



Taobao practices, everyday life and emerging hybrid rurality in contemporary China



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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, e-commerce has spread throughout China, providing an economic advancement opportunity for those in the lower classes of society. Villages who specialise in e-commerce, such as the Taobao villages, are booming. Taobao villages constitute an exciting phenomenon that has changed both the pattern of the rural economy, as well as the social foundation of rural daily life. This paper explores how everyday life in rural China has changed in response to the development of the network economy. Using Junpu village in Guangdong Province as a case study, our findings suggest that the development of e-commerce and network technology has changed the common values held towards rural life, the affection felt for the village, and the pace of life of local people. This development has also led to social separation in rural China. However, the intrusion of this new force of network economy has been resisted by local cultural structures such as family, clans, religion, and gender dynamics, leading to an unprecedented hybrid rurality. While network development has brought about the influence of modernity, the Chaoshan tradition of Junpu village has persisted and continued to be a part of life in this new stage of social life. The social milieu in rural China has been reconstructed and blends the alienation brought on by the operation of a network economy with the resistance felt from the practice of local cultural traditions.

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1. Introduction

Rural development in Western countries in the past few decades has witnessed a process of de-agriculturalization and post-productivism, since rural villages gradually made a transition from agricultural economy to a more diverse array of economic activities, including handicraft industry, retailing, and tourism (Marsden et al., 1993; Hoggart and Paniagua, 2001; Roche, 2003). This dramatic transformation has led a number of scholars to call for a post-rural perspective in understanding rural development (Murdoch and Pratt, 1993; Hopkins, 1998; Halfacree, 2006). This is particularly necessary when information and communication technology has become a driving force in transforming rural

economies and societies since the 1980s, connecting rural settlements more inextricably with networks of the global economy (Nelson, 2001; Cloke, 2006). This post-rural perspective emphasizes the mixture of hybridity, diversity, and heterogeneity in villages and argues that rural progression does not fully depend on a single sector, but is rather embedded into the intertwined and mutually constitutive production of rural space through material and discursive phenomena, processes and practices (Marsden, 1998; Woods, 2011; Heley and Jones, 2012).

Since the economic reform began in 1978 in China, rapid industrialization and urbanization have profoundly reshaped the trajectory of rural development in the country as more and more villages have experienced a similar process of economic restructuring and cultural diversification to their Western counterparts (Long et al., 2016; Long and Liu, 2015; Long and Woods, 2011; Xu and Tan, 2002). Information technology has deeply affected social structures and everyday life in numerous villages across the world (Salemink et al., 2015; Kilpeläinen and Seppänen, 2014; Michailidis et al., 2011). China is no exception to this trend. According to the

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latest report by China Internet Network Information Centre, internet-based information technology has become a predominant factor in the shaping of internal social ties and the reconfiguration of daily life in numerous Chinese villages.² Many scholars have also noted that information technology and internet-based economy have accelerated the process of de-agriculturalization and changed both the pattern of the rural economy and the routines of rural social life (Soriano, 2007; Zhao, 2008; Qiang et al., 2009; Oreglia, 2014).

China's Taobao village is a prime example of this phenomenon. Within the context of China's emerging e-commerce industry, some villages utilize a digital commercial platform provided by Taobao, the biggest e-commerce corporation in China and in the world, to become new centres of internet-based retail economy. Initiated by Alibaba Group Holding Limited, Taobao's business model involves a long industrial chain, and stimulates the development of various workshops that specialize in activities such as processing, manufacturing and logistics. The aggregation of these workshops in rural areas has led to the development of so-called 'Taobao villages', which has contributed to the rapid restructuring of the rural economy. In these villages, Taobao practices³ have blurred the line between life and work, and become an important component of villagers' daily lives. The embeddedness of the modern network economy in China's rural space has sparked a complex dialogue between modernity and rurality, and given rise to an unprecedented type of hybrid rurality.

This paper explores how everyday life in rural China changes in response to the influx of e-commerce activities. In this process of economic restructuring, reconstruction of rural subjectivity and values reflect the rural area's response to the transformation of the economy and society. This has occurred through the villagers' reselection of their life style and means of livelihood, as well as changes in the rural family structure, and the reconstruction of gender roles and social relations in rural areas (Qian et al., 2012; Fang and Liu, 2014; Liu and Liu, 2016; Judd, 2009; Ling et al., 2013; Huhe et al., 2015). Additionally, traditional rural cultures have power that cannot be overlooked in the rural areas of China that are currently transforming from an agricultural society to a modern society. Deep-rooted rural beliefs, familial relations and geo-relations continue to resist the forces of modernity in many areas (Chung, 2013). We examine how rurality, as a form of everyday life, was reconstructed under the network economy represented by the expansion of Taobao. An analysis of rural values, rural feelings, the pace of rural life, and changes in the rural space of Taobao villages assists with the interpretation of how the relationship between the vernacular traditions of rural people and modernity has been represented in the development of e-commerce, and creates a dialogue about studies of rurality in the post-rural era.

With the hybrid reconstruction of rural areas through the process of globalization (Murdoch, 2003, 2006; Woods, 2007, 2009)

and the inherent openness of the post-rural era (Halfacree, 2009), rurality has been viewed as a complex interwoven state in which various forces continuously unify and separate (Cloke, 2006). In this study, the concept of hybridity is introduced, and is combined with Lefebvre's theory of everyday life to explain the reconstruction of rurality and its relationship with modernity. Lefebvre argued that alienation under modernity engulfs all of human life and portrayed the 'everyday' as a practice that is banal, repetitive and lacking in creativity (Lefebvre, 1983). He and de Certeau (1988) independently noted that the public, in fact, experiences tremendous de-alienation and there is much creative potential integrated into their daily lives. Lefebvre's theory of everyday life in modernity is still relevant in the explanation of the relationship between modernity and rural traditions.

Integrating the perspectives of rural hybridity and the theory of alienation in order to interpret how the Taobao village operates under a network economy can help illustrate this unique form of rurality. In research on rurality, the understanding of hybridity in the 'post-rural' context emphasizes a type of subjective practice that adopts a wider perspective. By treating modernity and rurality as interactive subjects, we explain the complexity of this hybridity from the perspective of a new practical relationship. In discussing how modernity collides with China's rural traditions, this paper restores a multidimensional rural cultural scene that rurality research is rarely able to address. This is achieved through an explanation of the daily negotiations of alienation and de-alienation that occur in this context.

2. Research methods

Junpu village in Xichang Township, Jieyang City, in eastern Guangdong Province of China has 490 families who live locally (Fig. 1). After China's economic reforms, the economy of Junpu village gradually transformed from agricultural industry to the food industry. At the peak of Junpu's development, 80% of the village population was involved in the production of biscuits, jellies, and chocolates. Despite previously being a reputable site of production across the region, the food industry gradually declined because of a redundant business philosophy and lower-quality products.⁴ In light of this diminishing industry, from 2012 onwards, young people who had returned home to the rural areas after living in cities began using the former food production warehouses to open Taobao shops. In 2014, 360 households in the village were running 3880 Taobao shops, which in turn influenced surrounding towns and villages to set up nearly 10,000 Taobao shops.⁵ In 2013, Junpu village became one of the top 20 Taobao villages, and therefore represents a typical case of the drastic change occurring in China's internet-based economy.⁶

Major research methods used in this study are semi-structured in-depth interviews, together with participatory observations. The temporal pattern of Taobao transactions meant that the interviews and investigation were conducted from July to December 2014 and from February to March 2015. The investigation covered both usual transaction periods, and those surrounding special occasions (e.g.

² China Internet Network Information Centre (2015), "Research Report on the Rural Internet Development of 2014", available online at: <http://www.cnnic.cn/hlwzfzj/hlwzxbg/201506/P020150623466458430466.pdf>, last accessed 29 April 2016.

³ In this study, 'Taobao practices' refer to various online and offline practices that are undertaken by rural villages in relation to the business of Taobao. In particular, it indicates the impacts that are rendered by the clustering of Taobao businesses upon the daily life of rural residents. These include changes to common values that are held in terms of rural life, the affection felt towards the village, and the pace of rural life. Although Taobao is an online market, there are offline businesses that are providers of various goods and services and are located in rural villages, such as Junpu village, the site of this case study.

⁴ "Introduction of Taobao village in Jieyang", Internal report of Jieyang Municipal Government Office, released on 10 August 2015.

⁵ "Investigation of e-commerce trade in Jiedong district and speaking at the International Conference on Electronic Commerce Development in Guangdong Province", Internal report of Jieyang Municipal Government Office, released on 15 August 2015.

⁶ AliResearch (2014), "Chinese Taobao village research report", available online at: <http://i.aliresearch.com/img/20141223/20141223100803.pdf>, last accessed 18 April 2015.

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