

From Self Isolator to Business Owner: Social Standing and Economic Mobility among Chinese Housewives in Japan

Jie Zhang[†]

By focusing on cross-border shopping services and gender stratification among overseas residents in Japan, this study investigates whether and how *Daigou*—overseas shopping services—has helped newly arrived Chinese housewives overcome social isolation and achieve better economic status in Japan. Employing in-depth interviews with 32 newly arrived Chinese housewives in Tokyo, this study explores the experiences of disjuncture from previous lives of Chinese women who entered Japan with dependent visa status. Those Chinese women who have entered Japan as dependents have difficulties participating in the Japanese labor market, such as lacking both Japanese language ability and social connections. Such difficulties have resulted in their living in relative isolation. However, with the rapid growth of the middle class in China, the demand for quality products from other countries has increased, giving overseas Chinese housewives opportunities to be engaged in transnational businesses. They accomplished this because of their flexible schedules, knowledge of Japanese products, and a shrewd sense of the market. By using the *Taobao* website or *Weidian* as a platform to display Japanese products and sell them to customers in China, newly arrived Chinese housewives have opened their own businesses in the international market. Since they have more free time than other Chinese residents in Japan (i.e., skilled professionals and students), they can easily establish their own business and manage it. Therefore, many Chinese dependents can earn money in the Chinese market instead of washing dishes and cleaning restrooms in Japan. It can then greatly improve their socio-economic status, hence improve their satisfaction with their life as foreign residents in Japan.

Key Words: Cross-border shopping service, Daigou, Chinese housewives, Japan

Introduction

In recent decades, Chinese women among newcomers to Japan tend to pursue a higher quality of life and social status on their own than was the case with those who arrived in earlier years. A significant number of women are entering Japan through international marriages. An increasing number of newly arrived Chinese women, however, have created their own approach to migration through various types of visas, such as student, dependent, and skilled professionals. Among Chinese nationals in Japan, there have always been more women than men. From 2006 to 2018, the number of Chinese women in Japan jumped from 327,457 to 411,919. The number of Chinese men also increased in that same period from 233,284 to 329,737, a total that is approximately 80,000 fewer men than women.¹

As a significant immigrant group in Japan, Chinese women are also becoming important members of the market economy through various roles, such as through regular employment and self-employ-

[†] Assistant Professor, The Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, WASEDA University

¹ Japanese foreign statistics, from the Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications.
http://www.moj.go.jp/housei/toukei/toukei_ichiran_touroku.html. (December 9, 2018)

ment. Their economic status and activities may affect their quality of life and social standing as foreign residents, and in this way they influence the Japanese labor market. Among Chinese women who are in Japan, housewives with “dependent” visa status have always been considered “outsiders” in the context of Japan’s economy market, and their economic activities have been barely noticed by scholars. Because of their visa status and disadvantages in language proficiency, education, and work experience, their economic status and social status have been limited compared to that of other female residents.

In the past couple of years, however, a new type of cross-border business has flourished in Japan, which has provided more opportunities for Chinese housewives to engage in the international market economy. *Daigou* is a type of shopping service that provides global consumer products to consumers in other countries, passing through cross-market barriers and regional price differences, and those people who provide this service profit from exchange-rate variation, or from taking advantage of differential tax policies (Xie 2018). This international shopping service became popular when cross-border electronic business platforms began growing rapidly in the mid-2000s. A growing demand for quality goods from members of the Chinese middle class created increasing opportunities for cross-border business between China and several countries such as the U.S., Australia, South Korea, and Japan. In recent years especially, goods that are “Made in Japan” are in high demand because of their quality and reliability. This high regard for Japanese products and brands exists, despite some remaining anti-Japanese sentiments in China. Moreover, cross-border commerce relies heavily on favorable currency exchanges, taxation rates, and the price politics of international brands. Therefore, Japan has been seen by consumers as a desirable and modern location (Bofulin and Coates 2017) to obtain consumer goods.

In the last four years, the number of Chinese natives who live in Japan and have opened “*Weidian*” (an online store based on *WeChat* social media) to sell Japanese cosmetics, health foods, and other hard-to-get items has exceeded 450,000. These cross-border shoppers can turn monthly profits of approximately 200,000 to 300,000 yen. Some particularly active buyers accumulate more than 100 million yen in annual sales (Yoshida 2018). Among these Chinese cross-border shoppers who live in Japan, students always have been considered the biggest group. Many engage in cross-border purchasing activities as a part-time job; they gain profits by avoiding higher prices and hefty import and consumption taxes (Yoshida 2018).

Yet, among those Chinese cross-border shoppers in Japan, Chinese housewives have barely been noticed by both media and scholars. Compared to overseas students who pursue academic degrees in Japanese universities, Chinese housewives who live in Japan on a dependent visa are more flexible with their time and capital base. These advantages provide a larger space for them to expand their activities in the cross-border purchasing market. Further, with a different visa status and personal background, Chinese female dependents also display a different social status and sense of well-being compared to other female foreign residents living in Japan. Lacking language proficiency and social connections,

many Chinese female dependents have experienced disjuncture from their earlier lives in China. Others also feel that it is difficult to adapt into Japanese society because of the huge difference between their life before and after migration. In this situation, it is important to discuss whether *Daigou* could help them gain better economic and social status in Japan.

Therefore, this study aims to examine levels of social standing among Chinese dependents in Japan, and the influence of cross-border purchasing activities on them. There are two central questions addressed in this study. Can cross-border shopping help Chinese female dependents overcome disjunctive feelings and a sense of isolation as foreign residents in Japan? How can Chinese female dependents gain better economic and social status through cross-border commercial activities? This research hopes to highlight the significance of engagement among oversea Chinese dependents into the cross-border market, as it fits into the social issues faced by Chinese female migrants.

Literature Review

Compared to female Chinese migrants in other countries, newly arrived Chinese females in Japan face bigger challenge in Japan with regard to gender issues. Japan is known not only for its high life expectancy and its increasingly aging society (Coulmas *et al.* 2008), but also for its relatively traditional, rigid social structures with predetermined life courses and career paths (Sugimoto 2010). These features suggest that gender differences as part of a sense of well-being are more evident in Japan than in other societies (Tiefenbach and Kohlbacher 2013). Although several studies have shown similar results regarding the effects of marriage (Blanchflower and Oswald 2011), the effects of basic control variables such as gender are still a matter of controversy. Regarding gender differences, the international literature finds that women are happier than men (e.g., Blanchflower and Oswald 2004; Frey and Stutzer 2002; Praag and Ferrer-i-Carbonell 2008), whereas in many other studies the size of the gender effect is small or negligible (Tiefenbach and Kohlbacher 2013).

Unlike the arguments advanced by international literature, many Japan-related studies have found rather large happiness gaps between men and women (Sano and Ohtake 2007). It has been found that only a small coefficient of the gender variable (Yamane and Tsutsui 2008). Thus, the gender coefficient even lost significance in some of the research (Oshio and Kobayashi 2011). Indeed, the universal finding is that the gender gap in happiness is rather large in Japan compared to other countries (Tiefenbach and Kohlbacher 2013).

Considering the particular social context in Japan with the gender issue and the significant number of newly arrived Chinese female residents living in Japan with family visa status, how to overcome this gender inequality and gain better economic and social status becomes a crucial issue for female Chinese dependents in Japan. With the emergence and flourishing of new cross-border commerce, *Daigou*, between China and Japan, Chinese housewives who live in Japan have gained more opportunities to expand their economic activities in the international market. With an excellent knowledge of Japanese products and sharp market sense, Chinese housewives in Japan have increasingly acted as

“intermediate shoppers” through networks on social media (Bofulin and Coates 2017).

So far, few studies have been conducted to investigate cross-border shopping services in the U.S. (Zhang 2015), Australia (Martin 2017), and Hong Kong (Xie 2018). Scholars have brought attention to the relationship between the spatial and technological mobility among Chinese people, and have adopted mediated corporeal mobilities to understand the apparatus of uneven mobilities (Xie 2018). Research in the U.S. examined the social media-based cross-border reselling of Western luxury items by Chinese women through the lens of gendered transnational prosumption. Further, they analyzed the paradoxical implications that neoliberal global capitalism’s demand for more agentive and participatory prosuming female subjects has for international feminist politics (Zhang 2015). The scholar argued that through cross-border prosumption, for these Chinese women prosumption becomes a gendered response to the tensions inherent to China’s Post-Socialist modernity. Further, this kind of prosumption provides some women with more choices, and enhanced autonomy, flexibility, and mobility through the strategic performance of gendered identities and networks (Zhang 2015). Although this study explores how the technology-driven restructuring of labor and consumption on a global scale intersects with changing gender regimes in crafting individual subjectivities, Chinese women in the U.S. as observation objects are investigated without segmentation such as visa status. Meanwhile, this study analyzed cross-border shopping activities among Chinese women in the U.S. from a gender perspective. The influence of cross-border prosumption on the social standing of Chinese female migrants’ gender regime, however, still needs further discussion.

The study conducted in Australia drew attention to Chinese female tertiary-level students’ social network practices. It discussed how these students’ work practices link them both to relatively fixed, localized, and diasporic employment networks in Melbourne’s Chinese restaurants and to relatively mobile, transnational, and digitally mediated trading networks in cross-border shopping services: i.e., *Daigou* (Martin 2017). This research argued that geographic moorage and mobility can generate benefits for Chinese overseas students and that social capital cannot operate independently of geography. Further, this study found that Chinese students in Australia turn to *Daigou* at least partly as a result of experiencing exclusion from securing employment in local businesses in Melbourne. That situation, in turn, is partly due to the social capital deficit that they experience as a result of their move away from their home country (Martin 2017). This study provided a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese overseas students’ social network engagement in cross-border shopping services. Another study of mainland China–Hong Kong cross-border shopping services focused on both forms of corporeal mobility and the meanings created in them as relevant factors in mobility politics (Xie 2018). This research argued that mediated corporeal mobilities anchor the unbalanced power relationship in *Daigou*, which is exhibited in the differential performance of corporeal mobilities and the hierarchical classification of people’s corporeal mobilities (Xie 2018). From various perspectives on cross-border shopping services, previous studies investigated overseas females’ transnational reselling activities as “prosumer capitalism,” and the social network and cross-border mobility among Chinese overseas resi-

dents, although some questions remain. For those overseas Chinese who intend to settle down in the host countries, the significance and impact of these new cross-border commercial activities on their integration and migration process need to be investigated. Furthermore, by interrelating that significance with gender issues, the discussion of cross-border shopping services can give a new understanding into the dynamics among overseas Chinese women in the international economy market and to gender stratification in the context of globalization. Therefore, employing qualitative methods, this study will investigate the transformation of social standing and sense of well-being among newly arrived Chinese women in Japan through new economic activities. It will accomplish this by focusing on a group of housewives, and discuss the social and economic benefits that cross-border commercial activities generate.

Methodology

To provide an insight into the context of Chinese female immigrants in Japan and to better understand their cross-border commercial activities, a qualitative method is utilized. The objective is to investigate whether being cross-border shoppers can help Chinese female dependents overcome their sense of isolation and disjuncture as foreign residents in Japan, and how they gain better economic and social status through cross-border commerce. Between 2014 and 2018, interviews with 32 Chinese female dependents were conducted in Tokyo. Informants ranged in ages from 23 to 46 who entered Japan for the first time between 2002 and 2015. Most entered Japan with student or dependent visas. There were possible gaps in social environment and age among the potential respondents. For that reason, informants were limited to those who were the first generation of their family to enter Japan. Chinese women holding regular visa status or who were spouses of Japanese men, trainees, or engaged in specific activities were not included as research subjects. The independent interviews were mainly focused on Chinese female dependents' consciousness of social standing, evaluation of their lives in both Japan and China, and the experiences of engagement in *Daigou* cross-border commercial activities.

Narratives of Newly arrived Chinese housewives in Japan

When large numbers of Chinese came to Japan to study, work, or doing business, some brought their families with them. According to 2018 statistics from the Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications,² 76,752 Chinese came to Japan with dependent visas, comprising 10.35 percent of the total number of Chinese nationals in Japan. Considering that married Japanese women expressed a low degree of satisfaction with their lives as the consequences of their particular migration trajectories and life experiences in Japan, newly arrived Chinese immigrants who entered Japan with

² Japanese foreign statistics 2014, from the Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications. http://www.moj.go.jp/housei/toukei/toukei_ichiran_touroku.html. (December 9, 2018)

“Japanese spouse” visa status were not included as research subjects in this study.

Chinese immigrants that entered Japan with “dependent” visa status moved to Japan with various educational backgrounds and degrees of social status. Some graduated from universities in China with a Bachelor’s or Master’s degree and some even worked as white collar professionals for several years before coming to Japan. Thus, since their arrival in Japan, Chinese women initiated their migration process with different goals and degrees of planning. Some sought to take care of their children and support their spouses while some wanted to go to school or start their own business. Therefore, based on different backgrounds and motivations, their social lives, sense of well-being, evaluation of migrant lives, and adaptation process in Japan also presented a variety of trends.

During my fieldwork with newly arrived female Chinese immigrants to Japan, I found that most of their experiences of communicating with Japanese people occurred in daily lives. The words “oppressive” and “lonely” occurred frequently during my interviews with newly arrived Chinese women who are not only dependents but also students, employees, and permanent residents. These words emerged when these Chinese immigrants described details of their lives and when they see Japanese people around them. When they communicate with Japanese people, they feel the differences between the Japanese and themselves.

Among Chinese dependents in Japan, many have experienced feelings of disjuncture from their prior lives in China. Some also feel that it is hard to adapt into Japanese society because of the huge gap in their lives before and after migration. In addition to economic and emotional support for their spouses, for those Chinese dependents with children in Japan, raising children is their most important “career.” Those Chinese dependents quickly fell into a lower socioeconomic level with a decreased level of satisfaction with their lives. Recent years, however, have seen changes in this situation. Among the female informants I talked with in my fieldwork, all of them were procuring Japanese products, a popular business model known in China as *Daigou*. Through this procurement service, newly arrived Chinese housewives in Japan opened their own business in the international market. They have more free time than other immigrants such as skilled professionals and students, thus they can easily establish and manage their own business. Moreover, there is no language proficiency requirement in conducting this procurement service. Many Chinese dependents can earn money in the Chinese market instead of washing dishes and cleaning toilets in Japan. Thus, it can greatly improve their socio-economic status, hence improve their life satisfaction.

Disjuncture from Previous Life

In order to support their partners’ education or business, many Chinese nationals decided to move abroad to live with their family. From the day these Chinese family members relocated to Japan, their lives totally changed. Yang Hua (32) graduated from university in Xiamen with a Master’s degree. She was able to find a good job in her hometown. When her husband planned to get a PhD from a Japanese university, Yang Hua gave up her former life in Xiamen and moved to Japan with her husband in

2010. For almost two years, Yang Hua only stayed at home or went shopping by herself:

My husband stays at the research room every day. He attends parties with classmates and professors sometimes, but I never join him..... It would be embarrassing if I went there too because they all speak Japanese which I cannot understand..... To me, life in Japan is a little boring, and I always feel that Japan is too oppressive. The Japanese people I see on the street never have any facial expressions, they move like robots.

Not only past work or education experiences caused these disjunctive feelings. The huge gap between their living environment before and after migration also enhanced the negative perceptions of Japan in some newly arrived Chinese housewives. According to my interviews, most informants said they felt Japan was “yayi” (*oppressive*). Wu Minhua (28), felt her marriage has turned into a routine just like Japanese drama shows:

Every night my husband returns around 11pm, he always works overtime. I don't have to prepare dinner for him because he can eat at the cafeteria. Sometimes I am already asleep before he comes home. Then, he leaves around 7am next morning. From Monday to Friday we barely speak more than ten words. The weekend is the only time we can spend time together, but he always has to work on Saturday. On Sunday, he can sleep till the afternoon without eating anything. He says he is just so tired after work. So, you see, this is my marriage, it is pretty much like that of Japanese couples, right?

When these Chinese housewives arrive in Japan, they have to leave behind in China all of their previous personal achievements. Bao Rong (38) was a college teacher in Inner Mongolia. Her husband went to Japan in 2000 to study medical science. One year later, Bao Rong quit her job and followed her husband to Japan with their five-year old son. Although her husband received a scholarship, it is still difficult to financially support three people. Therefore, Bao Rong began to work in a noodle restaurant. She described her life in Japan as follows:

I never learned Japanese before, I was majoring in biology. All I can do in the restaurant is wash dishes and help make noodles. In the first two years, I was almost like a dumb person, unable to speak when I was working. In contrast, the best thing I could do before coming to Japan was speaking and teaching my students. Now my personal life has suddenly changed into a totally different world. It is hard to get used to this life. Nobody cares about my education and prior social status. I am only a regular Chinese woman in the eyes of Japanese people, merely a housewife who washes dishes every day.

Compared with her life before her arrival in Japan, Bao Rong showed some disappointment with her current life in Japan:

All of my life is cooking at home, housecleaning, then going to the restaurant to wash dishes. To be honest, nobody would like this life, but I have to do these things for my family. Once my husband graduates and finds a job, perhaps it will be easier for us. I can stay at home and take care of our son then.

Raising Children as the Only Objective

In addition to providing economic and spiritual support for their spouses, for those Chinese dependents with children in Japan, raising children becomes the most important “career.” As individuals who grew up during the one-child policy implemented in the 1980s, many Chinese who were born in the 1980s and 1990s have experienced attentive care by parents during their childhoods. In recent decades, the subsistence level in China has significantly improved. As a new generation of parents, these Chinese nationals are committed to show more meticulous care for their children. The same phenomenon is also represented among newly arrived Chinese parents. This attitude is especially true when considering Japan’s baby products and its high reputation for education in recent years. An increasing number of Chinese newcomers began to see Japan as an ideal country for raising children. As the quantitative study showed previously, married Chinese nationals in Japan are less likely to be satisfied with their migrant life, but they are more likely to stay in Japan for the long term. The reason for this attitude could be explained by the plans these newly arrived Chinese parents’ have for their children’s education.

In 2014, I joined a “New Mothers Communication Group” in the Tokyo International Exchange Center. In this group, newly arrived Chinese mothers are aged 24 to 32. Most of their children are only between two months and five years of age. Their husbands are mainly skilled professionals, researchers, or graduate students in Tokyo. Yang Hua (32) was the organizer of this group. She was in charge of managing a communication chat group on *Weixin*, and organized offline activities at least once a month. Yang Hua has a one-year-old son, her life revolves around him:

I am so glad to have him. Before he was born, my only relative in Japan was my husband, and he was always busy on his research. Now I have this baby, my life has totally changed. With him, I feel much happier than before. Every day I am around him to change his diapers, feed him milk, and take him out for a walk. I also organized this mother’s group because of him, so that he can make more friends here and I can also exchange parenting experiences with other mothers.

Even though having a baby can significantly improve happiness among newly arrived Chinese

mothers, when compared to other parents in China of the same age, these mothers still expressed thoughts concerning the pressure of childcare. As Yang Hua said:

In China today, young parents like me almost all let their parents help raising grandchildren, or live together so that these grandparents can help at parenting. My mother-in-law also came to help me a couple months earlier but the Immigration Bureau issued a visa only for three months. You can extend the three-month stay only once, then your parents must return to China and cannot apply for visa again for six months. So now I need to take care of my son by myself. It is much more exhausting than a part-time job, especially when your baby is still small. You may not be able to sleep more than three hours each day.

During my fieldwork, some newly arrived Chinese mothers believed that having children allowed them greater opportunities to communicate with Japanese, such as sending a baby to daycare, sending children to school, or even just taking the baby out for a walk. They believed it was a good opportunity to adapt to Japanese society for both their children and themselves. Yet, Wang Fang (30) still felt stressed whenever she went out with her one-year-old daughter:

Public facilities in Japan have done well, but going out with a stroller still requires courage. It is not just that you may take up more space in an elevator or subway, but also when your baby starts crying in public, you always see some impatient looks on the faces of Japanese people. Once, when my husband and I took the subway with our daughter, it was so crowded that we waited for two trains before we could get on one with our stroller. Then, my baby began to cry because there were too many people. One middle-aged Japanese man suddenly said “urusai” (annoying). My husband became angry and began to quarrel with him. The man complained that we should not have brought a stroller on the subway at that time.

Moreover, Japanese-language proficiency is essential for childcare in Japan as foreign parents. Those Chinese mothers who can speak Japanese well are more likely to communicate with the Japanese, yet these Chinese mothers who can barely speak Japanese felt it to be more stressful to talk with Japanese than with other immigrants. As Wang Fang said:

I never learned Japanese before I came here, so I always avoid talking to Japanese when I go out. This year we sent our baby to nursery school. My husband is so busy at work, so I need to take our daughter there every day. The teachers need to tell parents about the baby’s situation and there are many activities that require that the parents attend. I always feel embarrassed because I cannot understand what they are saying and what I need to do. When we attend these activities, Japanese mothers always talk about parenting experiences together, but I cannot join

them, I always like a fool standing on the side.

Without Japanese-language proficiency, some newly arrived Chinese mothers felt that it was difficult to adapt to Japanese society. Almost all of these migrant mothers, however, want to stay in Japan for the long term. "Everything is for the children." These words were spoken frequently by my informants. These newly arrived Chinese mothers all want their children to live in a better environment with excellent public facilities and a high quality of education. Personal perceptions and satisfaction with their lives are not more important than their children. Even though some married Chinese immigrants expressed a low level of satisfaction with their life during the interview of my fieldwork, they still want to stay in Japan for their children's education.

Form Self Isolator to Business Owner in International Markets

Among Chinese dependents in Japan, many have experienced disjunctive feelings from their previous life. Some others also feel it is hard to adapt into Japanese society because of the huge gap between their pre- and post-immigration lives. Those Chinese dependents fell to a low socioeconomic status with diminished satisfaction with their lives. In recent years, however, the situation has been changed. According to my fieldwork with newly arrived Chinese housewives, all of those I met with are conducting procurement service for Japanese products, a popular Chinese business model in China called *Daigou*. These Chinese immigrants use the *Taobao* website or *Weidian* as a platform to display Japanese products, and sell them to customers in China. Japanese items such as electronics, cosmetics, and baby products have earned a high reputation in the Chinese market, many Chinese consumers prefer to spend more money for items made in Japan. Therefore, some Chinese immigrants have opened their own businesses in the international market through this procurement service. This situation is especially true for those Chinese dependents in Japan that have more free time than other immigrants, such as skilled professionals and students. They can easily establish their own business and manage it. Moreover, there is no language proficiency requirement in operating the procurement service. Many Chinese dependents can earn money in the Chinese market instead of washing dishes and cleaning restrooms in Japan. It can then greatly improve their satisfaction with their life as immigrants.

When I met Li Jing (32) in Tokyo, she had been engaged in procuring Japanese products for over a year since 2013. Previously, she was working as a bank employee in Chongqing, since 2006. To support husband's career, Li Jing moved to Japan with a dependent visa:

My husband said his salary is enough for our livelihood, so I don't have to go out to work. But without friends and other family members here, life in Japan is really boring..... I remember it was 2013, one of my friends in China asked if I could buy some cosmetic products from Japan and mail them to her. After I did her that favor, more and more friends and acquaintances in

China asked me to buy Japanese products for them. I thought that maybe I could establish my own business, I can use Weixin to display those products so there are basically no operating costs. Now I sell lots of Japanese products to China, including clothes, cosmetics, and baby products. My life has also become fulfilling than before and sometimes I am even busier than my husband.

By opening a new business in the Chinese market, Li Jing felt that she is much “*kaixin*” (happier) than before:

The most important thing for me is that I can talk to Chinese customers on the internet every day. I was depressed because of my poor Japanese language ability before, but now I don't have to speak Japanese, and I can earn money. It is really great.

Besides mitigating the language problem, the procurement service also showed significant effects on reducing stress on some Chinese mothers from both economic and emotional perspectives. For instance, although Han Yuan (27) husband has a stable job in a Japanese enterprise, her mother-in-law still felt unsatisfied with her dependent residency in Japan:

She always asked me if I would like to find a job when we use WeChat to video chat. I know she doesn't like to see me rely on her son. She thought I should also earn money for this family. I tried to do part-time work in a fast food restaurant, but it was too dirty and tiring, and the wage was only 800 yen per hour. I could barely earn 70,000 yen a month at that time and this money could not even cover our house rent.

Since 2014, Han Yuan started her business on *Weixin*. She found a partner in China, helping her with displays and customer service. She soon opened a market in the Chinese market. When I interviewed her in 2017, she had already earned over 180,000 yen per month.

I was just trying to prove myself to my mother-in-law. Now she never says anything like that anymore. I feel much more relaxed because I don't have to listen to her complaints and it is also good for me, with the income from this business. I don't have to ask my husband for an allowance. I can go shopping and buy clothes and bags, and I only have to work three days each week. I feel satisfied with my life for now.

For those newly arrived Chinese dependents in Japan, the business of procurement service helped them achieve an improved economic status even without possessing language proficiency. Although they may still be isolated from Japanese society because of lack of communication with Japanese, their

zero-cost business still allows them to feel more satisfied with their migrant life than they had been before. In addition, by exploring business in China, these Chinese dependents who had earlier suffered disjunctive feelings in Japan were finally able to regain their earlier socioeconomic status. Additionally, they are more likely to engage in the international market through the procurement of Japanese products. Thus, their economic status has improved over what it had been before, a situation that also enhances their willingness to stay in Japan.

Conclusion

By focusing on cross-border shopping services and gender stratification among overseas residents in Japan, this study investigates whether and how *Daigou*—overseas shopping services—has helped newly arrived Chinese housewives overcome social isolation and achieve better economic status in Japan. Employing in-depth interviews with newly arrived Chinese housewives in Tokyo, this study explores the experiences of disjuncture from previous lives of Chinese women who entered Japan with dependent visa status. To support their partners' career development and while raising children, many Chinese, especially female migrants, moved to Japan as family members. Although most had gained higher education and work experiences in their home country, gender stratification and the pressure of child raising strictly constrained their social standing in mainstream Japanese society. Because of the uselessness of their former human capital (i.e., their social and educational achievements and background), many Chinese housewives have no choice but stay at home. These newly arrived Chinese housewives must see a drop in their prior socio-economic status in China and adapt into new migrant lives. Furthermore, those Chinese women who have entered Japan as dependents have difficulties participating in the Japanese labor market, such as lacking both Japanese language ability and social connections. Such difficulties have resulted in their living in relative isolation. Although some family members try to engage with the Japanese labor market through part-time jobs, the low-wage jobs only reduced their socio-economic status. In order to stay with their family and plan for their children's education, most Chinese family members in Japan still expressed a strong intention to stay in Japan even though they are not satisfied with their migrant lives.

This situation has changed in the past few years. With the rapid growth of the middle class in China, the demand for quality products from other countries has increased, and overseas Chinese housewives opened up their new businesses in the cross-border commerce market. They accomplished this through time flexibility, knowledge of Japanese products, and a sharp sense of the market. Without any market access threshold, such as Japanese language proficiency, knowledge of professional electronic commerce knowledge, or capital funding, *Daigou* allows Chinese housewives to gain an improved socio-economic status in order to overcome isolation in the host country and thus improve their social standing as newly arrived Chinese overseas housewives.

These newly arrived Chinese cross-border shoppers, however, may face a new round of challenges. On January 1, 2019, the Chinese government implemented a new E-commerce law that was passed on

August 31, 2018. This new E-commerce law requires that cross-border shoppers (*Daigou* purchasers) complete a registration process, if necessary, obtain relevant licenses, pay taxes, and avoid breaking advertising laws. From now on, *Daigou* purchasers using ecommerce platforms will come under increased scrutiny, as E-commerce platforms are forced to more carefully assess the safety and authenticity of goods circulating on their platforms as well as the credentials of the merchants selling those products (Tao 2018). The motivation of the Chinese government is to regulate online merchants and E-commerce platforms, apparently concentrating on the *Daigou* shopping service. The new form of cross-border business activity has become a major concern, even though *Daigou* has not been specifically addressed by the new E-commerce law. The general requirements articulated in the law have profound implications for cross-border shoppers (Tao 2018).

Under the terms of this environment, those newly arrived Chinese housewives who have finally found a way to overcome the social homogeneity, gender barriers, and financial hurdles through cross-border shopping services may lose their international business opportunities. The cross-border shoppers will be under strict supervision by E-commerce platforms and the Chinese government. There will be a higher threshold for the international purchasing market, which will make online business more difficult. Moreover, purchasing goods abroad and selling them to Chinese consumers through online shops without registration can be considered as tax evasion with a high risk of punishment or even arrest. By losing the advantages they have gained as cross-border shoppers, it will be more difficult for newly arrived Chinese housewives to achieve a better socio-economic status and settle down in Japan for the long term.

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