indication that '*the inner sphere was re-celebrated as women's natural domain*' (Evans, 2008:104). This development can be explained by the Party-state's withdrawal from the provider of public welfare (Evans, 2008:102), and a collective response to the highly supressed feminine traits under the image of androgyny during the Mao-era (Wallis, 2006:98).

Even though women's engagements in wage earning have been highly promoted since the Party-state under Mao, the reconfigured norm of *nanzhuwai* and *nuzhunei* still informs some gender practices in China today. This is especially the case as to how men are still considered as breadwinners in dual earner families and how women are still expected to live up to femininity through caregiving and homemaking (Zuo and Bian, 2001; Evans, 2002, 2008; Zuo, 2003).

In the late Reform period featured in the dissemination of Internet-based technologies, I propose to explore how the villagers of the Taobao village cope with challenges to the norm of *nunzhuwai/nuzhunei* brought about by the Internet-facilitated returnee entrepreneurship. In doing so, I am able to facilitate scholarly understanding of rural men and women's navigation between conforming to the prescribed gender roles and adopting new livelihoods (Choi and Peng, 2016; Choi, 2019). I posit that the critical impact of the rise of couple-run online businesses on this 'gendered inner-outer boundary' may lie in women's equal engagements in operating the home-based online businesses, which allows them to exercise decision-making power in business affairs and access the revenues of the online shops. I will explore such impact along two dimensions. First, I propose to examine the potential impact of women's engagements in family online businesses on the notion of 'men dominate the outside' by looking into whether and how male online sellers are perceived as heads of households in front of the outside world despite their wives' *de facto* roles as co-managers of online businesses. Secondly, the analysis on changes and continuities of the notion of 'women dominate the inside' in the Taobao village will include two emphases: women's double burden (Zuo, 2003; Wallis, 2006), and women's bargaining power in the family derived from their familial roles (Evans, 2008, 2017; Liu, 2016). The notion of 'women dominate the inside' entails that women are expected to 'manage the household well' (*chejia,* 持家) based on their roles as responsible wives and mothers (Choi and Peng, 2016; Liu, 2016). The previous literature on women's familial role-based power has presented a mixed picture. On one hand, it is argued that women could exercise substantial power over a wide range of household affairs based on their roles as *de facto* caregivers in families (Stafford, 2000, 2009). On the other hand, some scholars point out a clear contradiction between the role of deferential wife and the role of manager of the household ascribed to women (Choi and Peng, 2016; Evans, 2017; Choi, 2019). In other words, women are

expected to manage the household well without threatening their husbands' status as heads of households. In the public sphere, women need to respect their husbands' 'face' and even behave deferential to their husbands (Choi and Peng, 2016:71–72; Evans, 2017:194). In light of these perspectives, I will examine, whether the prevalence of rural e-commerce affects change in the gendered division of labour in domestic chores and care work, as well as whether women's engagements in the family online businesses further complicate the contradiction in patriarchy which lies between women's prescribed responsibilities to manage the household well and women's inferior position of power as wives.

As I have shown, the gender norm of *nanzhuwai* and *nuzhunei* still shapes gender roles ascribed to men and women in present-day China. However, this may not negate personal agency and diverse individuality beneath the seeming universalistic gender images (Harris, 2004; Evans, 2017). In other words, Chinese men and women are still expected to behave in accordance with this gender norm, but this does not mean that they have internalised this norm and women truly believe in male superiority and in their inferior position of power as wives (Stafford, 2009:151). Thus, I draw on the perspectives of Evans (2008) and Liu (2016), to examine how the inner-outer boundary can be flexible and context-specific in the Taobao families, and how personal agency can be found in how individuals navigate in discrepancies between the gender norm and gender practice (Harris, 2004; Rao, 2012).

Harris (2004, 2011) develops the concept of 'gender masks' to emphasise the gap – between people's distinct individuality underneath the masks and their projected normative gendered behaviours – where individual agency resides. Harris (2004:21) posits that the same individuals may enact variant gender performances in different situations, and in front of different audiences. This concept helps capture the inconsistency between how people behave and what people believe concerning conforming to gender social order in the patrilineal-patrilocal setting. Drawing on the concept of gender masks, I aim to explore whether and how the gender norm of *nanzhuwai/nuzhunei* is maintained through individuals' intentional demonstration of their conformity to the norm, and why this norm may not be internalised by the individuals (Harris, 2004, 2011).

Furthermore, utilising the idea of 'co-performance of gender' developed by Rao (2012:1027) helps me examine not only the discrepancies between social norms and action but also the process of co-performance. More specifically, drawing upon this concept, I explore the extent to which husbands and wives jointly seek to establish men's status as the heads of family businesses and relegate women to a subordinate position, in the process of running Taobao businesses as married couples. The notion of co-performance of gender acknowledges that seeking social recognition is a way of exercising individual agency, even though it does not necessarily lead to wider transformative changes (Rao, 2012:1025). By applying the concept of co-performance of gender to studying the married couples operating Taobao businesses, I aim to delve into whether and how husbands and wives jointly strategically conform to their prescribed gender roles, and how these engagements in gender performance entail individual agency (Rao, 2012:1044–1045).

Method and data

To unpack the reconfiguring of power relations in rural families with migrant returnees, I study village Xinyi with the majority of youngsters experiencing migration and return migration. This village embraces return migration thanks to the rise of the e-tailing industry. With the development of the e-commerce industry after 2008 in the village, young men and women alike have increased their income by running online shops on the Taobao platform, compared to working in the urban areas. In comparison to the older villagers, the youngsters are better educated and tech-savvy, thereby being able to establish online shops and recruit their parents to work for their businesses (Couture *et al*., 2018). It is in this context wherein young women have gained more economic resources to provide for their families, as managers of family online shops, than the women of their mother's generation. This is similar to how migration empowered young women to obtain higher family status as daughters and daughters-

in-law who provided economic contributions to the families (Yan, 2003).

In 2016, among more than a thousand 'Taobao villages' in rural China, I had chosen a Taobao village referred to as 'Xinyi' in southern Fujian to carry out my fieldwork based on three main reasons. First, Xinyi has been designated as a Taobao village since 2013. Studying the trend of return migration driven by the rise of e-commerce enables me to look into whether and how the returnees re-adapt to local gender norms in the aftermath of experiencing work and leisure lives in the urban areas. Second, the villagers in Xinyi have engaged in online businesses in the form of family firms. This socio-economic grouping of labour allows me to examine how the widespread family-centred online business making has complicated marital relations, and capture how rural women run online shops alongside their husbands. Thirdly, Xinyi is located in the Hokkien-speaking region in southern Fujian. My ability to speak Hokkien could help me build good rapports with the community members rather efficiently.

Xinyi is affiliated to Qianning (also pseudonym) township, Anxi county (安溪縣). In Xinyi, the annual turnover generated by online transactions of furniture items came to over RMB 0.2 billion in 2016 (Liu, 2019:75). According to my data, in Xinyi, as of the end of 2016, among 464 households, 194 households owned online shops selling various furniture products on the Taobao platform (Liu, 2019:75). As of 2017, the local supply chain of furniture was composed of 25 wood boards manufacturing factories, 50 to 60 workshops centred on making iron furniture, 5 workshops producing paper boxes, and 5 spray bake paint factories (Liu, 2019:75).

During 2016 and 2017, I spent 10 months conducting the ethnographic study in village Xinyi. I used snowball sampling method to recruit families and interviewees for qualitative interviews and participant observation. In total, I conducted participant observation with 14 local families engaging in online businesses by spending time with the family members on various occasions. I undertook in-depth interviews with at least two members of each family. I interviewed these family members multiple times to cross-check the interviewing data. I also interviewed numerous village and township party officials, and migrants from other provinces who worked in local factories manufacturing furniture products. The number of interlocutors amounted to 63 by the end of my fieldwork.

Considering the nature of my sampling technique, I avoid generalising findings to overall population in Xinyi by deploying a case study analysis (Mannon, 2006:257; Pyke and Adams, 2010:756). I analysed each family as a whole, meaning that I coded observation notes and transcripts of interviews of all members of one family together. A thematic analysis was applied to each family to identify common themes that emerged from different families in terms of marital dynamics, decision-making in family businesses, and individual familial/gender identities (Cook and Liu, 2016:33). The case study analysis allows me to shed light on rich detail and heterogeneity, and to ascertain the unique features of each case while providing a holistic understanding of the lived experiences of family members (Pyke and Adams, 2010:756).

To protect the confidentiality of all parties involved in this research, all informants, the village and township are given pseudonyms. In addition, the analyses of marital power dynamics in this paper mainly draw from the data of six families with whom I spent much quality time. I was able to conduct overt participant observation with the six families in various settings, including how the female online sellers worked with their husbands at home, as well as how the couples negotiated the division of labour relating to childcare and domestic chores. The family stories presented and analysed in the subsequent sections are the simplified version of my findings with less sensitive information and details, to protect the informants' privacy.

Return migration and online entrepreneurship in the Taobao village

The boom of e-commerce and the wave of return migration

It is well documented that work experience gained in cities enhances a rural Chinese returnee's skills, management knowhow and social capital, thereby enabling returnee entrepreneurship (Murphy, 1999, 2000). As

Murphy (2000:234) points out, in developing regions, migrant returnees are pioneering agents of information transfer and commercial innovation. According to my research, a pioneering village online seller, Chien (male, born in 1985), learned about the concept of selling goods on the Taobao platform while he stayed at his relative's house in Xiamen, which has highly developed since the establishment of a special economic zone (Chang, 2000; Judd, 2014). Similar to the developments of other Taobao villages (Li, 2014; Qian, 2018), Chien, the pioneered online seller's act of teaching other villagers to engage in online businesses has played a vital role in facilitating the rise of e-commerce industry in his natal village. After returning to Xinyi in 2009, Chien started teaching his brother and friends to merchandise products via the online marketplace.

With the dissemination of e-commerce know-how in this village, more and more young villagers have returned to Xinyi from coastal cities. Although the village party officials did not have data on the returnees to the village in the recent years, they told me that an explicit change caused by the emergence of e-tailing activities in the village manifests in the trend of return migration. Many youngsters who were working in coastal cities such as Shenzhen and Xiamen have returned home to start businesses on the Taobao marketplace. Related to this, there is also an increasing number of immigrants travelling from other provinces to Xinyi to start online shops and work in local factories.

The process of return migration, which is driven by the emergence of e-commerce in Xinyi village, began in 2008 and possibly peaked during 2013 and 2015. The majority of my informants returned to Xinyi village from the cities and established online shops between 2013 and 2015. As regards the work experiences of the young informants prior to selling furniture online, I found that most of them were incorporated into coastal economies of China, which were centred on manufacturing industrial products as assembly workers in the factories. Some informants were caterers in canteens of factories in Guangdong. With the decision to establish online shops, most young village returnees turned to their kinsmen and kinswomen to acquire the skills associated with running online businesses. Many returnees asked their cousins or cousins-in-law to show them how to register accounts on the Taobao platform and edit and upload photos of items of furniture, as well as promote sales for their online shops.

Return migration and family-based online businesses

The way that e-commerce know-how is disseminated through kinship-based networks facilitates the wave of return migration in Xinyi. Acquiring skills through informal networks rather than official trainings lowers the cost of starting a new career for the return migrants in Xinyi (Li, 2014). Similar to Li's (2014) research on a Taobao village in Zhejiang, the existed social networks in the village facilitate the boom of the e-tailing industry in Xinyi; specifically, the village returnees are socio-economically benefited from the reciprocal kinship webs.

In addition, working with family members at home rather than with strangers from other cities was attractive to many young villagers who had experienced hard time in factories in Xiamen and Guangdong. In contrast with the fixed work shifts in a factory in Xiamen, running online shops allows for home-based online sellers to enjoy more freedom and flexibility. It is working with family members that enable the online sellers to take breaks freely. During a busy time with an array of business orders, kinship members who often live in the same neighbourhood are usually willing to spend an afternoon helping out packing furniture.

Division of labour in the family-based online businesses

Among the 14 families whom I researched during fieldwork, there were six families in which the young husbands and wives operated online businesses jointly. They shared equal access to AliPay accounts linked to the joint online stores, as well as access to WeChat Pay accounts, another mobile payment system through which they made payments to their suppliers of furniture components. Among these couples, the husbands and wives also shared various tasks associated with running webpages of online shops, including providing web links to products, writing product descriptions, pricing items

and running display advertising. The manual tasks of wrapping and encasing products, among other tasks in relation to shipment of products, are mainly assigned to parents (−in-law) of these young couples.

The previous studies focusing on examining how couples running businesses together impacts the norm of *nanzhuwai* and *nuzhunei* do not further inquire into why husbands tend to claim leadership roles when their businesses grow to a certain level, other than providing a linkage between male dominance and the division of labour in family businesses, which is underpinned by what they claim as the rigid inner-outer boundary (Zhang, 2001; Chen, 2007; Yu and Cui, 2019). In contrast with this view, I study the daily arrangements of work in Taobao families engaging in e-commerce without being constrained by any presumption regarding a fixed connection between the gendered inner-outer boundary and the division of labour. It has been convincingly demonstrated that the gendered inner-outer boundary is not as rigid or universal as these studies suggest; rather, its operation is flexible and context-specific (Evans, 2008:102; Liu, 2016:41).

Based on the findings of these six Taobao couples, I further delineate three features of the family-based online businesses which are not captured by the previous studies of Taobao family businesses (Lin *et al*., 2016; Yu and Cui, 2019). First, the assistance from the older generation, especially the way that mothers-in-law helped undertake housework and childcare, allowed young female sellers to spend quality time on undertaking the tech-savvy tasks, thereby having the same level of understanding of the businesses and professional skills for decision-making as their husbands. This also explains why the two couples without consistent support from the older generation – Ping (born in 1983) and Han (born in 1982); Pei (born in 1987) and Chien (born in 1985) – allocated the manual tasks primarily to the wives. Nevertheless, given the fact that Ping and Pei were also familiar with running the online shops and had access to the joint online bank accounts as the wives, I argue that the division of labour in these Taobao families is not so much gender-based as age-based. Nonetheless, the intersection of gender and age in day-to-day work arrangements is omitted in the previous studies. Furthermore, the joint gender roles in managing webpages of online shops in these families indicate that they attempted to maintain optimal organisation of family labour by making necessary adjustments according to daily variant circumstances, rather than invariably adopted a rigid gender-based division of labour, which contradict the analyses of the previous studies. Lastly, by sharing the online bank accounts with their husbands, the female online sellers were able to manage family expenditures to a great degree. Not only did the wives obtain financial independence by having control over the money they earned, they could also stop their husbands from further squandering away the joint revenues for personal spending by changing the setting of the accounts if necessary. The female online sellers had as equal an entitlement to the online financial accounts as their husbands, mainly because this made it convenient for them to withdraw money when promoting products through display advertising and when making payments to furniture component suppliers, which was the work they shared with their husbands.

Decision-making in the 'Taobao families'

The level of decision-making power held by the female online sellers in comparison to their husbands is variant in six Taobao families. Four wives Rui, Rainbow, Fan and Zhen exercised relatively as equal decision-making power in various business affairs as their husbands. For instance, they made joint decisions with their husbands in terms of which suppliers of furniture components they should do businesses with, how much money they should spend on display advertising, and how to wrap products cost-effectively. Rainbow, and Rui, they could even decide on certain issues alone without consulting their husbands, such as how to reward customers who gave positive online ratings to their products. I argue that Rui could exercise substantial decision-making power in running businesses with their husbands, because she personally took interest in running online stores and she was good at promoting sales and persuading customers to buy products when they made requests online. Rainbow married Ding and moved to Xinyi in 2015. Rainbow was good at developing new products, and her

ability to boost online sales by selling competitive products impressed her mother-in-law. She was able to continuously draw on her mother-in-law's support in packing products and childcare even when she had squabbles with her husband. They had quarrels a few times because she berated him for spending the joint revenues on personal spending excessively.

Different from Rui and Rainbow, Ping tended not to claim decision-making power in the running businesses with her husband because she wanted to protect her husbands' sense of security as a male marriage migrant (See more details in the next section). Zhen and her sister Fan seldom made business decisions alone probably because they personally did not take as much interest in running online shops as their husbands, and their career passion lay in selling cosmetic products for a direct selling company where they had worked before they engaged in the online businesses with their husbands. Lastly, after 2 years of running family-based online businesses with Pei, her husband Chien choose to partner with a male friend to run a logistics company which needed a large sum of financial investment. In the logistics company, Pei was in charge of bookkeeping, while Chien and his partner were responsible for expanding the business scale, and they did not always share the details of their business meetings with Pei.

Performing the gender norm of 'men dominate the outside'

In the six families, even though the husbands and wives ran online businesses jointly, and shared access to the AliPay accounts linked to the joint online shops, when interacting with customers or suppliers of furniture components, most husbands tended to introduce themselves as owners of the online shops and their wives as their employees. I look into how the wives perceived their husbands' performed masculine identities as heads of online businesses and how they took action accordingly. I also tease out how these wives exercised bargaining power explicitly at home, which contrasts with their acts of helping preserve their husbands' roles as heads of household and online businesses in front of the outside world. In other words, I analyse how the Taobao couples coped with the discrepancies between the practice of joint leadership of the Taobao businesses and the existing norm of 'men dominate the outside'.

Ping is native of Xinyi. She met her husband Han, who came from Sichuan while she worked in Xiamen in 2004. During 2004 and 2013, Ping and Han worked in Xiamen as a rural migrant couple. For Ping's parents, out of their four children, Ping was the one who would move farthest from them in the future, so they hoped to seize the opportunity to have her geographically close through running home-based online businesses. Thus, Ping's father kept encouraging Ping and Han to start online businesses in Xinyi. In 2014, following Ping's father's advice, Ping moved back to Xinyi with Han to earn a higher income by participating in the lucrative e-tailing industry, since her cousins such as Ding (born in 1992) and Fa (born in 1995) had already made a fortune selling furniture online. Fa was Ping's uncle's son and it was he who taught Han to set up and manage online shops.

Even though running online businesses allowed Ping and Han to earn much more income compared to working in Xiamen as migrant workers, it seems that Han felt his male dignity undermined in providing for his family by engaging in e-commerce as a male marriage migrant in the village (Choi and Peng, 2016). Han coped with his sense of frustration by drinking and picking fights with those who called him a 'migratory bird' (候鳥, *gaojiao*), a local term which denotes migrants who do not speak Hokkien. Han felt really offended by this term: he thought he should not be labelled as a bird just because he was staying in the village with his wife's family.

Ping was also constantly worried that their earnings might be squandered away by Han's involvement in gambling. Han spent much money on playing poker with his uncles-in-law and cousins-in-law in Xinyi. Ping was able to temporarily stop Han from further spending their joint income recklessly on gambling by blocking his access to his WeChat Pay account because she knew the PIN number of his account. One time, when Ping found out Han gambled again and lost around RMB 1500, she changed the PIN number of Han's WeChat Pay account without telling him in order to keep

him from further withdrawing money from this account. This incident demonstrates that Ping was able to access Han's financial account and checked the statements of this account.

However, the way Ping and Han managed joint income on a day-to-day basis is rather distinct from other 'Taobao couples' with whom I researched. Even though Ping could access Han's financial account where the joint revenues of their online shops were deposited, she chose not to withdraw money from this account directly but tended to request him to transfer money to her when she needed to make purchases. For other Taobao couples, more often than not, the wives made payments using the money from the shared AliPay accounts without asking for their husbands' approval. I posit that, in contrast with other wives, Ping underplayed her ability to manage the family finances because she was concerned with Han's perception of his stay in her natal village as a male marriage migrant.

Concurring with a number of other studies on the marital negotiations of joint income management in Chinese families (Zuo and Bian, 2001; Zuo, 2008; Choi and Peng, 2016; Brown, 2017), I similarly reveal that Ping masked her ability to manage the joint earnings because she wanted to preserve her husband's role as head of the household by letting him dominate decision-making processes over family finances, under the condition that Han provided for the family by engaging in e-commerce based in her natal village (Choi and Peng, 2016:71). The temporary matrilocal residence taken on by the couple called into question Han's superior position of power over his wife, which is derived from patrilocality (Stacey, 1983; Wolf, 1985; Jacka *et al*., 2013). In addition, his sojourn in Xinyi posed a challenge to his masculine identity as head of the household, as he experienced a discrepancy between his dominant position in the family and his marginalised status as a Taobao village migrant (Choi, 2019:82), where low-paid and unwanted jobs have been taken up by migrants from other provinces. Even though Han did not move to the village as a labour migrant, he was very offended by being called a 'migratory bird', as other migrants in the village were described. He felt insulted by the local villagers who called him a 'migratory bird' because it connoted contempt and discrimination.

Han's gambling problem rendered his joint income with Ping whittled away. Ping's access to their joint income deposited in the online bank account as the joint owner of online shops enabled her to effectively block her husband's access to the account by changing the PIN number. This is a manifestation of a female migrant returnee's exercise of marital power owing to her involvement in running online businesses with her husband. In addition, Ping did not want to further impose a challenge on Han's masculine identity by sharing the power of managing the joint revenues, so she waived her right to withdraw money directly and let him uphold the role of the dominant decision maker over the family's finances. It seemed that she aimed to preserve her husband's culturally-ascribed status as the head of household as a virtuous wife. Ge *et al*. (2011) argue that the female migrant returnees' acts of bargaining with the senior men in the village drawing on their roles as dutiful wives and daughters-in-law reinforce patriarchy. In contrast with this view, I contend that Ping's decision of not making an equal claim to the right to manage household income most of time was not necessarily a sign of her lack of agency or real subordination, but was in fact a strategy for ensuring Han's sense of security as a man, which was proven to be beneficial to her and to her children in the long run (Rao, 2012:1027).

Turning to the case of Rui (born in 1991) and Xiang (born in 1992), Rui's cooperation with her husband Xiang typifies the couple, with the wife having equal decision-making power in business affairs. In 2011, Rui married Xiang and moved to Xinyi from Anxi county. In 2012, they started running online businesses jointly. In the first year of her marriage, Rui returned to her natal family in Anxi at least once a week because she felt out of place with rural lifestyle of Xinyi. After she started running online businesses, she regularly returned to Anxi to spend her leisure hours. She often went shopping or visiting manicure salons with her close friend Rainbow (born in 1991) whom she met in Xinyi.

While running online businesses with Rui, Xiang often travelled to Xiamen helping out the company owned by his older brother, so Rui was more familiar with the online businesses than Xiang. In one of the interviews with Rui,

she stated that they did not adopt a strict division of labour in terms of operating online stores, and she thought she was better at communicating with customers and promoting furniture products online compared to her husband. Interestingly, Rui further revealed that, when answering phone calls from customers, Xiang liked introducing himself as the boss of the family firm and Rui as his assistant. I probed into Rui's thoughts about this by asking her: '*Do you think he states the opposite of your two's roles in the firm*?' She answered: "*No, Men are 'the head of the household' (yi jia zhi zhu, 一家之主), after all. I certainly give him this face*."

On a typical day when Rui and Xiang worked together to ship products to a customer in July 2017, I visited Rui and Xiang's house where they had an early dinner; then, I went to their rented factory, where they packed furniture products, and stayed with them until late night. Xiang went to the factory first and Rui went there after she had finished washing dishes and cleaning the kitchen. A while after Rui arrived at the factory, I noticed Rui and Xiang started shouting each other. Rui scolded Xiang for bringing back the wrong colour cushions from the cushion manufacturer, while Xiang insisted he had done the job right and refused to return the cushions so Rui had to drive the cushions back to the manufacturer on her own later.

On the way to the workshop, I inquired into Rui's reflection on Xiang's reaction and asked her: '*Would you say that your husband and you might have a better relationship if you did not run the Taobao businesses together*?'

> *Rui: We would. We were good when we went to Anxi together. His nephew was with us [in the travel to Anxi], and he said we were all good when we were not working together.* ***When we work together, we compete with each other. We are not a married couple, neither are we friends; we are co-workers****. We often have disputes, like having different opinions on how to wrap a product properly.*
> *Interview with Rui, July 2017*.

As illustrated in Rui's narration, she perceived her relationship with Xiang as co-working, instead of the one between boss and secretary that Xiang claimed to the outside word. In practice, she criticised Xiang's work when she found it was not properly done. She felt she had the right to vet the work tasks undertaken by Xiang, and to point out, to his face, what kinds of mistakes he had made when she found out the work was not properly done, because she regarded her work relationship with Xiang as an equal partnership. Their squabble over Xiang's picking up the wrong cushions exemplifies Rui's contradictory behaviour of not contesting her husband's status as her boss in the public sphere while demonstrating her power to approve the tasks undertaken by him and to berate him for not getting the work done satisfactorily. Drawing on the concept of gender masks (Harris, 2004), I suggest that Rui's contradictory behaviour attests that she did not fully internalise the ideology of female subordination to her husband, so she only showed outward compliance with the gender norm when under public scrutiny and behaved otherwise at home (Harris, 2004:172).

It should be stressed that Ping and Rui's acts of masking their *de facto* roles in the family online businesses, especially in the public sphere, were not an indication of their real subordination, namely their internalisation of the norm of 'men dominate the outside'. Ge *et al*.'s (2011) claim as to how the female migrant returnees adhere to patriarchal norms by strategizing at the backstage and drawing their bargaining power from the kinship roles could risk denouncing female agency. In the cases of Ping and Rui, Ping was able to stop her husband from further withdrawing money from their joint income on gambling; Rui was capable of vetting her husband's work assignments and making business decisions alone. These examples attest that the female online sellers could exercise power explicitly in family decision-making, as a result of their equal engagements in running the family online shops. There were occasions when Ping and Rui chose to exercise their power discretely and avoid challenging their husbands' culturally-ascribed position as family heads. They helped preserve their husbands' image as heads of household because the status of their family was tied to the male heads' demonstration of their authority over their wives and children in the patrilineal-patrilocal setting (Harris, 2004, 2012).

In the context of the Taobao families, the contradiction in patriarchy in relation to women's familial role-oriented power still

exists, and, becomes more complicated. This contradiction, originally lies between women's role as manager of the household and deferential wife, now manifests in the female online sellers' roles as the joint owners of family online shops in the private domain and as 'performed secretaries to their husbands' in the public sphere. As I have demonstrated, Rui and Ping's argumentative and confrontational acts in interacting with their husbands did not render their wifehood and motherhood called into question, because they were entitled to articulate their opinions on the business matters and take action accordingly as the joint owners. This might suggest that, the female online sellers' power derived from their roles as managers of households could be enhanced by their active engagements in the family online businesses, and could be less mitigated by their culturally-ascribed roles as deferential wives.

Home-based online entrepreneurship and negotiating masculinity in the public and private sphere

This section continues to explore how the returnee couples react upon meeting challenges to the gender norm of *nanzhuwai* and *nuzhunei* brought about by the boom of the internet-based returnee entrepreneurship. Working in the domestic space constituted a significant part of the six husbands' day-to-day work activities. Nevertheless, these husbands remained disengaging from undertaking housework and taking care of young children even though they worked at home. In this regard, this section reveals how the Taobao couples coped with the discrepancies between the practice of home-based online entrepreneurship and the cultural construction of masculinity to be antithetical to domesticity derived from the norm of '*nanzhuwai* and *nuzhunei*' (Bedford and Hwang, 2011; Song, 2017). I will demonstrate, how the wives' substantial shares of domestic chores and childcare are associated with the husbands' negotiation of their masculine identities in Taobao families.

The analyses of this section mainly draw from the cases of three Taobao couples-Zhen (born in 1984) and her husband Xu (born in 1980); Fan (born in 1982) and her husband Guo (born in 1981); as well as Rui and Xiang. Their stories are exemplary cases to show the husbands' daily engagements in home-based work tasks were centred on operating webpages of online shops, while the wives' shouldered double burden of running online businesses and undertaking the domestic-oriented duties.

Zhen married Xu in 2006, and moved to Xu's house located in a neighbouring village to Xinyi, which I call 'Zhongxiao'. Before Zhen met Xu in Qianning township, Zhen spent a few years staying in Xiamen where she learned hairdressing skills in a salon. In 2002 Zhen returned to Qianning and opened a hair salon in the township centre. She met Xu in her salon. Before knowing Zhen, Xu spent numerous years working as a driver in Shenzhen; then, he returned to Zhongxiao village and started trading tea. In 2015, Zhen and Xu began their online businesses.

Zhen's older sister, Fan, and brother-in-law, Guo, made a fortune operating online furniture stores, and their success inspired Zhen to embark on her engagement in the e-tailing industry. After Guo and Fan engaged in e-commerce, they managed to buy a house in the county with a down payment of RMB 200000 in 2014 and purchased a luxury car in 2015. They made such a fortune within such a short space of time because the profit rate of customised furniture was much higher in those earlier times, when there were far fewer competitors in the online marketplace. Fan and Guo shared various tasks in their daily work arrangements. However, when meeting new customers, similar to what Xiang did, Guo tended to introduce Fan as his employee, and Fan did not contest his view.

When I visited Xu's house one day in April 2017, I noted that Xu spent all afternoon working at one of the computers in his antechamber. He barely left the computer, except for greeting and making tea for the village party secretary of village Zhongxiao, who stopped by his house briefly. In marked contrast, after Zhen drove their 3-year-old son back from the nursery at 4 pm, she barely spent any time seated at computer chatting with customers because she had to watch their child. Their son was quite boisterous and he wept loudly twice, after Zhen scolded him harshly, while Xu did not attempt to comfort him at all. Working in the domestic

space constituted a major part of Xu's work activities. This finding contradicts the previous studies which suggest that gender division of labour in couple-run businesses is shaped by the gender norm of *nanzhuwai* and *nuzhunei*, and the association between the strengthening of gender hierarchy and the devaluation of work undertaken by women and that undertaken in the domestic space (Zhang, 2001; Chen, 2007; Yu and Cui, 2019).

In addition, I suggest that, Xu was able to concentrate on working at the computer without being distracted much because Zhen was expected to take on more of the responsibility in looking after their young child as the mother. Concurring with two studies of couple-run online businesses in other Taobao villages (Lin *et al*., 2016; Yu and Cui, 2019), I found that the burden of doing housework and childcare asymmetrically fell to Zhen, and this was also the case with the other five Taobao couples.

Similarly to Xu, Xiang was allowed to choose whenever he wanted to spend time with his son and he rarely helped out with housework, whereas Rui knew she was obliged to complete these domestic tasks and she could not change her husband's behaviour. Rui was aware of that, as a wife she was expected to take more responsibility of rearing and educating their child than her husband. Acknowledging this cultural expectation on her gender role, Rui seldom argued with Xiang about the division of labour of housework, unlike her argumentative tendency when discussing business affairs with her husband. As she pointed out: '*In China, men still hold conservative thinking. Here, men think doing housework and taking care of young children are what women should do, while they only have to be responsible for making money. But haven't they thought women also make money now?'* This quote attests that Rui felt she needed to live up to domestic-oriented expectations because most men in Xinyi insisted on disengaging from doing domestic work, even though men spent much time working at home and women also earned income for their families.

As illustrated in the experiences of male migrant returnees Xu, Guo and Xiang, as well as the male marriage migrant Han, who all ran online shops jointly with their wives, even though the tech-savvy tasks are home-based, these tasks are not rendered feminised because men also undertake them. My findings regarding men's home-based work activities do not support the view suggesting that the notion of *nanzhuwai* and *nuzhunei* is reinforced by the gendered division of labour in family firms that are associated with the spatial segregation of 'inside' and 'outside' the home (Zhang, 2001; Chen, 2007; Yu and Cui, 2019).

As noted previously in this article, the gendered inner-outer boundary is not as rigid or universalistic as the studies of women returnees and couple-run businesses suggest (Zhang, 2001; Chen, 2007; Ge *et al*., 2011; Yu and Cui, 2019); rather, its operation is flexible and context-specific (Evans, 2008; Liu, 2016). I contend that, the inner-outer boundary only operates when the couples performed to conform to this norm, but this does not determine their daily work life and *de facto* family positions from which their marital power derive. The couples' joint effort of constructing men's status as heads of family businesses who disengage from domestic work is a corollary of the individuals' strategic compliance with the gender norm, rather than internalisation of the norm and its associated gender hierarchy.

Conclusion

In this article, I have shown how the female online sellers, exemplified by Ping and Rui, exercised marital power when running online shops with their husbands in their natal and/or marital villages for the purposes of protecting the economic welfare of the family, and ensuring the upkeep of online businesses. The material practice of husbands and wives working side by side obstructed the ways in which the women internalised the gender norm that upholds male dominance. Through running online shops jointly and managing joint revenues, they thought they were entitled to coerce their husbands to behave in ways they would otherwise not have done so, which was a manifestation of women's exercise of direct power (Liu, 2016). I also analyse how the male migrant returnees, and a male marriage migrant, negotiated their masculine identities as heads of family businesses, by disengaging from domestic-oriented chores and by dominating

decision-making over family finances, under the circumstance that their wives took on equal share of tech-savvy work tasks, and shared access to business AliPay accounts.

I would like to reiterate that the fact that the female online sellers had to underplay their roles as the joint managers of online shops to preserve their husbands' masculine identities does not mean that these women endorsed patriarchy (c.f. Ge *et al.*, 2011). I draw the scholarly attention to the variant sharp-witted, articulate, and even argumentative female subjectivity underneath the gender masks with the seemingly universalistic images of female subordinates. In light of the idea of flexible inner-outer boundary, it is essential to capture the discrepancies between how the migrant returnee couples behaved in the private and in the public sphere in terms of strategizing their conformity to the gender norm.

Drawing on the lenses of performance of gender and flexible inner-outer boundary, I shed a more positive light on the female migrant returnees' exercise of agency that entails preserving their husbands' masculine identities and prescribed gender roles in the patrilineal-patrilocal setting. I do so by closely examining how the six Taobao couples coped with the discrepancies between the practice of joint leadership and home-based online entrepreneurship, as well as the norm of *nanzhuwai* and *nuzhunei*, which upholds men's position as family heads in the public sphere and constructs masculinity to be antithetical to domestic-oriented. The notion of *nanzhuwai* is hollowed out by the practice of joint business partnership and home-based online merchandising among the Taobao couples, and its nominal form is maintained through the couples' co-performance of gender. However, the notion of *nuzhunei* in relation to women's double burden is not substantially reshaped by men's daily engagements in home-based work activities, which is consonant with the persistent female domestic-oriented roles in dual earner families in the broader context of China (Zuo, 2003; Wallis, 2006). In the private sphere, female online sellers are able to exercise marital power derived from their roles as co-managers of family online businesses in interacting with their husbands for bettering the family businesses and securing household income. In these occasions, female online sellers' argumentative and confrontational acts were not deemed as inappropriate in the local community. Enriching the scholarly discussion centred on women's contradictory roles in patriarchy (Choi and Peng, 2016; Evans, 2017; Choi, 2019), I tease out the complexity in rural women's familial role-oriented power in the digital era, by discussing the reconfiguration of *nuzhunei* separately from that of *nanzhuwai*.

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