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COURSEWORK COVER SHEET

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Module: Investigating the Social World

Article of choice:
Yu, Haiqing, and Cui, Lili. 2019. "China's E-Commerce: Empowering Rural Women?" *China Quarterly 238*: 418-437.

Word count (including all footnotes, references and appendices):
Q1: 469
Q2: 486
Q3: 500

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No

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Investigating the Social World 2022-2023

Assignment 1: Critical Methodological Response
For this assignment, you can consult all the references provided on Moodle, including the further readings. You should not need any external research. And no citations and quotations are necessary.

To start with, choose ONE of the following articles. Please indicate the article you choose at the very beginning of your response.
Yu, Haiqing, and Cui, Lili. 2019. "China's E-Commerce: Empowering Rural Women?" *China Quarterly 238*: 418-437.

Answer the following THREE questions based on the article you choose. Make sure you fully address every part of each question. Please limit your response to 500 words (max) per question.

Question 1
What is the main research question? State the research question in your own words, and then briefly describe the methods used in the article and explain the underlying epistemological and/or ontological stances (positivism and/or constructivism/interpretivism).
You do not need to know the methods well, but you should pay close attention to how the author(s) explain their research design and methods.

In the article 'China's E-Commerce: Empowering Rural Women?', Yu and Cui ask how the development of e-commerce impacts rural communities with a particular focus on gendered experiences within economic, cultural and political spheres. The authors examine rural China due to the rapid growth of so-called 'Taobao villages', where at least 10% of residents are involved in e-commerce or there are at least 100 online shops hosted on the Taobao web platform. As Chinese governments encourage the number and size of Taobao villages in order to reach poverty alleviation targets, the paper explores how effective the introduction of digital economic opportunities is at altering power dynamics in rural areas, specifically patriarchal gender norms. In other words, Yu and Cui question the relationship between entrepreneurship and women's empowerment.

In order to answer their research question, the authors use qualitative methods, including interviews and case studies to understand the gendered experience of residents in rural Chinese Taobao villages. Yu and Cui conducted site visits and participant observations in rural China lasting varying lengths over five years. They also conducted 26 interviews with residents in both small-group and individual interviews. Participants were asked the same questions regardless of their gender about their relationship to the running and management of the online shops and how familial and gendered relationships have altered as a result. The latter set of questions focus particularly on women's roles within family structures. By asking the same questions to both men and women, the authors aim to understand the different interpretations of gender and women's role within economic, cultural and political society. Through these methods, Yu and Cui endeavour to empirically demonstrate women's role and feminised labour within online economies and businesses.

This qualitative approach is in line with a constructivist epistemology as it uses a small number of case studies to explore individual experience and interpretation. The authors actively dismiss quantitative approaches which they consider to inadequately show the value and status of women and their work within online commerce and society more broadly. The

authors believe that statistics provide a two-dimensional understanding of societal structures and fail to give insight into the gendered experiences and impact of labour. In this instance, Yu and Cui argue that while numerical data can convey the number of women involved in economic activity, it does not convey the quality or experience of that involvement and its multiple interpretations. For example, employment statistics do not show whether women's increased involvement in e-commerce reduces their involvement in domestic activities or whether women view their involvement in public economic activities as a positive development. Yu and Cui emphasise their belief in the subjectivity of human experience by employing an intersectional approach in their research, which thus recognises that people's interpretation of events may vary depending on their socialised identity such as gender, class, and age.

Question 2
Summarize the key theoretical claims in your own words. Identify and explain the nature of these claims (i.e., paradigm and/or approach), as well as the alignment between the theory and empirics (i.e., induction, deduction, and/or abduction) in the article.
Keep in mind that some scholars treat theory as paradigm, using their theoretical claims to reveal the mechanisms that explain how different factors or variables work together to produce the outcome of interest (like Nunn). Some, in contrast, prefer to treat theory as approach, focusing on speaking to a broad theoretical framework without trying to specify a set of mechanisms or dynamics (like Meyer).

In the article, Yu and Cui lay out two key theories that guide their research methods and analysis: feminist political economics and gender intersectionality.

Feminist political economy theory explores the social dynamics and power relations embedded in the market system. While the theory recognises the impact of economic mechanisms on human experience, it does not believe humans are governed by such mechanisms. Indeed, according to Yu and Cui, the key theoretical claim of feminist political economics is that individuals make conscious and moral choices about how they engage with the economic environment that have political and social ramifications.

In a similar manner, Yu and Cui employ gender intersectional theory to reflect that people are both subjects and objects within social constructions. Yu and Cui recognise the multiple and layered differences in individual experience and interpretation based on a person's social identity, for example the difference in an older rural woman's experience of gender to that of a young urban woman. Moreover, the authors believe that humans are able to choose and construct gender, while also acknowledging that societal circumstances can limit people's choice.

These two theories are treated as approach throughout the paper. Neither feminist political economics nor gender intersectionality dictate specific mechanisms or rules that govern human behaviour or reveal causality, instead Yu and Cui use their theoretical claims to emphasise the nuances of human subjectivity and the interconnectedness of social, political and economic factors. Theory as approach is in keeping with the authors' constructivist epistemology as it creates the conditions for multiple experiences to be documented and acknowledged in order to then draw broader conclusions about the social world.

This method of linking theory and empirics is called abduction. Yu and Cui use abduction to refine their theoretical claims through observation and description of life in rural China to ultimately draw their two main conclusions. The first, that women's increased inclusion in e-commerce does little to challenge the predominant power dynamics. While women gain paid

employment - and thus improved spending power and, to some extent, status - the social expectation that they should be primary caregivers and homemakers remains. In other words, women gain an additional burden of work without gaining the equivalent political or socio-cultural power and freedoms of their male counterparts.

The other main conclusion drawn in the paper is that social impact should be included in any research into e-commerce on the basis that focusing solely on economics or technology fails to give a complete picture of the power dynamics and human experience at play. The authors highlight the numerical increase in women's employment figures, and then use their qualitative findings to demonstrate that these may not show the complete picture as women are not one homogenous group that experience employment in the same way or that can be fully represented through existing 'male-centred' analytical tools. Abduction is thus used to build on feminist political economic and gender intersectional theories.

Question 3
Are the findings valid and/or significant? What is the scope condition? Can/should the authors extend their findings to a different case, such as a country or a city? Why or why not?
You can discuss the validity of a research finding in many ways, but our discussion on causality in social research can be a good starting point. Make sure you include a concrete alternative case in your response.

Yu and Cui demonstrate the significance of their research by highlighting the rapid growth of Taobao villages and women's employment within e-commerce. These figures show there is a societal shift with enough value relevance to analyse. While this contextualisation is specific to rural China, the authors anticipate the paper to have a broader impact on social research by demonstrating the importance of including social implications when researching e-commerce in any context.

The relatively small sample size of people interviewed and communities observed is notable, particularly within one of the world's most populous countries. Nevertheless, many of the paper's underlying principles give it a broader scope condition. Some of the micro conditions are specific to China, such as the courtyard economy and the minutiae of a Taobao village, yet the macro conditions are more widely applicable. Indeed, the fixed factors being explored – a capitalist economy, patriarchal traditions, gendered division of labour, rural-urban divides – are present in numerous countries globally. The authors note that e-commerce is commonly used to develop rural regions, particularly within the Global South.

The paper asks whether increased employment enables women's empowerment; its validity could therefore depend on its very definition of empowerment. According to the authors, 'empowerment' is overcoming patriarchal gender norms and participating in the political sphere. The paper focuses on gender because of its significant influence in Chinese culture and acknowledges that other marginalised groups face similar oppression elsewhere, suggesting its learnings could be applied to other contexts, such as experiences of disabled or migrant workers. However, despite the authors' observation that age and class impact a woman's experience, there is no analysis of whether overcoming gender norms would be sufficient to 'empower' people who occupy multiple marginalised identities, such as disabled women or migrant women. This limits the intersectional reading of the study and its applicability to regions with a more heterogenous population.

While the paper may benefit from a more considered and intersectional definition of empowerment – including whether empowerment is ever possible under capitalism – it does demonstrate the value of including social considerations in e-commerce research. Conversely, its own study may benefit from more qualitative data. For example, data on the

demographics of the study participants and rural China is a notable omission. While most interviewees are 'in their mid to late 20s' (p. 423), no further information is provided so it is unknown whether they reflect the workforce or population in rural China, let alone of other countries. Moreover, there is an evident disparity in how the authors present their argument on Gender Enablement, where they use many participant quotes, and Gender Dis-enablement, where they rely more on personal observations and insights. This suggests participants were more conscious of the positive elements of e-commerce while the researchers interpreted the negative aspects themselves. Including data on women's political representation could help resolve this conflict between participant and researcher by empirically demonstrating the authors' claim that women continue to be invisible in the public sphere. A mixed-method approach may therefore improve the paper's validity.

Investigating the Social World Critical Methodological Response

FINAL GRADE

68/100

GENERAL COMMENTS

The filename can only contain your student ID number.

Q1: You do not have to mention the title in your response. Good RQ. Well done! 70

Q2: I would suggest you take out the "big terms" and focus on summarizing the key theoretical claims in a more elegant way, but what you have now is fine. A minor issue is: If they are using abduction, does that mean they are using their observations in rural China to provide a major improvement to the feminist political economy? If yes, how? Or they are just applying the framework to interpret what they saw? It is not clear which is the case based on your current response. 65

Q3: The opening sentence is confusing. Why is it significant to highlight "the rapid growth of Taobao villages and women's employment within e-commerce?" The discussion on the scope conditions is excellent (the contrast between micro- vs macro- is nicely done). I also like how you challenged the very notion of "empowerment." 68

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