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Revisiting Gender Inequality
Perspectives from the People's Republic of China
Edited by Qi Wang, Min Dongchao, and Bo Ærenlund Sørensen

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*Revisiting Gender Inequality: Perspectives from the People's Republic of China*
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# *Revisiting Gender Inequality*

## *Perspectives from the People's Republic of China*

*Edited by*

*Qi Wang, Min Dongchao, and Bo Ærenlund Sørensen*

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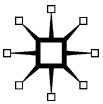


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# *Contents*

# *Illustrations*

## Figures



## Tables

# *Series Editor's Foreword*

In April 2015, a transnational mobilization of feminist activists, in solidarity with Chinese feminists organizing to secure the release of five feminist activists, known as China's Feminist Five, catapulted key feminist issues of sexual harassment, violence against women, and growing gender inequality in China into the global media. The Feminist Five—Wei Tingting, Li Tingting (Li Maizi), Wu Rongrong, Wang Man, and Zheng Churan (Datu)—were detained on the suspicion of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" after they had planned a multicity protest aimed at bringing an end to sexual harassment on public transport. They represent an increasingly vocal group of young activists who are taking to the Internet and the streets to voice their anger at the growing sexism and gender inequality in China today. Sexual harassment; economic inequity; gendered wage gaps; violence against women' and patriarchal ideologies of domesticity, marriage, and womanhood (the so-called leftover women) all take center stage in feminist struggles in the China of 2015. *Revisiting Gender Inequality: Perspectives from the People's Republic of China*, brings together feminist research on gender inequality published in China between 2009 and 2013. These translated essays provide a coherent picture of the last four decades of economic reforms and market development in China and the subsequent struggles for gender equality. *Revisiting Gender Inequality* is thus uniquely positioned to challenge the hegemony of Western knowledge about China, and is a perfect fit for the Comparative Feminist Studies (CFS) series.

*Revisiting Gender Inequality* addresses key questions for knowledge production and access to readers in the West. Asking questions about *what* Western readers know about gender inequality in China, and also *how* we know what we know, that is, raising questions about the structuring, translation, and travel of knowledges across cultural, linguistic, and geopolitical borders, the book interjects the voices of Chinese feminist scholars on gender inequality to "counterbalance the overwhelming predominance of non-Chinese academic works related to gender and gender inequality in China." The introduction thus argues that the positionality of the scholars in this collection is a potential corrective to the "possible bias of international scholarship on women in China" (Introduction, 6–7).

The CFS series takes up fundamental analytic and political issues involved in the cross-cultural production of knowledge about women and feminism, examining the politics of scholarship and knowledge in relation to feminist organizing and social justice movements. It is designed to foreground writing, organizing, and reflection on feminist trajectories across the historical and cultural borders of nation-states. Drawing on feminist thinking in a number of fields, the CFS series targets innovative, comparative feminist scholarship, pedagogical and curricular strategies, and community organizing and political education. It explores a comparative feminist praxis that addresses some of the most urgent questions facing progressive critical thinkers and activists today.

Over the past many decades, feminists across the globe have been variously successful at addressing fundamental issues of oppression and liberation. In our search for gender justice in the early twenty-first century, however, we inherit a number of the challenges our mothers and grandmothers have faced. But there are also new challenges to face as we attempt to make sense of a world indelibly marked by the failure of settler-colonial and postcolonial (and advanced) capitalist and communist nation-states to provide for the social, economic, spiritual, and psychic needs of the majority of the world's population. In the year 2015, globalization has come to represent the interests of corporations and the free market rather than self-determination and freedom from political, cultural, and economic domination for all the world's peoples. The project of US-empire building and the rise of Islamophobia in that country and Europe, alongside the dominance of corporate capitalism and neoliberalism, kills, disenfranchises, and impoverishes women everywhere. Militarization, environmental degradation, heterosexist state practices, religious fundamentalisms, sustained migrations of peoples across the borders of nations and geopolitical regions, environmental crises, and the exploitation of women's labor by capital all pose profound challenges for feminists at this time. Neoliberal economic policies and discourses of development and progress mark yet another form of colonial/imperial governance, masking the exercise of power over people's lives through claims of empowerment. In China, economic reforms and capitalist market development have led to profoundly negative consequences for women. Recovering and remembering insurgent histories, and seeking new understandings of political subjectivities and citizenship, has never been so important, in these times marked by social amnesia, global consumer culture, and the worldwide mobilization of fascist notions of "national security."

These are some of the very challenges the CFS series is designed to address. The series takes as its fundamental premise the need for feminist engagement with global as well as local ideological, historical, economic, and political processes, and the urgency of transnational dialogue in building an ethical culture capable of withstanding and transforming the commodified and exploitative practices of global governance structures, culture and economics. Individual volumes in the CFS series provide systemic and challenging interventions into the (still) largely Euro-Western feminist studies knowledge base, while simultaneously highlighting the work that can and needs to be done to envision and enact cross-cultural, multiracial feminist solidarity. Thus, *Revisiting Gender Inequality* is a perfect fit for this series.

*Revisiting Gender Inquality* suggests that feminist positionality and the notion of "intercultural translation" within the theoretical framework of "epistemologies of the South" (developed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos) are together key to dismantling global power relations of knowledge and producing counter-hegemonic knowledges anchored in the lived realties of women in China. In addition, essays in this book engage in a deep critique of China's capitalist development, arguing that the new left critique of China's economic reforms are inadequate since they do not address the deeply gendered consequences of the market economy. Authors tackle issues of gender bias and gender insensitivity head-on, challenging normative discourses of the state, development policy, as well as mainstream intellectual thought.

A volume that will be of interest to scholars and activists alike—one that helps us "see" what we so often miss in the grand narratives of revolutions, social movements, and knowledge paradigms, and one that provides an important and insightful corrective to discourses of gender inequality in contemporary China.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty
Series Editor, Ithaca, New York

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# *Introduction*

*Qi Wang*

The idea for this book sprung from a meeting between the two editors, Qi Wang and Min Dongchao, and their colleague, senior researcher Cecilia Milwertz at NIAS (the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies) in the spring of 2013. Dongchao had just been granted an EU Marie Curie International Incoming Fellowship within the Seventh European Community Framework Programme and had moved to the NIAS in Copenhagen to start her two-year project titled "Cross-Cultural Encounters—The Travels of Gender Theory and Practice to China (and the Nordic Countries)." And since the project is about how feminist gender theories "travelled" to China, we talked about a potential travelogue in the opposite direction, namely a translation of scholarly works from China to the outside world. We all liked the idea, not only because it matched Dongchao's project very well, but also because we, as scholars of two cultures, have constantly travelled between different cultures in our research and have personally experienced the importance of cross-cultural dialogue in knowledge production. We have particularly recognized that, in our globalized world, knowledge/theories travel mainly from the West to the non-West, particularly from the United States and Europe to other parts of the world, whereas the flow in the opposite direction are very rare (Costa 2000; Min 2008; Thayer 2010).

Soon after our meeting, the Ford Foundation office in Beijing announced that it would provide funding to a number of projects aimed at disseminating the legacy of the United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. We applied for funding with our book proposal, and had the great fortune of being awarded a grant. At the time of application, the title of our book project was still "Reversing the Travelling—Transnational Feminism from China to the World." We then started to search for the articles to be included, and after a while, we realized that among the many articles we had skimmed through, quite a number dealt with gender inequality and they could be brought together to produce a coherent volume of contemporary studies on gender inequality in present-day China. So we decided to change the title and make gender inequality

the central theme of this translation project. It was a pity that in the process of writing the publication proposal, Cecilia Milwertz had to withdraw from the editing team due to practical obstacles, but we were lucky to get Bo Ærenlund Sørensen on board, and he made the translation process proceed as smoothly as we had hoped.

What has finally emerged is an edited and translated collection of studies on gender inequality in China. It brings together nine recent and robust research articles that were originally written in Chinese and published in China in the period spanning 2009 to 2013. These articles address and analyze numerous issues of gender inequality in current Chinese society from various analytical angles. To translate these studies into English and make them available to an English-reading audience is a cross-cultural knowledge production project, and such a project reflects a number of concerns from the editors' side. These concerns will be addressed one by one in the following paragraphs, where we will also outline the context in which these nine Chinese studies of gender inequality should be read and understood.

## Gender Inequality: Perspectives from China—Why?

It is widely acknowledged that China's economic reforms and market development of the past four decades have resulted in multidimensional inequality and a widening of the social gap. China, according to Wang Ban and Lu Jie, "has been evolving toward a polarized society of extreme wealth and poverty.... Unemployment, poverty, and human suffering are becoming part of the daily routine" (Wang and Lu 2012, ix). In the words of Sun Wanning and Guo Yingjie, the economic reforms have "transformed China from one of the world's most egalitarian societies into one of the most unequal in Asia and the world" (Sun and Guo 2013, 1). It is also widely acknowledged that the surging inequality in Chinese society is highly gendered. The market reforms have caused more negative consequences for women than for men, and China's successful economic development has led to a strong backlash against gender equality across socioeconomic, political, and cultural domains.

While there is a growing body of literature on inequality[1] and the situation of women in China (Cai 2006; Chen 2008; Entwisle and Henderson 2000; Gaetano and Jacka 2013; Jacka 1997, 2006; Judd 1996; Lee 1998; McLaren 2005; and Pun 2005), book-length studies focusing on gender inequality in China are still quite rare.

The most recent ones include Leta Hong Fincher's *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China* (2014), Eileen M. Otis's *Market and Bodies: Women, Service Work, and the Making of Inequality in China* (2012), Pauline Stoltz et al.'s *Gender Equality, Citizenship and Human Rights: Controversies and Challenges in China and the Nordic Countries* (2010) and Xiaowei Zang's *Gender and Chinese Society, Volume II: Gender Discrimination and Inequalities* by Routledge (2014). The first two are single-author monographs devoted to one specific theme of inequality; the third is a multi-authored anthology addressing a number of challenges and controversies facing gender equality in/between China and the Nordic Countries, while the last one is a compiled collection of previously published articles on topics concerning gender, marriage, family, gender inequality, gender and migration, and gender and empowerment. Apart from these books, there is, of course, a large number of studies on gender inequality in China in either article or book chapter form.[2] The immediate aim of the editors in the editing this book is to contribute one more book-length study on gender inequality in China.

But the book is more than that. One thing the editors kept in mind during this project was not what/how much we (the Western audience) know about gender inequality in China, but rather *how* we know it. And this, in turn, brings up the questions of how that knowledge is structured and of how we conceive of the underlying power constellation. Over the past decades, a number of English translations of Chinese scholarly works on gender issues have been made available due to the growing transnational feminist activism and scholarly exchange. However, the number of such translations is still relatively small in comparison to what has been produced in China, and most of the translated works pertain to a few internationally well-known Chinese feminist thinkers, such as Li Xiaojiang and Dai Jinhua.[3] That is to say, the knowledge structure about gender and gender inequality in China available to the Western audience consists mainly of either international scholarly work about China or translated works by a few prominent Chinese feminists.

There is thus a "lack" of knowledge of how Chinese scholars treat the phenomenon of gender inequality and how various gender inequality issues are addressed and analyzed by Chinese academics. This lack constitutes a serious "deficit" in our knowledge structure about gender inequality in China, and it is this deficit that our book aims to offset. As a translation project, this book collects a bouquet of novel and robust research articles on gender inequality from China. In making these studies available to an international audience, we aim to

introduce the Chinese academic venue of knowledge production concerning gender and gender inequality in twenty-first century China and present perspectives from China. Such an endeavor, we strongly believe, will counterbalance the overwhelming predominance of non-Chinese academic works related to gender and gender inequality in China. In particular, the importance of bringing in perspectives from China is premised on a number of concerns as described as follows.

## *The Question of Positionality*

First of all, we aim to draw more attention to the question of "positionality" in feminist research about China. For quite a long time, Western feminist scholars have been wrestling with the potential danger of bias and power relations in knowledge production about other women. They then come to terms with the question of the "position," or "positioning" of the researchers, and see it as "the key practice of grounding knowledge" (Haraway 1991, 193) because position "indicates the kind of power that enabled a certain kind of knowledge" (Rose 1997, 308). The feminist "positionality" literature, according to Deianira Ganga and Sam Scott, has since then developed into a vast and multicolored body of scholarship, springing from different disciplines and disciplinary cultures (Ganga & Scott 2006). This literature deems it both important and necessary to "make one's position vis a vis research *known* rather than invisible, and to *limit* one's conclusions rather than making grand claims about their universal applicability" (Mattingly and Falconer-Al-Hindi 1995, 428–29; quoted in Rose 1997, 308), given that "a researcher's positionality (in terms of race, nationality, age, gender, social and economic status, sexuality) may influence the 'data' collected and thus the information that becomes coded as 'knowledge'" (Madge 1993, 296; quoted in Rose 1997, 308).

Because positionality matters and influences both the process and the result of knowledge production, we have enough reason to believe that researchers from various "positionings" (be it geographical, political, and cultural) may treat the same subject differently, adopt different approaches, and come to different conclusions. Knowledge about gender and gender inequality in China is, thus, as feminist knowledge in general, "situated," and this "situatedness" only "produce[s] partial perspectives on the world" (Rose 1997, 308). Here the center of our concern is not so much with the possible bias of international scholarship on women in China, although that is indeed an issue of

our concern in a broad sense. What we derive from the feminist positionality literature is rather how the scarcity or invisibility of Chinese scholarship in the bulk of our knowledge about gender and gender inequality in China contributes to what is (still) a lack of knowing about how the problem of gender inequality is dealt with by Chinese academics from their own specific positionality, and how this lack constitutes a serious challenge to our knowledge structure and cognitive impartiality. The translation of these nine studies of gender inequality in China, and from China, can be seen as our effort to bring out the Chinese perspectives from the various different positionings of Chinese scholars. This, we believe, will be the pathway that leads to a well-balanced, democratic knowledge structure and knowledge "plurality."

## *The Epistemologies of the South*

We are also inspired by what Boaventura de Sousa Santos terms the "epistemologies of the South" (Santos 2012). In his study of "the public sphere"—"one of the key concepts of the social theory produced in the global North" (Santos 2012, 43)—Santos asks the question of whether the global South "needs this concept" that has "theoretical and cultural presuppositions [which] are entirely European" (ibid.). He points out that "the social theories produced in the global North are not necessarily universally valid" (ibid., p. 45), and that concepts like "the public sphere" have become hegemonic as they may leave out much of the political reality in the global South or even make it invisible. Santos advocates the construction of an epistemology of the South on two premises: one is the infinite diversity of the world, and the other is the prospect of achieving a much broader understanding of the world than the Western way of understanding. In the same vein, Raewyn Connell writes about "reconstructing the sociology of gender from Southern perspectives" (Connell 2014, 13) to counter the sociology of gender as "mostly Western scholarship on gender and globalization" (Acker 2004, 17; quoted from Connell 2014, 4) in terms of both quantities and theoretical frameworks.

One of the steps toward an epistemology of the South, according to Santos, is intercultural translation. Intercultural translation is a procedure that "allows for mutual intelligibility among the experiences of the world, both available and possible" (Santos 2012, 58). Here he is talking about the "translation of knowledge" that "assumes the form of a 'diatopical hermeneutics'" (ibid., p. 59) in either "interpreting

two or more cultures" or "translating among various conceptions of wisdom and different visions of the world and the cosmos" (ibid.). Santos regards translation as "even more important as a new counter-hegemonic or anti-systemic movement took shape," since the work of translation "becomes crucial to define, in each concrete and historical moment or context, which constellation of subaltern practices carry more counter-hegemonic potential" (ibid., p. 61). In line with Santos's thinking, we do see power relations in the global body of knowledge—including gender knowledge—and we believe that, as Santos puts it, "there is no global justice without global cognitive justice" (Santos 2006, 14). By engaging in this piece of translation work, we hope to bring more focus to the gender knowledge produced in China and promote cross-cultural dialogue on a more equal basis (Min Dongchao 2014).

## Gender Inequality Research as a Domestic Critique of Capitalism

In recent years, there has been a revitalized concern over social inequality within China and a rising intellectual reflection and critique of the growth-focused development path that China has followed so far. The articles in this collection raise a strong criticism of gender inequality and of the various gendered manifestations of social inequality, and they can therefore be seen as a part of the large anti-capitalism choir that is surging in China at the moment. Gender inequality research in China is thus not a purely academic undertaking without social relevance. Rather, it is a form of social critique and social activism that is deeply rooted in the intellectual's sense of social conscience and social justice. But gender inequality research also stands out in the concerted intellectual critique of China's capitalist development. For from the vantage point of gender, the authors cut deeply through the gendered fabric of socioeconomic structures and hence provide a sharper and more thorough analysis of the nature of capitalism. The timeliness and importance of this kind of research-based social activism can never be overestimated, given the gravity of the gender inequality problem in current Chinese society and the lack of concern over gender and the gendered consequences of China's capitalist development in the mainstream intellectual and political analysis of social inequality.

Historically speaking, there has always been an intersection between the national struggle for modernization and women's liberation. Since the dawn of the modern era in the middle of the nineteenth century, great Chinese revolutionaries/reformists have all forcefully argued that China's modernization will not succeed without a fundamental change to women's position in society. China's weakness was entangled with the oppression of women to such a degree that any movement for a strong and modern China had to "put gender equality on the agenda" (Davin 2008, 452) and start with freeing women from the joke of the patriarchal tradition. The May Fourth Movement in 1919 "made the 'Women's Question' central to its debates and demands" (ibid.), and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), conceived in the womb of the May Fourth Movement, used laws and various affirmative policies to push forward the course of women's liberation by granting women equal rights with men to productive, social, and political participation. Whether it was in the CCP-controlled base areas of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, or in the new People's Republic of China periods, such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, women's liberation has become the hallmark of Chinese revolution and socialist development.

The historical juncture between national development and women's liberation, however, cracked when China embarked on its ambitious journey toward "the four modernizations" in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The shift from socialism to a market economy, according to the reform leadership, would at the first stage result in a well-off (小康 *xiaokang*) society and a significant improvement of Chinese citizens' material life. The departure point for such a vision of development, however, was not to let everybody get rich, but rather to let a few get rich first. What echoes through this liberal rhetoric of reform is the newly achieved consensus among China's political and intellectual elite that China had, over the course of the socialist period, achieved excessive gender equality at the expense of fair competition and economic efficiency. Retrenchment, therefore, had to be allowed and it was made explicit for the first time in CCP history that national development did not necessarily go hand-in-hand with gender equality and women's development.

Through the 1990s and 2000s, as China's economy developed rapidly, Chinese society became increasingly polarized. It is within this context that the New Left emerged and neo-liberal development thinking was called into question. The liberals and the rising New

Left intellectuals "constantly clashed over both the strategies and outcome of the reform" and debated back and forth on "issues such as the state vs. market, economic nationalism vs. globalization, equity vs. growth, fairness vs. efficiency" (Li 2010, 6; Freeman and Yuan 2012; Xu 2003; Narayanan 2007; Mishra 2006; Rofel 2012). The New Leftists emphasize "economic justice, not just economic growth at any price," and they view "the complete divorce from the redistributionist ideals of Marxist communism as callous and immoral" (Li 2010, 12). They "favor a strong state…arguing for a strong government to regulate the market" and to "act vigorously to counter what they see as the unacceptable inequalities and injustices created by the past thirty years of market-oriented reform" (Li 2010, 7). One of the New Left's concerns is the so-called s*annong* (three rurals), which is shorthand for discussing issues concerning the plight of *nongmin* (peasants), *nongye* (agriculture), and *nongcun* (rural communities) (Pocha 2005).

The rise of the New Left has generated much hope among international as well as domestic anti-capitalist forces, for the New Leftists challenge "China's current market reforms with a simple message: that China's failed 20th-century experiment with communism cannot be undone in the 21st century by embracing 19th-century-style, laissez-faire capitalism" (Pocha 2005, 25). They "oppose a neoliberal market economy, want increased social welfare, argue for greater democratic participation (but without formal elective democracy), and support more assertive foreign policies" (Hook 2007, 9). The New Left critique of China's capitalist development is, however, incomplete and inadequate, due to its ignorance and indifference to the gendered consequences of the market economy. Though preoccupied with the problem of inequality and social stratification in general, the New Left intellectuals seldom bother to care about women's conditions.

Take the key issue of the New Leftists—the new rural construction discourse—as an example. According to Tamara Jacka, the "new rural construction discourse offers very little space for those concerned to overcome the injustices faced by rural women" (Jacka 2013, 994). Scholars behind the new rural construction discourse, such as Wen Tiejun and He Xuefeng, "emphasize the distinctiveness of Chinese peasant economy and society, and simultaneously elide gender and other differences and inequalities within rural communities" (ibid.). As such, "there is no significant recognition of or concern about gender injustice" (ibid., p. 993). Both scholars "mention women only rarely and, when they do it, it is usually to portray them as a problem, rather than as key agents and subjects of rural (re)construction" (ibid.,

p. 998). Moreover, neither of them "recognizes the gender-specific injustices and difficulties faced by women" (ibid.).

Within this context, research on gender inequality is not only a part of the anti-capitalist voice that is rising in China, but also a powerful and sharp-edged criticism of the gender-neglecting stance of the anti-capitalist, left-oriented intellectual elite. Most of the articles in this collection either forcefully argue or tacitly imply that the consequences of Chinese capitalist development cannot be completely decoded and thereby discredited without fully taking the gender dimension of inequality and women's suffering into account. Thus, although these articles were not originally written for the purpose of public debate, it is quite obvious that the scholars are raising a critical voice from the platform of research. As the New Left, widely regarded as the guardian of social equity and equality, fails to recognize the gendered nature of social inequality in Chinese society and ignores the relevance of gender for social analysis, academic gender research becomes the stronghold from where researchers can launch their counteroffensives and voice their cry for gender equality and social justice.

A distinct feature of this collection is that the authors examine the issue of gender inequality with a well-adjusted dual approach. One side of this approach is to situate gender inequality in the larger context of social disparity in Chinese society and conceptualize it as a ramification of social inequality. The other is to "gender" social inequality by highlighting both the central place of gender in resource distribution and also how social inequality is inevitably "gendered." Issue-wise, the focus of the included articles is directed to gender inequality at two interrelated levels. Some of the articles concern various forms/patterns of gender inequality associated directly with labor and the labor market in areas such as employment, labor division, and income. Some of the other articles focus more on social stratification and the multifaceted consequences of rising social inequality in Chinese society for women and gender. Due to the balance in approach and focus, the authors present us with both a panoramic overview of the landscape of gender inequality in China and an in-depth analysis of specific themes.

While demonstrating the deepening of gender inequality and social injustice in China's reform, the authors also look far beyond the horizon of the current capitalist development. For them, the market economy is one of the major sources of gender inequality, but certainly not the only one. In their writings, many of the authors have critically examined the legacy of socialism and state feminism in terms of

both theory and policy practice. Their analyses illuminate the built-in limitations of state feminism and many of the pro-women policies of the past socialist period and show how women-friendly state policies can carry within them constraints and gender–blind spots. Some of the research looks back further to China's century-long patriarchal tradition in order to identify the root of today's gender inequality. Altogether, the articles contextualize the various issues of gender inequality across a wide historical-political horizon and show convincingly how gender inequality derives from multiple sources, such as tradition, state feminism, modernization, and the market economy—and very often from the convergence of these elements.

## Research as a Form of Social Activism: Academic Handcraft and Strategizing

The chapters in this book are also part of an active dialogue with the state, the official development discourse, and mainstream intellectual thinking. While addressing various gender inequality issues, the authors attempt to engage the mainstream academia, the policy-makers, and the mainstream media in a dialogue about the nature/extent of gender inequality and the potential of possible policy interventions. Although the dialogue is still in its initial stage, many of the authors are directly or indirectly questioning the neo-liberal logic and many discriminative aspects of the socioeconomic policies and practices. They are openly critical towards the propensity for gender insensitivity, gender blindness, and gender bias that often permeate mainstream development thinking, governmental policies, and media representation of social reality.

In the Chinese political and academic context, research can carry an agenda of political or social critique, and researchers often play the role of "public intellectuals" (Michael 2000; Misztal 2007). In addition, researchers also see themselves as the ones who shoulder the responsibility to enlighten, inform, and educate the general public. This form of academic "social activism," however, has to observe the normative rules of academic "handcraft" and operate within a carefully delineated and negotiated space so that it will be both "scientific" and critical at the same time. For this reason, much of the critique and the critical messages embodied in these research articles are either "coded" or "camouflaged" and may not appear directly obvious to the eyes of Western readers. Here the question is how Chinese

scholars say things between the lines and disguise their critical messages under the cover of "scientific" claims.

One thing we should keep in mind is that in the current Chinese domestic debates about the course of economic development, anti-capitalist voices as those aired in these articles go against the "tide" and hence have to "arm" themselves with the strongest possible "arsenal." One such "weapon" is statistics: national statistics and preferably statistics from various international sources such as the United Nations and the World Bank. While the importance of statistics in supporting/verifying research results (whether quantitative or qualitative) is obvious to academic professionals, there is a commonly held sense that sound research must stay critical toward statistics and be able to reflect upon the possible flaws and built-in biases of statistics. This common sense is found not only in the Western academic tradition; it is also widely held and well observed within Chinese academia.

Having said so, however, there is a slight tendency among Chinese academics to use and treat statistics rather pragmatically, especially statistics from world and international organizations. In a pure academic sense, this touch of "statistic pragmatism," as our readers may detect from some of the articles in this collection, may be interpreted as a lack of critical and independent thinking. However, Chinese scholars from their specific domestic positioning often employ statistics for strategic reasons, particularly when they are uttering counterarguments or critical point of views. As some of the articles show, statistics are used as evidence of some "indisputable hard facts" in the vein of, "Hey, look, the statistics say so!" This unspoken power of hard statistics is premised partly on the "scientific" outlook of statistics and partly on the prestigious positions of statistics producers. Statistics from international organizations, for instance, are often believed to be more authoritative and reliable because they originate from authorities higher than the national state, and they are often used as a vantage point in academic writing with an agenda of social criticism.

Other "weapons" that Chinese scholars (of the public intellectual type) have at their disposal consist of country examples from the West and Western social science theories, including gender theories. References to this kind of sources in academic reasoning not only provide the authors an international-oriented air, a broad view angle, but also a strong legitimizing effect, since these sources embody a universal value of humanism. These sources form a stark contrast to

the social reality of inequality in China and can hence be relied on as a supporting foundation for the scholars' advocacy for change. Since the dawn of modern China in the middle of the nineteenth century, Chinese progressive intellectuals have, for the most part, looked westward for enlightenment and theoretical inspirations in their fight to modernize China. Here again, Western sources of inspiration can be used in a somewhat pragmatic manner. Scholars may snatch a case, a theory, or a concept without thoroughly examining the historical, political and cultural contexts of these sources and without engaging in a deeper reflection of the relevance of these sources to the Chinese sociopolitical reality. This is not because these scholars are incapable of doing so, but rather because, in the Chinese context, knowing some Western sources is already an advantage in itself. The authors employ Western sources either in support of their own criticism of gender inequality in China or as a justification of the changes they have proposed.

## Chapters of the Book

The nine research articles in this book are written by Chinese scholars from various disciplines, including political science, sociology, anthropology, legal studies, gender studies, history, cultural studies, and economics. Some of the contributors are well-known gender specialists who have written and published extensively in China over a long period of time, whereas others are relatively young scholars who have distinguished themselves lately with an excellent record of writing and performing research both in their field of training and in gender studies. Most of the articles contained in this book were published in China in the period between 2009 and 2013. In addition, the book also contains one article written specifically for this collection. The articles have been chosen for their strong focus on gender inequality and their well-grounded and insightful analysis of specific issues of gender inequality.

A shared characteristic of these articles is their solid rooting in existing gender inequality issues and the authors' shrewd theoretical analysis on the basis of solid empirical evidence and research. As scholars living in China, the authors not only witness various forms of gender inequality on a day-to-day basis, they also provide a fresh and close observation of how gender inequality is discussed and dealt with in terms of political discourse and government policies. Most of

the authors have conducted thorough in-depth field work and base their arguments on this research. The studies thus display a unique freshness and closeness of observation and a deep insightfulness. As a whole, these studies reveal not only the covert and overt impact of the market economy, government policies, traditions, changing values, and media representations of gender inequality, they also point to how these forces converge to reinforce gender inequality in today's Chinese society.

The book covers a variety of topics concerning gender inequality. About half of the articles address gender inequality in rural China, while the other half focus primarily on urban areas. Altogether, the chapters cover a wide range of issues, including gender discrimination on the labor market, the imbalanced sex ratio at birth, working-time rights, new urban poverty, women and the rural crisis, left-behind women, and village women's participation in rural community affairs. The book does not include studies on migrant women workers and "leftover" women not because these topics are less important, but rather because these topics have already been fairly well covered by the international scholarship of gender and China.

Chapter One, "Gender (In)Equality and China's Economic Transition" by Liu Bohong, Li Ling, and Yang Chunyu, draws a general view of the gendered consequences of China's economic reforms. With a focus on employment opportunities, income, and unpaid labor, the chapter looks into the causes of gender disparity and inequality in the economic sphere and abundantly documents how the economic reforms have affected women more negatively than men.

Chapter Two, "'Returning Home' or 'Being Returned Home'?—The Debates over Women Returning to the Home and Changing Values" by Song Shaopeng, scrutinizes the mounting intellectual and policy advocacy for letting women withdraw from the labor market, which has manifested itself in four rounds of "women returning to the domestic sphere" debates since the 1980s. Analyzing these debates from the perspective of the public–private divide, the chapter shows how the separation of the public from the private lies at the heart of the neoliberal market economy ideology and how such shifts constitute a source of oppression of women at both the structural and the institutional levels.

Chapter Three, "Labor Markets, Gender, and Social Stratification" by Tong Xin, analyzes social stratification through a gender lens. It first examines the impact of the previous socialist planned economy on women in the labor market, and then the consequences of the

current market economy on social and gender stratification. The chapter shows how social stratification under China's transition to a market economy features not only stratification between the two genders but also stratification among the members of a given gender.

Chapter Four, "Gender and Gendered Working Time Rights" by Guo Huimin and Li Xiang, critically examines the Chinese labor law provisions regarding working time. Drawing on life cycle theory and life course theory, the chapter unpacks the hidden linearity in the conceptualization of working time that underlies Chinese labor legislation and shows how this linear definition of working time in reality discriminates against migrant women.

Chapter Five, "Urban New Poverty from a Gender Perspective" by Jin Yihong, examines the "new urban poverty" phenomenon in contemporary China. Pointing out that there is a lack of attention to gender in the general scholarly treatment of the new urban poverty, the chapter shows how, in urban communities of poverty, women are invariably hit harder than men, and how women in poverty are more vulnerable than men in poverty. New urban poverty, as the author argues, is intrinsically a gendered problem, one that cannot be properly addressed or adequately dealt with without thinking of gender.

Chapter Six, "Son Preference and the Tradition of Patriarchy in Rural China—An Empirical Investigation of Sex-ratio Imbalance at Birth" by Li Huiying, examines the revitalization of son preference in rural China on the basis of large-scale empirical research in six provinces. The data derived from the research strongly points to the continued existence of patriarchal family structures, patrilocality, and patrilineality as the root causes for the preference for sons. The chapter shows how these patriarchal cultural customs are omnipresent in rural China and how they are practiced both in village culture and in the distribution of public material resources.

Chapter Seven, "The Everyday Lives and Media Representation of Rural Left-behind Women—A Study of Songzhuang in Southern Shandong Province" by Zhu Shanjie, relates the narratives of the "left-behind" women themselves. Some have stayed behind in the village for an extended period of time and some only for short terms. Critical of the media representations of the left-behind women, which often show a voyeuristic tendency by overstating these women's emotional desires, their loneliness, and/or their pursuit of random sexual pleasures as compensation for the absence of their husbands, this chapter vividly shows how these women struggle to survive economically and at the same time function as "guardians" of their kin and of the local community.

Chapter Eight, "Gender and Rural Crises in China's Transition toward a Market Economy" by Hu Yukun, examines the "three-rural" crisis in China and the dissimilar manifestations of the crisis for rural men and women. Based on macro statistical data as well as micro-level fieldwork, the chapter illuminates not only the gendered nature of the three rural crisis, but also the deep entanglement of gender-based inequality. The chapter also criticizes the scholarly three rural research and the state's development policies for not having taken gender adequately into account.

Chapter Nine, "Village Women's Participation in Local Public Affairs—Test Results from Democratic Consultative Meetings in Zhejiang" by Guo Xiajuan and Zhang Jing, explores rural women's political ability and contests the widespread assumption that rural women possess lower political quality than men and are hence less qualified to engage in local public affairs. Based on a carefully designed control test around a series of democratic consultative meetings, this chapter investigates how village women perform the role of village representative at these meetings where local public issues are debated and settled. The study shows that when the condition for participation is made equal for both genders, women are as apt as men when it comes to judging issues, making decisions, and understanding local public policy priorities.

## Notes

1. See, for instance, Carl Riskin, Renwei Zhao, Li Shi (2001); Li Shi, Hiroshi Sato, Terry Sicular 2013; Wang and Lu 2012; Sun and Guo 2013; Wang 2008.
2. To mention a few chapters, see Whyte 2000; Li and Song 2013; Sargeson 2013. For articles, see Stockman 1994; Bauer et al. 1992; Shen and Deng 2008; Liu 2011; Hong 2010; and Zhang 2003.
3. For some translated works of Li Xiaojiang and Dai Jinhua, see Li 2013a, 2013b, 1994; Wang and Barlow 2002.

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# *Chapter One*

# *Gender (In)Equality and China's Economic Transition*

*Liu Bohong, Li Ling, and Yang Chunyu*

## Introduction

Economic growth and development are common goals for all countries. At the end of the twentieth century, the concept of development changed from a pure pursuit of gross domestic product (GDP) growth to one that encompassed sustainable development aimed at improving people's overall well-being. Development is no longer solely about earning a higher income. It also includes "better education, better health and nutritional standards, less poverty, cleaner environment, more equal opportunities, more individual freedom, richer cultural life, etc." (World Bank 1991). In other words, development should offer people more options so that all people—both men and women—have equal opportunities to benefit from progress (UNDP 1995). Yet, after decades of economic development, inequality as a social problem has once again caught the public's attention in both developed and developing countries. Although the overall proportion of the population living in poverty has declined, the gap between the rich and the poor has become wider in both the North and the South. Emerging social conflicts, driven by inequality, limit economic growth, curtail social prosperity, and hinder the realization of the ultimate goal of development—the improvement of people's well-being. As a result, the pursuit of social justice and the elimination of inequality have become common global yardsticks for evaluating the implementation of the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals (hereafter referred to as MDG) and for discussing the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

According to Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, "development" can be conceptualized as a set of interconnected freedoms, including political freedoms, economic freedoms, and the freedom of opportunity (Sen 1999). Positioning gender equality under the broader objective of

development is consistent with the core development goals delineated in the 2010 MDG Summit.

Policies and practices that promote gender equality also function as important development tools. Structural barriers to women's education and economic opportunities inhibit national productivity and increase economic costs (World Bank 2005, 2011). In the United States, for example, gender inequality in employment created higher birth rates, which further impeded economic growth (Cavalcanti and Tavares 2007). Moreover, research in Latin America and the Caribbean has demonstrated that a substantial increase in the GDP is achievable by eliminating pay inequality and occupational segregation (Tzannatos 1999).

Efforts to remedy gender inequality contribute to other important areas of development. Specifically, higher rates of employment and higher incomes have been shown to strengthen women's bargaining power within the family (Thomas 1997; King and Mason 2001). Research has demonstrated that one consequence of women's greater domestic bargaining power is an increase in household savings (Seguino and Floro 2003), which may then be applied to children's health and education. Greater family investment in children, buttressed by women's greater economic power, leads to gains in human capital and economic growth, including that of future generations (Thomas 1997; King and Mason 2001). Using China as an example, N. Qian, in "Missing Women and the Price of Tea in China" (2008), found that every 10 percent increase in an adult woman's income leads to a 1 percent increase in the survival rate of girls in the family, as well as an increase in the schooling time for male and female children. By contrast, when a man's income increased by 10 percent, daughters' survival rate and schooling both decreased, while sons' schooling and mortality were unaffected.

Finally, when women achieve structural gains they are empowered to push for more favorable policies that also lead to better development outcomes (World Bank 2005, 2011). For example, after securing the right to vote, women in the United States leveraged their new electoral power to politicize issues like child and maternal health care, leading to a significant decline in the infant mortality rate (Miller 2008). Further, policies promoting women's political participation lead to increased investment in infrastructure, which improves human capital and saves time. Such investments contribute to economic growth (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2003; King and Mason 2001). Taken together, these findings demonstrate that the elimination of gender discrimination and the promotion of gender equality

can empower women, promote economic development, and further social progress.

The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) adopted by the United Nations (UN) in 1979, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted at the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, and the MDG set by the UN in 2000 have greatly promoted women's rights and their status for more than three decades. Significant global progress around gender equality has been made in areas such as education, reproductive health, average life expectancy, labor force participation rates, enlargement of legal rights, and so on. Yet, in other areas, progress comes at a much slower pace—these include the disproportionate mortality of women and girls, gender polarization of economic activities, income gaps, the division of household labor and family care, property rights, and the lack of women's voice and initiatives in both the public and private sector (World Bank 2005, 2011). Global economic growth and women's increased access to education and economic opportunities have not led to proportionately equivalent development outcomes for women. Gender inequality is often exacerbated by factors such as poverty, class, stratum, race, ethnicity, religious belief, physical disability, marriage status, age, sexual orientation, social identity, and so on. Therefore, this research focuses on gender equality and development in the context of the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

"Gender" is in this chapter used to refer to women's and men's social, behavioral and cultural characteristics, expectations, and norms. "Gender equality" is here defined as a situation when all persons, regardless of their gender, are able to develop their capabilities and make their choices free from any stereotype, gender perceptions, or gender discrimination. Gender equality does not necessarily mean that women have to become exactly the same as men. Rather, it means that a person's rights, responsibilities, and opportunities are not determined by the person's biological sex. What we will focus on here is "substantive equality," also known as equality of outcome. Substantive equality encompasses not only equal opportunities, equal processes, equal rules, and equal laws, but also equal outcomes or equal reality. The development over the last 30 years, in China as well as in other parts of the world, has proven that equal opportunities do not necessarily lead to equal outcomes, and only by realizing equal outcomes can we correct the unjust factors at work in the development process.

The socialist revolution and development in China led to the emancipation of Chinese women. After the founding of the People's

Republic of China (PRC), gender equality became China's mainstream ideology and legal principle. Chinese women decisively broke away from feudalist shackles, walked out of their homes, and made significant contributions to China's social and economic development. Chinese women have seen their status undergo unprecedented changes as women have become the owners of this socialist country. In the era of the planned economy, China upheld a dual urban-rural system. Under this system, almost all employed workers in the cities, both men and women, had equal access to lifetime employment insurance, child care, education, health care, housing subsidies, and retirement benefits.[1] Child care was provided by employers to their employees, and this service greatly reduced the opportunity costs for women in the labor market. Through these mechanisms and policies, China, a low-income country, made remarkable achievements in gender equality, primary education coverage, health, and employment (Li and Li 2010). "Women can hold up half of the sky" became a catchphrase showcasing Chinese women's liberation and their improved social status, and these results were commended around the world.

Since undertaking market-oriented economic reform, China has undergone a transition from a planned economy to a market economy, and from an agricultural society to an industrial society. China's economic reform process led to rapid and continuous economic growth. Personal income and living standards have risen, bringing women unprecedented development opportunities. Gender equality became a basic social development goal and was, as such, included into the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women. The government incorporated the development of women and girls into the Twelfth Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development, and through promulgating and implementing the Program for the Development of Chinese Women, the National Human Rights Action Plan of China and other regulations, the government honored its commitment to the international community to lift women's status in political, economic, social, and cultural areas, as well as relating to citizenship, marriage and domestic life.

However, a market economy is a double-edged sword. As the market economy has brought reform and economic growth, it has also exacerbated social polarization and the gap between the rich and the poor. Women are placed in a disadvantaged position in the market economy because of the traditional division of domestic labor. Despite increased opportunities for women's economic advancement, the development gap between men and women continues to widen. According to the UN's *Human Development Reports* for the years

**Table 1.1** China's HDI, GDI, and GEM Rankings

| *Year* | *1992–1994* | *1999* | *2000* | *2001* | *2002* | *2003* | *2004* | *2005* | *2006* | *2007/2008* | *2009* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| HDI | 111 | 87 | 96 | 104 | 94 | 88 | 81 | 81 | 81 | 81 | 92 |
| GDI | 71 | 76 | 77 | 83 | 71 | 64 | 64 | 73 | 64 | 73 | 75 |
| GEM | 23 | n/a | n/a | n/a | n/a | n/a | n/a | 57 | n/a | 57 | 72 |

*Source*: UN's *Human Development Report*. The UNDP modified the GDI measurement in 2010, so the comparison ends at 2009.

1992 to 2009, China's Human Development Index (HDI) ranking improved during this period.[2] China's Gender Development Index (GDI), however, did not improve in tandem with China's economic and social development.[3] In terms of the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), China even slid down the international ranking list, as shown in Table 1.1 (Liu Bohong et al. 2010).[4] This suggests that the market does not allocate resources equally and justly, as might be assumed. Instead, the development of a market economy may come at the expense of social equality and justice. It is incumbent upon us to find a development path that can realize gender equality and social justice in a market economy when discussing the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

The shifts in its political and economic systems are largely responsible for the current situation of gender inequality in China. Since the market-oriented economic reforms, mainstream economists in China had been focusing solely on GDP growth, without examining China's economic system from a gender perspective. China lags behind the international community in research on the relationship between gender and macroeconomy, as well as in research on the relationship between gender and development. Thus, gender has remained a blind spot in China's macroeconomic policy-making for some time. Young female economists in China have assumed the historical responsibility of mainstreaming the study of gender in the field of economics. They have explored gender-related economic theories and analyzed gender-related experiences from the aspects of labor supply, unemployment, occupational mobility, salary, labor migration, informal employment, allocation of family resources, family care, and time utilization, and they provided a solid basis for how to improve China's macroeconomic policies. By drawing on existing literature and available statistics on gender and development, this chapter will attempt to analyze the major issues in China's economic development from a gender perspective.

Due to space limitations, this chapter mainly covers gender issues in the labor market. In the next part, we describe and analyze the status of gender during China's economic transformation and the causes of gender disparity and inequality, by focusing on three selected areas: employment opportunities, income and unpaid labor. Thereafter, we explore the possible implications of gender inequality for China's economic and social development. In the last part, we give policy recommendations for China's future economic and social development from a gender perspective.

## Gender (In)Equality in Three Selected Fields

### *Gender Disparity in Employment*

Equal opportunity of employment has been defined as "equal opportunities in applying for a specific job, obtaining the job and receiving related education or occupational training, and equal opportunities to receive certain job qualifications, be recognized as employees and promotion" (International Labor Office 2001). This includes examining the labor supply (which includes the labor population, labor force participation rates, labor hours, etc.), unemployment, occupational mobility, and so on. The discussion of employment opportunities in this part concentrates on the labor force participation rate and on employment structure. The discussion reveals that, in terms of employment opportunity, the labor force participation rate for women has been decreasing, and the gap between the labor force participation rates of men and women has been increasing. In terms of employment structure, women's jobs are being marginalized, meaning that even when there are job opportunities for women, they are generally at a lower-level than men's jobs.

Since the founding of the PRC, the Chinese government has regarded an increasing women's labor participation rate to be crucial for improving women's status and for promoting gender equality. As a result, in China, the labor participation rate for women was higher than that of most other countries for a long time (United Nations 2000). Yet, after the start of economic reforms and the gradual establishment of a market economy, the overall labor force participation rate of women in China declined. This development accelerated after the state-owned enterprise reforms in the 1990s, where the women's

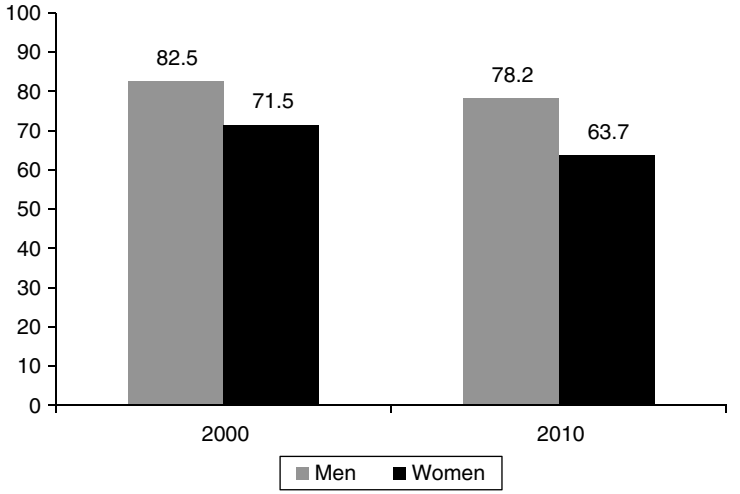


**Figure 1.1** Gender Labor Participation Rates in 2000 and 2010.

labor participation rate dropped significantly—especially the labor participation of mothers with pre-school age children (Li et al. 1999; Yao and Tan 2005). According to data from the Fifth Census in 2000, the labor participation rate in China was 82.5 percent for men and 71.5 percent for women. In 2010, the Sixth Census showed that the labor participation rate was 78.2 percent for men and 63.7 percent for women. As can be seen in Figure 1.1, the gap between the labor participation rates of men and women was 11 percentage points in 2000, and it grew to 14.5 percentage points in 2010. We can see that although the labor force participation rates of both men and women declined, the decline for women was faster, which reflects, among other things, that there were fewer employment opportunities for women than there were for men.

Gender disparity is also pronounced in employment structures. According to the national census in 2010 (see Figure 1.2), among all employed persons, 48.3 percent were in the primary sector, 24.2 percent in the secondary sector, and 27.5 percent in the tertiary sector. Gendered statistics showed that 53.2 percent of women, that is, over half of all female workers, were in the primary sector (agriculture). This figure is almost 9 percentage points higher than the percentage of men working in agriculture, which is 44.4 percent. In terms of moving out of agriculture, men were ahead of women both in time and in scale. Only 19.3 percent of women were in the secondary industry, far

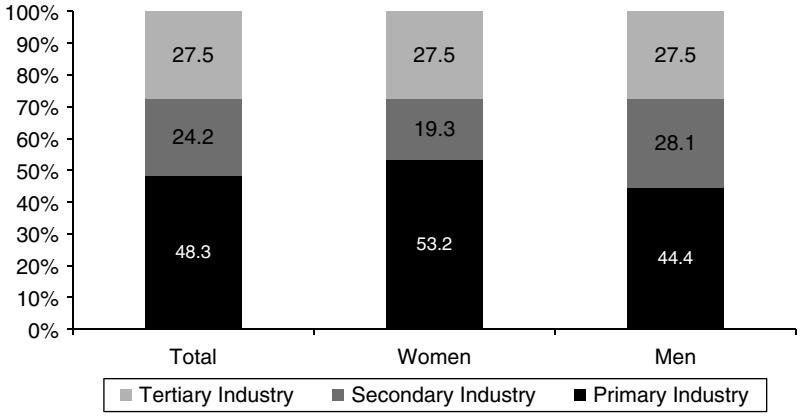


**Figure 1.2** The Gender Composition of the Three Sectors in 2010.

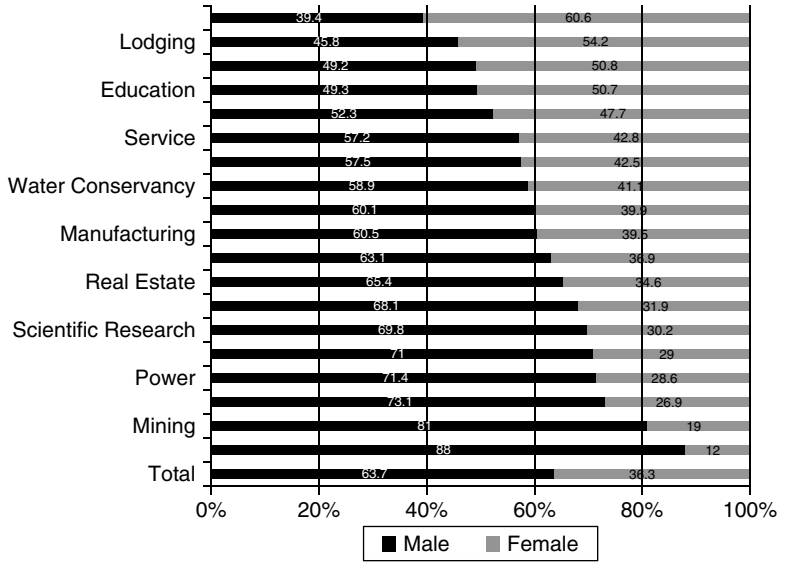


**Figure 1.3** The Gender Composition of Urban Employees by Sector in 2011.

fewer than that of men at 28.1 percent. Although gendered statistics for the tertiary industry did not show a significant gap, women were mainly found in the traditional service industry while men dominated the modern service industry.

According to the *Annual Statistical Report of Wages in 2011* (see Figure 1.3), the gender composition of persons employed in cities

by sector shows that the male-female ratio varies greatly in different sectors. Women were concentrated in jobs that represent the social extension of their family roles, such as health care, lodging, education, and culture, and in jobs that do not require a lot of physical labor, like finance, wholesale, and services. By contrast, in areas like construction, mining, transportation and power supply, which have traditionally been dominated by men, the proportion of female employees is significantly lower. All this suggests that women have far fewer employment opportunities that can bring occupational prestige and higher income on the labor market than men do.

Formal employment and informal employment opportunities are another element of employment structure.[5] Labor statistics in China tend to equate employment in cities with formal employment. As shown in Figure 1.4, women comprise a smaller share of city employees than men, and women's share has even shown a downward trend in recent years, declining from 38 percent to 36.3 percent between 2000 and 2010. Over the same period, women's representation in informal employment has increased. Calculations based on the 1 percent population sample survey in 2005 (Xue and Gao 2012) show that the proportion of women in informal employment stood at 42.39 percent. Even within the category of informal employment, men and women hold different jobs. Informal female workers are mostly commercial and service staff and clerks, whereas informal male workers are mostly technicians or managers. This reflects the marginalization

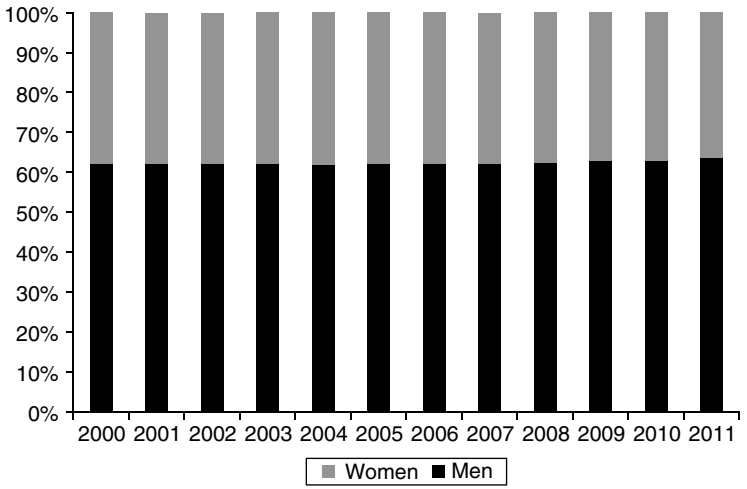


**Figure 1.4** The Gender Composition of Urban Employees, 2000–2011.

of female informal employees in the informal employment market (Ren and Peng 2007).

The current labor force participation rate of women in China is a product of many factors. First, the women's labor participation rate is influenced by the policy environment and the social environment. The market-oriented reforms in China have undermined the nation's protection and support for women in the labor market. When the market bases its labor decisions solely on efficiency and does not factor in equality, it inevitably leads to gender disparity, particularly a decrease in women's labor participation. It also leads to the return of a gender stereotype—men work outside as the breadwinner, while women stay home to take care of the family. Second, the married women's labor participation rate is subject to the influence of the income gap between husband and wife. Empirical studies in China show that when the potential income gap between husband and wife widens, the one with the higher income tends to stay employed, whereas the one with lower income tends to engage in housework.

Research has found that since the 1990s, the decline in women's labor participation in cities occurred primarily among low-income families (Dong et al. 2009). When women's average wage in the market is lower than that of men, it appears that men work outside and women stay home (Li et al. 1999). Third, the women's labor force participation rate is also influenced by housework and family care. When the government and employers withdrew from the responsibilities of family welfare and family care, leaving family affairs a private matter, the accessibility and price of nursery services affected many mothers' decisions about joining the labor force. Wage levels, nurseries, and family structure tend to impact the women's labor participation rate more than men's (Du 2008). During the 1990s, subsidies for nurseries and kindergartens were slashed in the state-owned enterprise reforms. Nursery services were privatized, forcing many mothers of preschoolers to drop out of the labor market, leading to a widened gender gap in labor participation (Du and Dong 2010). In rural areas, child care responsibilities keep married women from participating in non-agricultural work (Wang and Dong 2010). Fourth, women's labor participation rate is very much influenced by educational background. Among married women, those who have a higher degree of education have higher labor force participation rates. Among all women, the biggest drop in the labor force participation rate has been among those who have the lowest degree of education. Those who are less educated are more prone to lose their jobs and have greater difficulties securing re-employment (Yao and Tan 2005).

## *Gender Disparity in Income*

Income is an important measure of outcome equality, both in terms of education and employment. Income embodies the value of labor and social justice. Hence, we study income from a gender perspective, focusing the analysis on the gender income gap. In countries across the world, women's wages are lower than men's (Altonji 1999). There are two measurements commonly used to quantify wage disparity. The first is the logarithmic difference in wages between men and women, reflecting men's wages as a percentage of women's. The second is the percentage of women's wages against men's (Liu 2012). Research has found that differences in physiology and societal roles between men and women result in different productivity (Dong and Zhang 2009). However, other studies have shown that the relationship between educational background, work experience, and productivity can only explain part of the gender wage gap. The portion of the gender wage gap that cannot be explained by factors such as educational background and work experience is known as "the residual wage gap." This wage gap comes partly from gender segregation in the labor market, and partly from wage discrimination of the market against women (Becker 1971).[6] Below, we will elaborate on China's status in these two aspects.

In the era of the planned economy, the work allocation of all workers was decided via national planning, and men and women enjoyed relatively equal employment opportunities. In addition, the state had uniform administrative regulations on wage standards and pay scales, and employers had no discretion over employees' pay. Therefore, the gender wage gap was small. The economic reform process (which began in 1978 and continued through the 1990s in state-owned enterprises) gave increasing autonomy in management to companies and other employers, who gained the right to regulate the work and wages of their employees. Since then, a wage differential between men and women began to emerge. However, because of the time that passed since data collection and survey coverage, and a difference in computing methods, the results of the calculated gender wage gap tend to differ. Nevertheless, as shown in Table 1.2, the gender wage gap is tangible in China's labor market, and the disparity is widening as the economic reforms deepen. Two studies can be taken as cases in point. According to the analysis of income distribution in China, by Li Chunling and Li Shi, the annual income of women was 84.0 percent of that of men in 1988. This figure declined to 80.0 percent in 1995, and 79.0 percent in 2002. Thus, women's annual income as a

**Table 1.2** The Gender Wage Gap

| *Time* | *Women/ Men (%)* | *Comparison Indicator* | *Source* |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1978 | 79.1 | Monthly Wage | China Statistics Press, *Chinese Women's Statistics* |
| 1986 | 82.3 | Monthly Wage | China Statistics Press, *Chinese Women's Statistics* |
| 1988 | 84.4 | Annual Income | Gustafsson and Li (2000) |
| 1988 | 55.3 | Annual Wage | Margaret et al. (1997) Urban Survey 1988–1994 |
| 1988 | 73.0 | Monthly Wage | Rozelle et al. (2002) Rural Survey in 8 Provinces in 1996 |
| 1988 | 84.5 | Monthly Wage | China Statistics Press, *Chinese Women's Statistics* |
| 1988 | 84.0 | Annual Income | Li Chunling & Li Shi (2008) Sample Survey on Income Distribution of Chinese Urban Residents |
| 1989 | 55.0 | Annual Wage | Margaret et al. (1997) Urban Survey 1988–1994 |
| 1989 | 94.2 | Hourly Wage | Zhang Dandan (2004) CHNS Data of Urban Areas |
| 1990 | 48.9 | Annual Wage | Margaret et al. (1997) Urban Survey 1988–1994 |
| 1990 | 77.5 | Annual Income | ACWF&NBS, The Second Nationwide Survey on Social the Status of Chinese Women |
| 1991 | 76.4 | Hourly Wage | Zhang Dandan (2004) CHNS Data of Urban Areas |
| 1991 | 50.1 | Annual Wage | Margaret et al. (1997) Urban Survey 1988–1994 |
| 1992 | 85.9 | Monthly Income | Hughes and Margaret, 2002 Survey on Employment in 12 Provinces |
| 1992 | 46.8 | Annual Wage | Margaret et al. (1997) Urban Survey 1988–1994 |
| 1993 | 82.9 | Hourly Wage | Zhang Dandan (2004) CHNS Data of Urban Areas |
| 1993 | 47.1 | Annual Wage | Margaret et al. (1997) Urban Survey 1988–1994 |
| 1994 | 41.8 | Annual Wage | Margaret et al. (1997) Urban Survey 1988–1994 |
| 1995 | 82.5 | Annual Income | Gustafsson and Li (2000) |
| 1995 | 71.2 | Monthly Wage | Rozelle et al. (2002) Rural Survey in 8 Provinces in 1996 |

continued

**Table 1.2** Continued

| *Time* | *Women/ Men (%)* | *Comparison Indicator* | *Source* |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1995 | 80.0 | Annual Income | Li Chunling & Li Shi (2008) Sample Survey on Income Distribution of Chinese Urban Residents |
| 1997 | 77.5 | Hourly Wage | Zhang Dandan (2004) CHNS Data of Urban Areas |
| 1999 | 78.0 | Annual Wage | Li Shi et al. (2006) Income Survey in 6 Provinces in 1999 |
| 2000 | 70.1 | Annual Income | ACWF&NBS, The Second Nationwide Survey on the Social Status of Chinese Women |
| 2001 | 80.3 | Hourly Wage | Wang Meiyan (2005) Survey Data from 5 Cities |
| 2002 | 80.0 | Annual Income | Gustafsson and Li, 2008 |
| 2002 | 76.3 | Hourly Wage | Yao Xianguo et al. (2008) Urban Survey Data |
| 2002 | 79.0 | Annual Income | Li Chunling & Li Shi (2008) Sample Survey on Income Distribution of Chinese Urban Residents |
| 2003 | 68.1 | Annual Income | Wang Tianfu et al. (2008) CGSS of 2003 |
| 2004 | 83.0 | Monthly Wage | Tian Yanfang et al. (2009) CHNS Data of Urban Areas |
| 2005 | 78.3 | Monthly Income | Chen Wenfu (2011) CGSS of 2005 |
| 2006 | 80.8 | Hourly Wage | Ning Guangjie (2011) CHNS Data of Urban Areas |
| 2009 | 79.9 | Monthly Income | Han Xiulan (2012) CHNS Data of Urban Areas |
| 2010 | 60.4 | Monthly Income | Deng Feng et al. (2012) CFPS Data in 2010 |
| 2010 | 67.0 (urban) 56.0 (rural) | Annual Income | Data from Sample Survey by the Project Group of The 3rd Survey on the Social Status of Chinese Women (2011) |

*Note*: This figure has been developed on the basis of Liu Xiaoyun's 2012 analysis of the gender wage differential.[7]

percentage of men's steadily declined over these 14 years. According to Zhang Dandan's analysis with CHNS data, the percentages of women's annual income against men's were 94.2 percent, 76.4 percent and 77.5 percent in 1989, 1993, and 1997, respectively. Again, there is robust evidence that the gender wage gap has been widening since the 1990s.

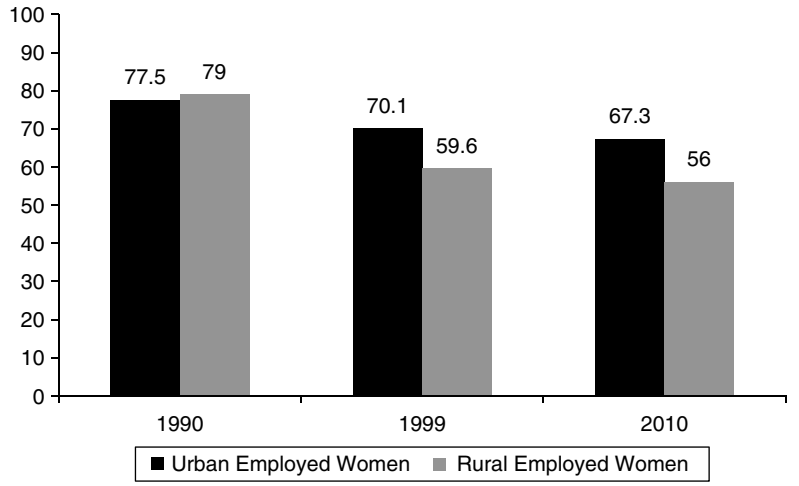


**Figure 1.5** Income of Employed Urban and Rural Employed Women as a Percentage of the Income of Urban and Rural Men.

According to data from three consecutive nationwide surveys on the social status of Chinese women, the labor market gender income disparity widened from 1990 to 2010. As shown in Figure 1.5, the average income of urban women as a percentage of that of men dropped from 77.5 percent in 1990 to 67.3 percent in 2010—roughly 10 percentage points. The increase in income disparity in rural areas has been even greater than that in cities. The average income of rural women as a percentage of that of men was 79 percent in 1990. This figure plummeted to 56 percent in 2010, which meant that the average income of rural women was a bit more than half of the income of rural men. From the distribution of average income by gender in 2010, it is clear that rural women's lower average income could be attributed to the income structure. Women comprised only 24.4 percent of the highest income group, while they accounted for 65.7 percent of the lowest income group, as shown in Figure 1.6.

The major reason behind the gender income gap is segregation in the labor market. For example, engineers, technicians, and senior managers are mostly men, whereas secretaries, nurses, and others are mostly women. This is occupational segregation. Male migrant workers are mostly in the construction sector, whereas female migrant workers are primarily concentrated in hairdressing, housekeeping, and other services. This is sectoral segregation. Compared with men,

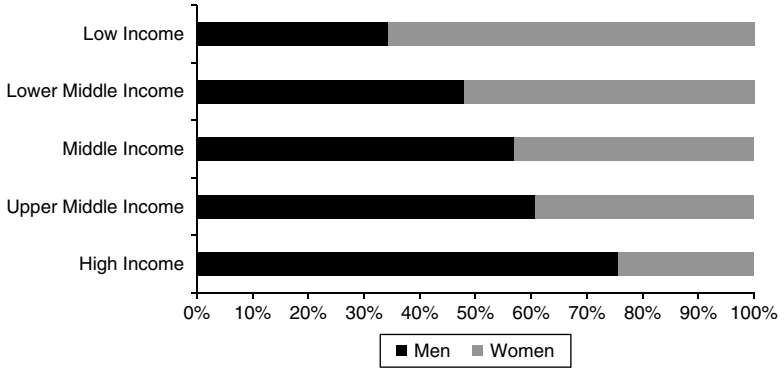


**Figure 1.6** The Average Income Distribution of Men and Women in Rural Areas in 2010.

women are often engaged in occupations and sectors with lower pay. Reasons for gender segregation can be found on both the supply side and the demand side. On the supply side, under the traditional gender division of labor and social customs, women have to take up most of the family care responsibilities. In order to take care of children and family, many women choose jobs that offer more flexibility and are less physically demanding. But these types of jobs tend to pay poorly. On the demand side, due to employer's stereotypes or information asymmetry, women are discriminated against by employers. It is worth noticing that social discrimination and personal preferences are mutually reinforcing. For example, the unfair treatment women suffer in the labor market dampens their enthusiasm about work and makes their families and society think that women should only be occupied in particular occupations. Influenced by such thoughts, women are led to develop their preferences for the so-called feminine occupations (Phelps 1972). Regardless of the reason, the result of gender segregation is that women are forced into a limited number of occupations and sectors, and this produces the gender wage gap.

According to the Chinese Family Panel Studies (CFPS) in 2011, men's wages were higher than women's in every sector.[8] However, the gender wage gaps in the public sector and in the state-owned collective enterprises are smaller than that in the private sector or among home-based businesses. The gender wage gap is the smallest in the public sector, and the biggest in private companies, as shown in Figure 1.7. Stratified by occupational classification, men's wages

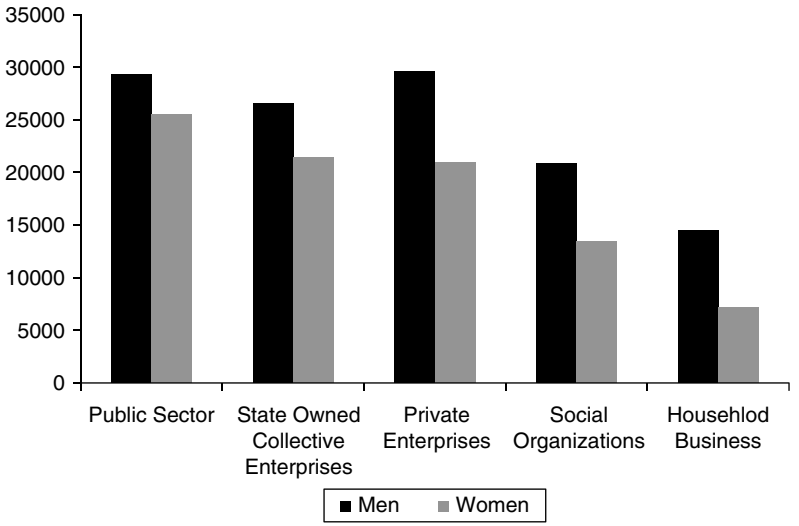


**Figure 1.7** Annual Income of Men and Women by Sector.

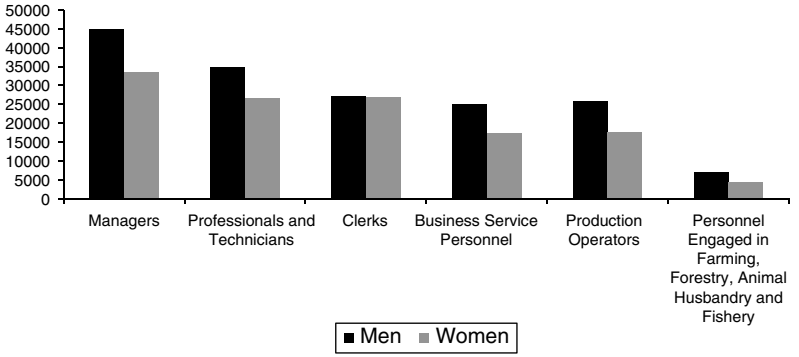


**Figure 1.8** Annual Income of Men and Women by Occupation.

are higher in every occupation. The gap between the annual wage of a man in charge of an organization or business and that of a woman in charge is roughly 13,000 RMB, which is the biggest gap among all occupations. The wage of male clerks and that of female clerks are almost the same, giving us the smallest gap among all occupations, as is shown in Figure 1.8 (Deng and Ding 2012).

A gender wage gap may result either from men and women having unequal levels of competence or from discrimination. One important indicator of unequal competence is educational background. A study

has shown that the gender gap in education has gradually narrowed since market-oriented economic reform. The share of female college students among all college students rose from 23.4 percent in 1980 to 33.7 percent in 1990, and from 40.9 percent in 2000 to 50.8 percent in 2010 (An 2002). It took only three decades for the proportion of female college students to double and surpass that of male college students. The gap in average schooling years of men and women narrowed from 1.9 years (7.4 years for men, 5.5 years for women) in 1990 to 1.3 years (8.3 years for men, 7.0 years for women) in 2000, and 0.8 years (9.2 years for men, 8.4 years for women) in 2010.[9] Even though enrolment rates of rural women are low, urban women in the PRC have generally obtained equal access to education at all levels—an unprecedented situation in China's history. However, the narrower gender gap in education opportunity has not decreased the gender gap in income. Some empirical studies of China's labor market show that both inter-occupational discrimination and intra-occupational discrimination contribute to the gender wage gap (Wang 2005). Calculations show that intra-occupational discrimination contributes as much as 68 percent to the gender wage gap (Li and Ma 2006). One study of income expectations among medical students showed that female doctors not only earned less than male doctors, but also expected to earn less (Ma 2008). The average monthly income of male doctors is 5145.7 RMB, while the average income of female doctors is 4316.8 RMB. The expected monthly income of male doctors is 6836.6 RMB, while the figure for female doctors is 5486.0 RMB.

It is clear that the increased educational level has led to increases in men's and women's income in China, but it hasn't narrowed down the gender income gap. To put it another way, the improved education of women has not translated into equal status on the labor market or equal recognition of and remuneration for their labor value.

## *Gender Disparity in Unpaid Care Work*

Studies show that one important reason for discrimination against women in the labor market is that women are burdened with child rearing and housework, and are therefore saddled with substantially more family care responsibility (Liu et al. 2008). Unpaid family care work is not recognized by society, nor is it included in the GDP figures or in conventional labor force surveys. Because unpaid family care work limits both women's participation in the labor force and their occupational choice, it is the main variable responsible for

gender discrimination and the gendered wage differential in the labor market (Elson 1999). In addition, unpaid care work has a considerable adverse impact on women's individual rights, capacities, and autonomy (Robeyns 2002). In this part, we will first briefly introduce the definition and features of care work. Then, we will explain why it is women who shoulder most of the family care work from the New Household Economics perspective and the Feminist Economics perspective. Moreover, we will discuss the impact of unpaid care work on women against the backdrop of China's economic transformation. Finally, we will discuss the value created by unpaid care work.

Care work refers not only to the physical activities of providing care, but also to the construction of emotional bonds and the demonstration of care for the recipients. Care work may be said to come in two forms, paid care work and unpaid care work, with the former provided by the government and for-profit or non-profit private institutions, and the latter provided by family members, friends, and in some cases, volunteers from churches and other charity organizations (Dong 2009). In almost every country, women represent the bulk of both paid and unpaid care workers. Care work is different from other forms of work in three respects. First, care work entails care and love for the persons being cared for (Himmelweit 1999; England and Folbre 2003). Care work in the absence of emotional care for the persons being taken care of is incomplete. Compared with other types of work, care work requires internal motivation. Therefore, genuine love for the persons being taken care of is extremely important. Second, labor input is the most important factor in care work. The fact that care work is provided directly to people makes it difficult to form economies of scale (Himmelweit 2005). To improve productivity by increasing the average number of care receivers per caregiver tends to negatively affect care quality. Thus, the improvement of productivity in care work is much slower than in other sectors. High-quality paid care work is expensive and unaffordable for low-income families. Therefore, for low-income families, family care cannot be replaced by care provided by the market. Third, family care has a spillover effect (Folbre 2004). Therefore, investment in high-quality care for children and in higher education will bring high social returns (Carneiro and Heckman 2003).

In nearly all countries, the responsibility for taking care of the young, the old, the ill, the disabled, and other family members falls on women. New Household Economics and Feminist Economics have their explanations of why this is the case. New Household Economics holds that not only is the family a consumption unit, it is

also a production unit. It is assumed that the wife and the husband have shared interests and that they behave altruistically. That is, they place the interests of their partner above their own. Generally, the market wage of the husband is higher than that of the wife, and the household productivity of the wife is higher than that of the husband, therefore a pattern is formed where the husband is engaged in market labor, while the wife is engaged in housework. However, the theory of New Household Economics advocated by Becker and others has the following deficiencies (Folbre 2004). First, the interests of family members are often conflicting. Second, the theory overlooks the inequality in the division of family labor and the imbalance of rights between men and women. For example, by dedicating themselves to housework, women become financially dependent on others and stand to lose their source of income if widowed or divorced. In addition, women's human capital investment in family care is more likely to depreciate.

Third, the allocation of care by the family or by the market is not necessarily the optimal choice for society at large, due to the information asymmetry and spillover effect of care work. Given the shortcomings in New Family Economics theory, Feminist Economics gives another explanation for why women shoulder most of the responsibility of unpaid care work. This theory holds that the gender roles of men and women are socially constructed, and that people's behavior and decisions are shaped by customs, institution, laws, and regulations. Traditional gender norms reinforce the gendered division of labor through the interaction between the labor market and marriage, which not only influences individual behaviors, but also the economic system and public policies. This in turn reinforces traditional gender norms. The traditional gender norm that men work outside as the breadwinner while women stay at home to take care of the family still influences people's behaviors, market operations, and public policy-making (Elson 1995). It is taken for granted that women should be the caregiver, and therefore, the contribution of care work by women is not fully recognized. A case in point is that social security benefits are determined by wage level and by the number of employment years, thereby disregarding the contribution of unpaid care work provided by women.

Families in China have evolved from the agricultural family unit where the immediate family lived together, men held the power, and the whole family revolved around the father and the son, to a modern family pattern where the husband and the wife are the equal points of power (Ding 1999). The government's advocacy of gender equality

has, to a large extent, promoted equal participation of urban women in social production. In a way, policy interventions by the government have changed the gendered division of labor and transformed gender relations in China (Jiang 2000). When traditional gender stereotypes were still applied, Chinese urban women bore dual responsibilities for work and family, but the public welfare policies and public services provided by the government through the work units largely offset the dual burden (Liu et al. 2008). After the market-oriented economic reform, these public services were taken over by the market and families. When the public services provided by the market can no longer meet the needs of families, and when families can no longer afford family care services, the responsibility of family care falls back on the shoulders of women. And when women participate in market competition when shouldering a heavier family burden, discrimination against them begins to surface.

Data from the time-use survey by the National Bureau of Statistics shows that the traditional gender stereotype of men working outside and women staying at home still affects modern family life. As shown in Table 1.3, women spend three times as much time as men on unpaid work every week. Unpaid work takes up only 20.2 percent of men's time, but 47.1 percent of women's time. This phenomenon is more prominent in rural areas, where women spend over three times as much time as men on unpaid work, including spending four times as much time as men on child care. It is clear that women—especially rural women—perform most of the unpaid work. Women are burdened both with unpaid work and paid work, which means they have much longer working hours and much less spare time each day than men (Dong and An 2012).

**Table 1.3** Distribution of Paid and Unpaid Work (Hour/Week)

| | *Overall* | | *Urban* | | *Rural* | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *Men* | *Women* | *Men* | *Women* | *Men* | *Women* |
| Paid Work | 42.0 | 30.7 | 33.0 | 25.0 | 51.7 | 37.3 |
| Unpaid Work | 10.6 | 27.3 | 12.9 | 27.6 | 8.1 | 26.9 |
| Unpaid Housework | 8.1 | 22.3 | 10.0 | 22.5 | 6.1 | 21.9 |
| Child Care | 1.3 | 3.6 | 1.5 | 3.2 | 1.0 | 4.0 |
| Time Spent on Unpaid Work (%) | 20.2 | 47.1 | 28.1 | 52.4 | 13.5 | 41.9 |

*Source*: Dong and An (2012), 6.

Empirical studies in China suggest that unpaid care work has adverse impacts on women's employment, income, and other economic activities. Using China Health and Nutrition Survey (CHNS) data from 1991 to 2004, Du Fenglian and Dong Xiaoyuan (2010) analyzed the impact of China's reform of nursery policies on the choice of child care in relation to urban women's participation in the labor force. The study showed that women's participation in the labor force and the choice of children's pre-school education differed greatly among the economic and social strata. Women with low educational levels and from low-income families had a higher probability of withdrawing from the labor market and relied less often on standard nursery services. For working women, the higher the educational level of their husbands, the higher the probability that they would use standard nursery services. The study also found that prohibiting public nurseries from accepting children below the age of two greatly reduced women's labor force participation rate. In cities, the wages of women with children are about 20 percent lower than the wages of women without children. The wage differential widened by the end of the 1990s, and it was much greater in the private than in the public sector (Jia and Dong 2012). Studies have also found that women who take care of their own parents do not compromise their labor force participation rate or their labor supply time, but taking care of their husband's parents negatively affects both of these indicators (Liu L. et al. 2010).

In addition, unpaid care work also affects women's individual rights, their capacities, and their autonomy. Having sufficient time to spend at their own discretion can enable people to pursue additional interests (Robeyns 2002). Many working women face the dual responsibilities of work and family. But lengthy working hours are harmful to their health, restrict their development, and limit their social and political participation. Liu Lan and Chen Gong (2010) studied the relationship between parental care and self-evaluated health conditions of married urban women. The study showed that taking care of parents increased the psychological and physical stress of married women.

In reality, unpaid care work has great economic value. According to Dong and An's (2012) analysis of the time-use survey data in China in 2008, the value created by unpaid care work was equal to between 25 and 32 percent of China's GDP, between 52 and 66 percent of China's consumption, or 63 to 80 percent of China's total industrial output. However, the value of women's unpaid housework and their contribution to their families and to society is not recognized under the

market economy. Instead, unpaid housework impedes women from entering the labor market. For-profit companies and the competitive and profit-driven market reject women under the pretext that women suffer the dual burden of work and family. This makes women the first to be fired and the last to be hired in the labor market. They used to "hold up half of the sky" in the planned economy era, but now are reduced to being discriminated against in the market economy. Changes in economic and public policies in the past three decades of market-oriented reform have accelerated the marginalization of women in the labor market and exacerbated gender inequality.

## Discussions and Impact

China's drastic social transformation has brought about rapid and sustained economic development and improved economic strength, but it has also produced a gender gap in the labor market and heightened the conflict between working lives and family lives for many. The consequences of these changes have been far-reaching.

First, economic development has been affected. Gender inequality has a negative influence on labor force participation and human-resource utilization. In the context of market-oriented reform, gender disparity in employment opportunities, income, and other areas of the labor market are growing, driving women out of the labor market due to a mixture of subjective and objective factors, and also diminishing the motivation of the women who stay in the labor market. Currently, increasing numbers of women in China have an equal chance for receiving higher education and professional education. By the end of 2011, the ratio of female students in college stood at 51.14 percent (Department of Social Science and Technology and Cultural Statistics, National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China 2012). However, there is a tendency for the labor market to reject female college graduates, and women retire five to ten years earlier than men according to China's current retirement system, which causes a significant waste of highly educated, experienced, and capable human resources. Gender inequality also exacerbates the wealth gap in China by interacting with the urban-rural imbalance. The average rural income is lower than the average urban income. In addition to this, rural women have lower incomes than men, and therefore have the lowest income among all working groups. Gender discrimination may also cause unequal opportunities in education and employment, which further leads to gender disparity in income, social security, and public services.

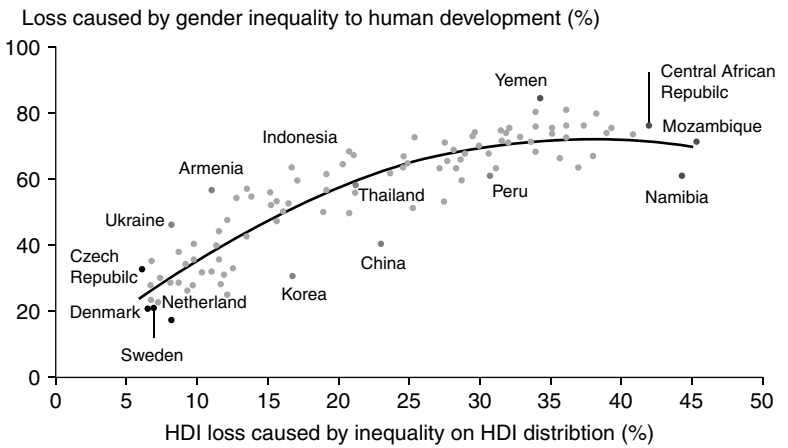


**Figure 1.9** Loss Caused by Gender Inequality.

*Source*: UNDP. Human Development Report 2010: The Influence of Poverty, Gender and Inequality Described with New Creative Measurements, New York: 2010. http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/

Second, gender equality affects social development. To offer women equal education opportunities, economic rights, and political rights is not only a demonstration of social justice, but also the best investment for social development. In turn, gender inequality causes a loss to human development. As is shown in Figure 1.9, the loss of human development caused by gender inequality in China was as high as 40 percent (UNDP 2010).

In addition, gender inequality will exacerbate the gender imbalance in China. Some of China's laws and policies lack a gender equality perspective, such as in the areas of retirement ages for female and male civil servants, rural land policies, economic policies, and birth-control policies. These unequal laws and policies pose barriers for the survival and development of women and create the impression that giving birth to boys is better than giving birth to girls. This preference for boys makes the gender ratio at birth more imbalanced and is harmful for social justice and sustainable development.

Third, gender inequality affects families. Gender disparity in the labor market and the undervaluation of unpaid care work undermine gender equality within families. The rejection by the labor market drives women back to their traditional family role, decreasing their status in the family. After the market-oriented economic reform, full-time housewives have emerged in China, along with the idea that a woman can change her fate by depending on a man. This introduces

discord in Chinese women's efforts to fight for equality and emancipation. In addition to this, the dual roles commonly faced by women are an impediment to gaining higher social status. On the one hand, society expects women to play a positive role in the family. Yet, on the other hand, the labor market denies entry to women exactly because women are expected to play a central role in the family. The subordinate position of women within the family and in the labor market disadvantages women in political and social life. Furthermore, shrinking family size and the pursuit of modern life make family care more complicated and time-consuming. Yet, the government and society do not advocate that men and women should jointly bear family and social responsibilities. Thus, in keeping with the traditional stereotype of men working outside and women staying at home, the responsibility for family care falls mostly on women. In China, reform of the pension system, increased childbearing responsibility, higher cost of child rearing, insufficient social services, and changes in personal values have shaken up the traditional notion of bringing up children as security in old age. There is a trend toward late marriage and late childbirth in cities. Some people even choose not to have children. Meanwhile, corporate culture, policy orientation, and a faster pace of life have all produced adverse effects in the amount and quality of care seniors receive in their family.

Fourth, gender inequality affects children's education. Inequality can be handed down through the generations. The social status and educational priorities of the parents influence the views of their children on issues such as gender equality and the competence of men and women. One study, the *Gender Study on Female Science and Technology Professionals in China,* examined the relationship between girls' evaluation of women's capacity for scientific research, and their parents' educational background. The study found that girls whose fathers were leaders or managers agreed that men had a higher capacity for scientific research, while girls whose mothers were leaders or managers thought otherwise. These evaluations were clearly affected by their parents' occupations. The girls whose fathers were leaders or managers saw that men enjoyed advantages in their daily lives and were therefore prone to think that men had a higher capacity for scientific research. In contrast, the girls who saw their mothers working as leaders or managers did not agree that men had a higher capacity for undertaking scientific research (Kexue shibao ketizu 2011). Thus, if left uncorrected, gender inequality may influence the views and capacities of the next generation. This is not conducive to

cultivating human capital in accordance with socialist core values, because the culture of inequality is continually reproduced.

## Policy Recommendations

After the market-oriented economic reforms, the Chinese government signed a series of UN core human rights conventions. The Chinese government considers the respect for and the safeguarding of human rights—including women's rights—to be an obligation of the state. Gender equality was included into the report at the 18th Congress of the Communist Party of China as one of the basic state policies. Therefore, when discussing and formulating post-2015 development goals, the Chinese government should carry forward and promote its socialist traditions, honor its commitment to the international community and to its own people, and incorporate the values and goals of the abovementioned human rights conventions into the human development framework for the future.

First, equality and justice must be considered important goals on the global agenda, as well as for China's economic and social development. From the previous analysis of employment opportunities and of income and unpaid work, it is clear that inequality and injustice, consequent upon the widening gender disparity, have surfaced in China for the first time since the founding of the PRC. In the past three decades of reform, economic prosperity, market development, and national wealth have made the "cake" bigger and brought Chinese people development opportunities and improved lives, but the reforms have also increased the wealth gap and caused new gender disparity. In addition, gender inequality is compounded by poverty, social stratum, urban-rural imbalance, race, disabilities, marriage status, age, sexual orientation, and social identity, thus making women all the more disadvantaged. This, together with other undesirable aspects of market and social development, has generated malignant inequality—in China, as well as across the world. Therefore, when discussing the post-2015 agenda and the Chinese dream, China ought to consider the reduction of the wealth gap and the realization of social justice as keystones for sustainable development. And then, China should pursue substantive equality instead of formal equality or protective gender equality, so that all members of society, both men and women, will be free to participate equally in social development and share the accruing benefits.

Second, gender equality must be brought into the mainstream of China's macroeconomic and social development policies. Gender mainstreaming is a global strategy adopted at the UN's Fourth Conference on Women, and the Chinese government was one of the first 49 governments to make a commitment on gender mainstreaming. The previous analysis of employment opportunities and of income and unpaid work shows that when policy-makers make macroeconomic and social decisions, they privilege economic benefits, trusting blindly in market forces and the importance of GDP growth. Taking the traditional notion of men working outside and women staying home as a basis for policy-making, policy-makers do not understand the unequal outcomes, including gender inequality, brought about by their seemingly neutral policies. Therefore, the government should incorporate gender equality into China's macroeconomic and social policy-making. First, the impact of current policies, plans, and programs on men and women, on different social groups, and on economic and social development must be analyzed. Next, targeted remedial measures or temporary special measures must be implemented to correct possible unequal and unfair outcomes so as to realize substantive equality. Second, to address the goal of ensuring equal rights for men and women to participate in economic and social development, and to share in family happiness, and in order to phase out discrimination against women and other disadvantaged groups, gender equality and justice assessments must be conducted for new measures related to economic restructuring, income distribution reform, and the urbanization process. Third, substantive equality and justice must be fully integrated into China's "five-in-one" socialist development framework (the term refers to economic, political, cultural, social, and ecological development). Gender mainstreaming mechanisms should be put in place to address deep-rooted structural and institutional issues of inequality and injustice, so as to genuinely implement the basic state policy of gender equality.

Third, interventions in the labor market shall be enhanced in order to eliminate gender discrimination in employment and occupation. The inequality inherent in the three previously mentioned aspects can also be interpreted as discrimination, not only against women, but also against people of various overlapping identities. Discrimination is evident not only in these three aspects, but also in three different phases: pre-market, on-market (occupational career), and post-market. The Chinese government signed the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* in 1980, and ratified the No. 111 *Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention*

of the International Labor Office in 2007. Yet, for several years and even several decades, despite the Labor Law, Employment Promotion Act, and Labor Contract Law the government has promulgated, there is still no clear definition of employment discrimination, nor of direct discrimination or of indirect discrimination.

In times of labor overabundance as well as in times of economic recession, the Chinese government has managed to create an environment where more than 760 million are employed—quite a remarkable achievement. But the government has not shown the same courage and wisdom when it comes to solving employment discrimination and occupational discrimination. This has dampened the enthusiasm of workers and hurt productivity. Therefore, the following recommendations are being made. First, employment and occupational discrimination must be clearly defined, including direct discrimination and indirect discrimination, so as to offer equal employment opportunities to all workers. Second, regulations to fight against employment and occupational discrimination must be formulated for China's labor market. Multiple approaches, including adopting administrative, legal, and social measures, should be adopted to strengthen intervention against employment and occupational discrimination. Third, skills, training, and occupational guidance must be enhanced to eradicate occupational segregation and break the glass ceiling to give women equal opportunities for career development.

Fourth, the principle of equal pay for equal work must be adhered to, and the reform of China's income distribution system must be accelerated. Traditional views hold that the economic aggregate can constantly improve economic efficiency and promote social progress, that we should pursue growth first and think about distribution later, and that everything good in life comes from growth. The increased gender income gap previously mentioned runs contrary to this myth. As world leader in aggregate economic growth, China is also experiencing a widening wealth gap and a rapidly rising Gini coefficient, which have led to unequal outcomes in economic participation. Therefore, the following suggestions are being made. First, according to the 46th provision of China's Labor Law, wages must be work-based, and equal remuneration for equal work shall be paid to workers irrespective of their social identities. Second, the government should provide detailed definitions and standards for work of equal value, establish scientific and non-biased performance evaluation mechanisms, and gradually realize equal pay for equal work. Taken together, these processes aim to end the undervaluation of women's labor in low-income industries with many female workers, break the

occupational segregation in the labor market, and narrow the gender income gap. Third, gender disparity and the wealth gap should be reduced through taxation, social security, social welfare, and public services to realize social justice and substantive equality.

Fifth, the value of unpaid work must be recognized and family care services must be integrated into the public service system. Previous analyses of unpaid work have suggested that putting the responsibility of child rearing and family care into private hands, meaning primarily the hands of women and of the market, reinforces the traditional gender labor division and causes gender inequality. Since the beginning of the current century, the Chinese government has strengthened social development and has adopted a strategy for equalizing social services. However, the government's Twelfth Five-Year Plan for the Public Service System did not include the elimination of gender inequality or the recognition of unpaid work. Therefore the following suggestions are being made. First, family services and family welfare must be integrated into the national public service system. This is an important measure for the elimination of gender inequality and the wealth gap (supporting low-income families, especially), and a fundamental way of easing women's burden of unpaid work. Second, human-centered family policies, rather than just family planning policies, must be developed to help male and female workers with family responsibilities to balance their work and family lives. Family services must be developed and a family-friendly social support system must be built. Third, men and women should be encouraged to share family and social responsibilities equally. Policies such as paternity leave and parental leave should be introduced to encourage men to assume an equal share of the family care responsibilities. Fourth, the value of unpaid work must be recognized by providing corresponding social security benefits and by granting rights to family property in accordance with the value of unpaid work.

Sixth, the reform of the political system must be strengthened to promote women's participation in administration and policy-making. Gender inequality leaves women with marginalized voices and less decision-making power in political life. The growth of the aggregate economy does not automatically lead to gender disparity. Rather, unequal social norms are acquired in the process of individual socialization, and these are often reinforced by market signals, along with formal and informal institutions. Social customs in China assume that political and economic decision-making are men's prerogatives and that female leaders have long hair but are short on experience. The low level of women's political engagement further consolidates this misconception. Given that challenging the existing systems and social norms can help promote gender equality, and

that the collective initiative of women can shape institutions, markets and social norms, it is extremely important to increase women's engagement in policy-making and to improve the quality of their engagement (not all women are in favor of gender equality), and to make democratic decision-making more scientific and more representative.

Last, gender equality and human rights education must be included in China's cultural development. After the founding of the PRC, gender equality became an official ideology. The progress for gender equality that grew out of legal and other policy changes attracted the attention of the world. However, with the introduction of market-oriented economic reforms, various market failures, institutional barriers, and social norms have shaken and confused people's conceptions of the equality of men and women. So far, China has not embraced continuous reflections upon the concepts of gender equality, a practice that continues to evolve in the international community. Because China does not have a long history of human rights culture, there appears to be a collective ignorance of core human rights principles, including of such concepts as "equality," "non-discrimination," and "government obligation and responsibility." Therefore, the government should add gender equality and social justice to China's socialist core values so that every Chinese citizen comes to observe them in mind and deed.

Translated by Bo Ærenlund Sørensen and Shi Duole

## Notes

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1. In rural areas, especially during the period of the Great Leap Forward, People's communes helped workers by providing socialized services, such as building canteens, nurseries, kindergartens, nursing homes, etc. But the great famine of 1959–1961 changed the status of the socialization of housework. As a result, many nurseries and nursing homes were shut down, and child rearing, old-age support, and daily chores yet again became the responsibility of individual households in rural areas.
2. HDI is an indicator used by the UN to measure social progress. It includes three aspects: life expectancy, length of education, and GDP, and it emphasizes that all members of society should participate equally in development and equally share the fruits thereof.
3. GDI is a development indicator related to gender. It measures the basic capacity and achievement just as HDI, but focuses on the inequality of achievements between men and women. The greater the gender disparity, the lower the GDI.

4. GEM also measures gender equality. It focuses on whether women and men have the opportunities to engage actively in economic and political life and in policy-making. The greater the gender disparity, the lower the GEM.
5. Different from formal employment, informal employment refers to "economic activities outside the institutionalized economic structure" (ILO). Informal employment is volatile and nonstandard in income, labor time, labor relation, labor form, social security, and business activities. In the process of industrialization and urbanization, informal employment became the choice of low-skill workers including migrant workers, laid-off and unemployed workers, and women.
6. As for the definition of wage discrimination, Becker (1971) holds that if the employer gives different wages to male and female employees with the same production capacity, then there is wage discrimination. There are two explanations for why there is discrimination in the market. The first one is Becker's theory of Taste for Discrimination (Becker 1971). Becker thinks that discrimination is a matter of individual taste. According to the theory, at least some employers are willing to pay higher wages than necessary to satisfy their taste in regard to gender and race. The secondary explanation is the Theory of Statistical Discrimination, which holds that gender discrimination is not caused by personal taste, but by the selection problem arising out of insufficient information. The employee is discriminated against simply because he/she belongs to a certain special group (Aigner and Cain 1997).
7. See Liu Xiaoyun, "Xingbie gongzi chayi fenxi: Pingjun gongzi chayi fenxi" [Analysis of the gender wage differential: decomposition of average wage disparity], quoted from *Shehui xingbie yu jingji fazhan: Jingyan yanjiu fangfa* [Gender and Development: Empirical Research Methods] by Zhang Liqin, Du Fenglian, and Dong Xiaoyuan. Beijing: 2012, Zhongguo shehuikexue chubanshe, pp. 122–152.
8. CFPS is a major social science project conducted by the Institute of Social Science Survey of Beijing University that aims to investigate changes in China's society, economy, population, education, and health through tracking individual, household, and community data. Available at http://www.isss.edu.cn:8888/datapub/logon.jsp.
9. Data from population census in 1990, 2000 and 2010, quote from a secondary source: *Men and Women in the Chinese Society—Facts and Data in 2012* by Department of Social Science and Technology and Cultural Statistics, National Bureau of Statistics. Beijing: 2012, p. 66.

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# *Chapter Two*

# *"Returning Home" or "Being Returned Home"?*

## *The Debate over Women Returning to the Home and Changing Values*

*Song Shaopeng*

Every year, in early March, thousands of delegates to the National People's Congress (NPC)—the legislature of the People's Republic of China (PRC)—and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) gather together in Beijing for the Lianghui Meetings, generating an atmosphere of lively debate. Since International Women's Day, March 8, falls during the two sessions of the meetings, the Chinese media always takes this opportunity to turn the spotlight on female delegates and file stories about women and gender issues. There was a time when the day was known in China as "International Women's Labor Day," but the term "labor" has quietly disappeared, and political celebration has given way to a day of leisure and consumption without any officially organized activities. In the days immediately before and after March 8 in 2011, however, two controversial law proposals concerning gender issues attracted great attention and triggered a heated public debate in the media. One was the proposal "Encouraging Some Women to Return Home," put forward by a female member of the CPPCC National Committee, Zhang Xiaomei (Zhang 2011), and another was the proposal for the same "Retirement Age for Men and Women" (Yu and Cheng 2011). These two proposals raised again the problematic question of how to interpret "equality between men and women"—ought men and women be considered basically alike, or would it be better to pursue equal rights and treatment on the basis of their respective differences. In addition to this, the proposals also brought to light the

class-based differentiation among Chinese women. This chapter will, for the moment, put those questions aside and instead focus on the historical background of the debate and the socioeconomic and political implications of having women "return to the home."

Those who advocate that women should be returning to the home take the concepts of "choice" and "rights" as the starting points for their argument, so that even opponents find it difficult to argue against them because of the hegemonic attraction of "individual choice" (Chen 2011; Nüsheng 2011). On the other hand, generally speaking, the opponents of the idea of women returning home do not confront the question of why (some) women do wish to do so. Instead, they regard labor participation a criterion for women's liberation, and criticize Zhang Xiaomei, accusing her of either having forgotten the history of women's liberation or of siding with men (Shen 2011; Nüsheng2011). Some even think that she does not understand feminism at all.

I do not want to opine on whether Zhang Xiaomei's position is correct or not. What constitutes feminism and who is a feminist is a pseudo problem in a pluralist society where everyone has the right to express their personal view. We cannot not classify Zhang Xiaomei as a male voice merely because her viewpoints do not dovetail with some particular version of feminism (Shen 2011; Zhang 2011), nor would it be fair to assume that Zhang Xiaomei's proposal is merely an attempt to attract publicity or to suspect her of ulterior commercial motives just because she is the editor of fashion magazines that cultivate "femininity."

In a way, I would rather believe that Zhang Xiaomei, in her role as a delegate of the CPPCC, makes sincere attempts to sympathize with women's suffering and tries her best to represent women's interests. As a matter of fact, she has emphasized in media interviews that she regards herself as a "female worker" and "has deep feelings about women's issues" (Zhang 2011b). Overall, I choose to see Zhang Xiaomei and her detractors as representing two different strands of women's interests, for both sides genuinely believe that, by arguing for or against the proposal of women returning home, they are safeguarding the interests of women. Thus, instead of impugning Zhang's personal motives, I suggest we interrogate closely why (some) women would consider it in their best interest to return to the home. The present purpose is not to prevent the articulation of "women returning home," but rather to open up the debate and deepen the discussions.

## Why Returning to the Home? Lack of Options or Change of Values?

Over the past century, China has seen six substantial rounds of debate on the issue of women returning home. The first two rounds of the debate took place in the 1930s and 1940s at the time of the Second Sino-Japanese War. Since the 1980s, there have been four more rounds, including the recent one sparked by Zhang Xiaomei's law proposal. What makes the latest debate unique is that this is the first time a woman has proposed to send women home and thus take up a position that has previously been taken by men.[1]

Zhang Xiaomei cites two arguments to support her idea that some women should leave the labor market and become full-time housewives. The first is that women are physiologically "more suited to take care of household affairs, housework, caring for the elderly, nursing, educating children, and creating a happy and harmonious family life" (Zhang 2011). Besides, "there are some congenital differences between men and women which cannot be changed. Society should respect these differences and treat men and women differently" (Zhang 2011). Her second argument is that career-plus-family is a double burden for women. Since many feminist theories have already refuted the first reason by arguing that gender differences are but a cultural construct, I will not delve into this discussion here.

Concerning her second argument, Zhang Xiaomei is perhaps correct in pointing out the problems some urban professional and middle-class women have faced in managing both a working life and a family life, and the problem of a double burden has indeed been a focal point of contemporary women's studies.[2] Several research reports have reached similar conclusions. Conflicts between having a family and fulfilling the traditional duties of motherhood (the one-child policy has greatly enhanced the role of mothers in educating their offspring) have had an effect on the career paths of women. China is said to have the largest number of female scientific and technical workers (Ruobing 2011), but the *Report on the Study of Chinese Women in Scientific and Technical Work issued by the Chinese Science Academy* (March 7, 2007) pointed out that although women account for roughly one-third of those working with science and technology, they make up only 5 percent at the top of the pyramid, and the output of female scientists and technicians is only half or two-thirds of what men in the same age group produce. An important reason why female scientists and technicians are less productive than their male counterparts

has to do with the family. Time spent on maternity and the family has been identified as the second most important factor underlying the lower professional productivity of female scientists and technicians—the most important factor being traditional gender biases. Seventy-eight percent of female scientists and technicians wholly or largely took care of housework, while this held for only 12 percent of men (Wang 2007).

The "2009 Survey on the Living Conditions of Professional Women" revealed that roughly 70 percent of working women experience a conflict between their family and career. The proportion of those who feel that "the center of life is in the home" has increased over the past years, from 22.9 percent in 2007 to 23.5 percent in 2008, and 34.1 percent in 2009. In 2007, only 3 percent of women indicated that they were willing to be full-time housewives, whereas the proportion had increased to 8.4 percent by 2009 (The National Women's Federation 2010). In short, Zhang Xiaomei's proposal "to encourage some women to return to the home" could perhaps also be formulated as "some women prefer to return to the home." In this sense, I think Zhang Xiaomei's proposal does represent the wishes of a segment of urban career women.

Under the dual pressures of family and work, to return to the home may have become a needed solution for some women. But to ask only what women need is not enough, for women's needs or preferences can be divided into "practical gender preferences" and "strategic gender preferences" (Moser 1989, 275)."Strategic gender preferences" refer to choices made with a view to change the social status of women and the traditional gender system in the long run. "Practical gender preferences" refer to choices made necessary by the existing gender system. Meeting the practical gender preferences will not necessarily challenge the traditional gender system; it may, in fact, reinforce it.

When Zhang Xiaomei refers to "women's preferences," she probably does so without asking whether or not the existing gender system is fair and reasonable. However, it will be pointless to accuse Zhang Xiaomei's proposal for "a step back to history," as such an accusation cannot deny the existence of the preference among women to return to the home.

Therefore, we ought not to attack Zhang Xiaomei as a person, but should rather ask how the wish to return to the home has come into being? Whose needs foster such a preference and why? The *2009 Survey on the Living Conditions of Professional Women* attributed women's desire to return home to a change in values, especially among women born after 1980. The report concludes, in a slightly gloomy

tone, that "with the increasing working pressure among professional women, more and more women are willing to return to the home, and even to become full-time housewives if their family's economic conditions allow. Another possibility is that as women of the 1980s generation have become the backbone of the professional female workforce, they also brought in new values and tend to seek more individually-based and varied choices" (ACWF 2010, 13).

I believe that attributing women returning home to matters of value change and individual choice relies on an exaggerated cult of individual subjectivity, which risks imposing upon the subject an essentialist existence in an existential vacuum. This kind of independent subject is merely a fiction. Subjects may seem to make independent choices, but choices are always made within certain institutional frameworks, and options are always shaped by external factors. We tend to see only the agency side of the choice and disregard all the factors that exert their influence upon the actor. In fact, we all live in the "iron house" of society (Lu 1922). We can act freely and make our choices, but we cannot escape the iron house. In Zhang Xiaomei's proposal, she, on the one hand, considers the wishes of some women to return to their home as purely "voluntary," on the other hand, she urges the state to encourage such voluntary acts through policies and institutional arrangements. In other words, she wishes to construct an iron house in which women will be encouraged to return home, or we might say that she wishes to lay down a path within the iron house to channel women in the direction of their own homes. If the choice of returning home were completely voluntary, why would it be necessary for the state to encourage it?

Thus, to really understand why some women choose to return home, we must examine why such a value change has occurred, how the soft and informal—as well as the hard and formal—institutionalization of women returning home is constructed. We also need to examine whether such institutional arrangements have always existed, are determined by "nature," or if they have existed in various guises throughout history?

According to Marxist theory, the prerequisite for women's liberation is that women escape the confines of the household and join the community of productive labor. This has been held to be the basic principle of women's liberation in China since the founding of the PRC in 1949. In order for the belief that productive labor liberates women to hold true, there needs to be socialization of housework, by considering the facilities of nurseries, canteens, public baths, and so on. While the state mobilized women to participate in the labor

market, housework was thus made the responsibility of the state. In other words, in the collectivist era, the private and public spheres partially overlapped, with the individual small household embedded in the collective large household of state-governed society. As a result, large numbers of women entered the labor market, which had previously been monopolized by men. Although a gendered division of labor still existed—across sectors (Jin 2006) as well as in the professions (Gao 2005)—the socialization of housework made it possible for women to participate in productive labor outside the home. Even though the state was never able to entirely socialize housework, it nevertheless remained the goal and moral obligation of the state. As a response to the incomplete socialization of housework, however, feminists within the state system emphasized the efforts of women (*Women of China* 1964) and called upon couples to adopt a "revolutionary attitude of equality" by sharing housework (Dong 1964).[3] But the advocacy of this kind of revolutionary gender ideology, and the attack on so-called feudal thoughts, lacked institutional support and was, furthermore, met with hostility from male chauvinists in the party (Wang 2011). In other words, the gender division of labor within the family was never fully abolished by the socialist system. In fact, the socialist system itself constructed new forms of gendered labor divisions in the sphere of production (Jin 2006; Gao 2005).

Since the beginning of market reforms in the 1980s, the relationship between physiological gender differences and gender roles within the family has been reconstructed and emphasized. The efforts of the Women's Studies movement of the 1980s to recover what is "naturally female" (Wang 1998; Liu and Liu 2007) and the widespread criticism of the socialist "women's liberation" policies and practices for having masculinized women by peddling the stereotype of "iron women" have both served to reinforce women's physiological difference from men (Wang 1998; Hershatter and Honig 1999). Women are now depicted as a "weaker" and less productive type of manpower, and this supposed weakness is justified with reference to what is "natural." As the naturalized physiological gaze of the 1980s became entangled with the market transformations of the 1990s, the reproductive work of women was once again pushed back into the private domain. In a sense, China's market development up through the 1990s involved two privatizations: the privatization of property and the privatization of the household.

The market-oriented reforms of the late 1990s, under which the Modern Enterprise System came to replace the old work-unit system, were achieved through transfers of ownership and by changing

relations of production. The transfer of ownership was mainly accomplished through the enterprise reforms, which were centered on the introduction of a stockholding system. The change of the relations of production came about through the freeing of enterprises from providing social services, and through labor "optimization" (another word for downsizing) aimed at improving efficiency. This optimization has mainly been pursued by laying off women and by reducing social services. The main reason why women were eliminated in the optimization process is said to be that they are less productive on the job due to their housework and childcare burdens. Through optimization and social service reduction, companies have been freed from the burden of labor reproduction, which has reduced their labor costs and increased their competitiveness. Initially, the notion that enterprises need not provide social services did not imply that society should not provide such functions at all. But, due to the comprehensive marketization of childcare and medical services since the mid 1990s, these social service functions have been pushed back onto the shoulders of individuals. If three decades of rapid economic development in China have been made possible by cheap labor, we cannot ascribe this simply to a demographic dividend providing an ample labor force. From a gender perspective, the price of labor has been driven down by a structural separation of the public and private spheres. Cheap labor is not the inevitable result of the market's spontaneous order, but rather a consequence of a man-made structural adjustment.

Before the traditional patriarchal gender division of labor was completely removed, the privatization of the family amounted to the feminization of housework (giving birth, rearing, providing care, etc.). The privatization of the household and the separation of public from private produced a structural disadvantage for the vast majority of women who were not wealthy enough to have servants to do their housework. In this manner, China's marketization of housework since the 1980s has produced gender and class oppression. When a part of the urban middle class turned to the market to cover their household labor needs, lower-class rural women stepped in as the main provider. Discussions in the 1980s about "the burdens of intellectuals" demonstrated an ongoing ideological reconstruction and legitimation of three areas of inequality: that between mental and physical labor, between urban and rural inhabitants, and between men and women (Yan 2010). But the vast majority of people who were unable to contract out their housework had to solve their problems by dividing the housework, either by gender or by generation. If an individual or a nuclear family could not manage all their chores, they would

have to rely on the older generation to share some of the work. Urban working couples often have to ask for help from their parents—most often from the parents of the husband—to take turns in caring for their children, especially when the children are under the age of three. It is in the context of this structural transformation that the call of "women returning home" began to be articulated.

The children, women, and the elderly left behind in rural areas are also emblematic products of the structural separation of production from reproduction and the the public from the private sphere. In this way, the focus on lineage, characteristic of China's traditional patriarchal family and cultural heritage, has been seamlessly woven into the current capitalist system, reappearing in contemporary Chinese society under the guise of compassionate parental and grandparental love. As the importance of family has been greatly strengthened in the process of China's marketization, family values and ethics are once again being reemphasized. If the oppression of female migrant workers in the 1990s was premised on a tripartite alliance between capitalism, patriarchy, and the state (Pun 2005), then capitalist male dominance has sent down deep roots with the further entrenchment of China's capitalist development. Male dominance is now an integral part of the capitalist system, rather than something exterior thereto.

Under male-dominated capitalism, enterprises no longer need to concern themselves with labor reproduction, and hence, they often see the female employees who undertake this function as burdens. Women are generally labelled as "low quality labor" because of their gender, and this is the main reason why female workers are the first to be laid off, why female university graduates have such difficulties finding jobs, and why professional women encounter corporate glass ceilings. But traditional patriarchal culture is not the only blameworthy factor. On the contrary, a new gender ideology has been developed to rationalize the new capitalist system. As women have become increasingly marginalized on the labor market, many have been forced to choose marriage and family at the expense of their career, and the notion that choosing the right spouse is more important than choosing the right job has been praised as the prudent woman's motto. In contrast, the male elites exert dominance over material resources, politics, and discourse. No matter how mellifluous the rhetoric used to ennoble housework and motherhood, no matter how flattering the portrait of female subjects as consumers (rather than as producers), the balance between gender roles in regards to sex, marriage, and family life has long been lost. Furthermore, as the private and the public spheres have become more and more separated, the

public sphere has come to enjoy ever more prestige. As male-dominated society takes to railing against women for consorting with married men and for being greedy gold-diggers, this same society refuses to acknowledge that these needs have been produced by the "buyers" in the system. Simply put: no demand, no supply. This kind of gendered relationship between supply and demand is very much a product of the capitalist system.

Contemporary Chinese society has more or less completed the social reconstruction of the public and private spheres, especially as it pertains to ideology. So the question is, how many options do professional women have in this iron house? A few years ago, the Chinese media heatedly debated the phenomenon of "hidden marriages" among white-collar employees and of the escalating number of unmarried and childless women in the cities. Similar to some women's choice to return to the home, these choices, too, were made by middle-class professional women facing the same constraints and dual pressures. One reason why some professional women may prefer returning to the home has to do with the alienation of labor under the capitalist system. The most extreme examples are the recent cases of death from overwork among young white-collar employees.[4] When employment comes to stand not for liberation, but rather for alienation, fatigue, and burnout, family life may come to seem the only retreat, and marriage may come to seem the only way out. Where the traditional gender norm stipulating that men govern outside the home, and women govern inside may provide an escape route for women, men in the same situation have no where to retreat. The capitalist system also oppresses men, and while men may seek recompense at the upper rungs of the gender hierarchy, capitalism remains at the root of their oppression.

## Four Debates about "Women Returning Home" since the 1980s

China's contemporary iron house was not built overnight, but emerged through a gradual transformation process. As a constitutive element of social relationships, gender is embedded in all political, economic, social, cultural, educational, and other social institutions (Scott 1986). Therefore, changes in the social system inevitably affect the gender structure of society. This means that gender provides an excellent vantage point from which to inspect the changing social structure.

Since the launch of China's market reforms in the 1980s, there have been four significant rounds of debate about women returning home. Examining these debates as part of China's ideological change, and observing them in the context of China's grand economic transformation, will not only highlight the position and role of gender within this larger picture, but will also reveal much about the trends, rhythms, and direction of the transformation of China's economy, society, and value system. The four women returning home polemics are like four tremors of thought unleashed by the transformation of the economic and social structure and recorded by a social seismograph. By observing the four tremors, we are able to draw a relatively clear picture of how China's mainstream value system has changed along with the penetration of capitalism, and how Marxist notions of women's liberation diverged toward liberalism on the way to its present pattern.

The four women returning home polemics include the discussion of "Job or Home? Where Is the Way out for Women?" initiated by the inaugural issue of the magazine *Zhongguo funü* [Women of China] in 1988. In the mid 1990s, Zheng Yefu published "Sociological Reflections on Gender Equality" in *Shehuixue Yanjiu* [hereon Sociological Studies] (1994), leading to a discussion in academic circles about the future of women's emancipation. During the two sessions of the NPC and the CPPCC in March 2001, CPPCC delegate Wang Xiancai presented a paper "A Call for Women to Return to Housekeeping—Reflections on Gender Equality and the Division of Labor," suggesting that lower-class women should devote themselves to housework, and causing the first debate on this topic in the twenty-first century. Zhang Xiaomei's proposal in 2011, encouraging middle-class women to abandon their jobs in favor of doing housework, set off the fourth round of debate.

The first round of debate took place in the late 1980s, at a time when China's economic system was transitioning from a planned economy to a market economy. In October 1984, the third plenary session of the 12th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) adopted the "Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Reform of the Economic Structure," which for the first time articulated the concept of a socialist planned commodity economy as a way of bridging the commodity economy and planned economy. In October 1987, the resolution of the 13th Party Congress devised a new economic mechanism whereby "the state would regulate the market, and the market guide enterprises," which greatly enhanced the status of the market. However, allowing the market to regulate itself is still equated with capitalism, and some of the legal

ramifications hereof remain to be wholly clarified. Looking at the reforms from a practical point of view, the economic transformation of the countryside was largely completed in the 1980s. The collective mode of production was eliminated, the household contract responsibility system was established, and the family once again became the locus of production in rural areas. A large number of rural women, previously engaged in collective production, returned to the domestic sphere. At the same time, some cities undertook economic reforms by expanding the autonomy of enterprises.

In 1984, the provinces of Henan, Hebei, Heilongjiang, and a number of others launched a pilot project aimed at workforce optimization. On September 9, 1986, the State Council issued interim provisions for implementing the labor contract system in state-owned enterprises, which vested power over employment matters with the enterprises. In 1988, enterprise workforce optimization reached new heights. On the basis of the labor contract system, companies began to restructure and set new limits on the number of employees, and as it turned out, in most places more than half of the surplus personnel were women, that is, gender-based distinctions began to emerge under the new system of employment. In addition to the lay off of female workers, female university graduates also began to find themselves being rejected by the labor market, and a new system of classification even came into being, which placed women alongside the old, the weak, the sick, and the disabled. Under this new employment system that prioritized efficiency and believed in the survival of the fittest, women workers were placed in the "poor quality" category (*Women of China* 1988).

Faced with this situation, the inaugural issue of the magazine *Women of China* (1988) came out with an eye-catching cover: "Discussion: 1988—Where is the Way Out for Women?" along with two provocative articles asking, "Where is My Way Out?" and "Reflections on Women's Returning to the Home in Daqiuzhuang." Discussions from this period essentially reflected the confusion and helplessness experienced by women excluded from the labor market during the early stages of reform and can be seen as women questioning the reforms against the backdrop of injustice. The article "Where is My Way Out?" is a letter written by a woman, Li Jing, who was laid off. Li Jing had often asked for leave to take care of her children, and one day, the factory, in the name of efficiency, ordered her and a number of other "superfluous employees" to go home and wait for reemployment. For this, the workers would receive 80 percent of their previous wage.

Faced with this situation, Li Jing raised many questions: "I lost my job because of my kids. But my kids are not my private property. Why should I be treated so ruthlessly? Isn't it often claimed that equality is the starting point for competition? We women shoulder the burdens of motherhood and housework, but we also have to compete with men at work. Is that supposed to be an equal starting point? Women fulfill the important task of human reproduction, but why isn't this contribution acknowledged by society? And not only that, it has even become the excuse for squeezing women out of the labor market!"

Li Jing lived in an era when the agenda of women's liberation in the name of socialism still enjoyed some legitimacy, and the legitimacy of the market economy was still not fully established. Hence, Li Jing stood at a historical crossroads, and her doubts and questions targeted both the continuing withdrawal of socialism and the development of market mechanisms. In her letter, Li Jing used her own experience to talk about her dedication to socialism and to her factory. She used socialist theories of women's liberation to question why women had to lose their jobs because they took care of their children. According to the logic of socialist collectivism, children are the "flowers of the motherland," and rearing children is not the responsibility of the individual. Li Jing did not question the gender division of labor, which also shows that despite the fact that housework ought to have been socialized during the socialist period, women still accepted a gendered division of household labor. This marked the built-in limits of the socialist women's liberation theory and social practice. However, Li Jing offered a positive evaluation of the social value of parenthood and housework, conceiving of these as a form of "contribution," and it is exactly on the basis of this positive evaluation and her deep identification with the socialist ideology of gender equality that Li Jing asks what constitutes an "equal starting point." Of course, neither Li Jing nor the editors of *Women of China* questioned the reforms, nor did they question the legitimacy of competition or the principle of the survival of the fittest. As pointed out in an editor's note in the magazine, the editors merely hoped "to call for the establishment of an environment where women may have an equal starting point [with men]" (*Women of China* 1988).

Daqiuzhuang was a model of the socialist market economy in the 1980s, diversifying from an solely agriculture into a mixture of agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, fishery, and commerce. Before the reforms, 95 percent of the women in Daqiuzhuang participated in collective production, as did other women across China. By the end of the 1980s, however, 84 percent of the married women in Daqiuzhuang

had returned to their homes, creating a new social stratum: the housewife. Women did not return to the home in Daqiuzhuang due to an excess of available labor power. In fact, the collective economy of Daqiuzhuang still depends on labor, including female workers, imported from outside the village. The article about Daqiuzhuang reveals an important reason why women became housewives in the village—namely as a consequence of the structural separation of production from social reproduction under the market economy. "As Daqiuzhuang began to develop and entered the stage of primitive capital accumulation, people had fewer holidays, longer working hours, and more physically demanding jobs, all of which not only exclude women, but also put a great deal of stress on the men. Food is a major necessity for everyone, and cooking has become an essential concern for every family in the village. Three meals a day, men hurrying back home to eat and dashing back to the factory as soon as they put down their chopsticks" (Zhang and Ma 1988). In this way, letting women return to the home to take care of the housework safeguards the income of the other family members and maximizes the profits of the entire household. This shows that women returning to the home became an economic strategy for families only when the family was once again made the basic economic unit of society.

The second debate occurred in the mid 1990s. This period was the key turning point for China's transition into a market economy, after which the Chinese economy truly switched into high gear. To a certain extent, Deng Xiaoping's speeches made during his so-called Southern Tour in 1992 swept away the ideological obstacles to the establishment of the market economy as he proposed that "[a] market economy does not necessarily mean capitalism. Socialism should also embrace the market." He furthermore pointed out that "both plan and market are means for developing the economy. The essential distinction between socialism and capitalism does not depend on the balance between plan and market" (Deng 1992, 373).

In October 1992, the 14th Congress of the CCP explicitly stated that the goal of the economic reforms was to establish "a socialist market economy." In November 1993, the Third Plenary Session of the 14th Party Congress adopted the "Decision of the CCP Central Committee on Issues Regarding the Establishment of the Socialist Market Economy," which clearly stated that the market would have "a fundamental role to play in social resource allocation" and a market economy would be established by "transforming the operating mechanisms of state-owned enterprises" and by "altering the organizational structures of enterprises." Following this decision, various

steps were taken to convert state-owned enterprises into shareholdings, and "reducing the burdens of enterprises providing social services" become a key objective. In October 31, 1993, two weeks before the decision was issued, *Renmin Ribao* (People's Daily) had published a research report prepared by the Shandong Province's Task Force for Solving the Issue of Enterprise Involvement in Social Services, titled "Allow Enterprises to Enter the Market with a Light Baggage." It is recommended that enterprises should have no direct involvement in the life, welfare and social security of the workers in periods prior to and after employment. In other words, enterprises should "peel away" functions not directly related to manufacturing in order to "join the battle with a light baggage." The report finds that enterprise involvement in providing social services has become a major obstacle for a shift toward the market, and the report urges that this problem be solved the earlier, the better. At the early stage of peeling away, Xue Zhao, the vice chairman of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), published an article in *People's Daily* under the rubric of "How to Solve the Problem of Employment for Female Workers." In this article, Xue revealed that women bore the brunt of the market transition. For instance, 60 percent of the laid-off workers were women. Xue also carefully reminded readers "to adopt a cautious attitude towards the conversion of childcare institutions when solving the problem of enterprises providing social services" (Xue 1995) hinting at the significant effect these policies would have on working women. The main gist of Xue's article is that laid-off female workers should hold high the spirit of self-reliance and embrace self-employment as a means of adapting to the economic transformation.

The debate about women returning home in the mid 1990s took place exactly at the time when the legitimacy of the market system was being established. It was also around this time that Zheng Yefu—one of China's leading sociologists—published his article "Sociological Reflections on Gender Equality." If the discussion in the late 1980s was initiated by women who questioned state, society, and the market as they came to face the injustices inflicted upon them by the transition, then the discussion in the mid 1990s was initiated by male scholars who argued from a market point of view, urging women to accept injustice, or at least to recognize and accept gender injustice, at the current stage of China's development. If Li Jing's questions in the late 1980s emerged out of the socialist women's liberation theory, then the debate of the mid 1990s set out to negate the socialist practice of women's liberation from a market perspective and argued for the reasonableness of gender inequality under the market system.

In the discussion of the late 1980s, although the socialist model of obtaining gender equality through the masculinization of women was regarded a "leftist" error and therefore contested, the principle of gender equality was still, in general, affirmed. As such, Daqiuzhuang was still commended for its commitment to practicing gender neutrality in matters of employment and remuneration (Zhang and Ma 1988). In contrast, the discussion in the mid 1990s was based on a fundamental disavowal of the practice of socialist gender equality. In the debate of the late 1980s, equality was still a core value. An editorial in *Women of China* described the precarious situation of women as being premised upon a conflict between "equality and profits" in the market economy (1988). At the same time, however, the conflict between freedom and equality also emerged from the same discussions. The article "Contemplating 'Women Returning to the Home in Daqiuzhuang'" styled it as a voluntary choice when women in Daqiuzhuang returned to the domestic sphere (Zhange and Ma 1988). Therefore, when facing the conflict between equality (in the 1980s, having women engage in production was considered an important manifestation of gender equality) and freedom, the author concluded the article by asking: "How, from the viewpoint of women's liberation, should we evaluate the decision of women to return to the home?" (Zhang and Ma 1988). By the time of the discussion in the mid 1990s, however, freedom had become sanctified as the highest social value.

In his work, Zheng Yefu (1994) treats market principles (fair competition and the strong leading the weak) as the standard of social ethics. He not only elucidates the reasonableness of historical forms of gender inequality (matriarchy and patriarchy), he also attempts to reinterpret state–society relations from a classical liberal point of view. In addition, Zheng adds, the first four decades of women's liberation in the PRC had been "ahead of their time and achieved by executive fiat," which had unleashed "disorder in family relationships." The upshot of the state interfering is that "by helping the weak to suppress the strong, the normal division of labor between the strong and the weak in the family is disrupted to the point where the weak fail to comprehend their weakness and the strong lose their belief in themselves, ultimately depriving China of real men." "Forcing through women's liberation by political means has also cost China its women," as Chinese women have become "neutered" or "asexual." Zheng dubs the equal pay of the socialist period "egalitarianism" and pronounces it both "absurd" and a cause of the "increasing feminization" of Chinese men. The reason behind this increasing feminization is that men come to engage in housework—"When a man brings home

a pay check the same size as his wife's, his dignity suffers. After all, in terms of physical strength he is significantly superior to his wife, so when his income is not higher than hers he has no choice but to outdo her in housework." In short, all of these consequences can be traced back to socialism's charitable bestowal of liberation upon women. Zheng argued that the market would be able to rectify the problem of "liberation ahead of time" and could "constitute a mechanism for justly measuring everyone's abilities and talents." "The real liberation of women should not interfere with the free and fair exchanges of the market, but ought rather to build upon this sort of fair exchange." Therefore, Zheng welcomed "the ability of the reform and opening to finally put paid to both socialist welfare and to the equality bestowed upon women." The discrimination suffered by women on the labor market in the wake of market reforms, such as with regard to choosing an occupation, "is neither totally without reason nor absolutely unwise."

The reason why Zheng Yefu defines women as the weaker party is to be found in his conviction that "competitiveness and predatory behavior" are innate traits of human beings. In a patriarchal society, "strength is of crucial significance for social production and for deciding power struggles." Thus, males hold the dominant position in society on account of their superior physical strength. Zheng believes that there are three fundamental sources of power: physical force, money, and knowledge. As long as physical strength is still "a constituent element of the productive forces," then "men should be able to contribute more to production than women and, thus, receive a higher income." In accordance with his linear view of development, Zheng must admit that the importance of human muscle power in production gradually decreased with the increased use of machinery. He is also unable to get around the history of the liberation of women in the West in the eighteenth century. Zheng does not deny that women have the capacity to participate in the labor market, but he attributes their inferior position in the marketizing economy to matters of physiology. Zheng notes that bearing and nurturing children affect the ability of women to contribute at a workplace for a period of time, and he claims that "a reasonable model for working out how work and wages should be determined during this period has still not been found." This argument rests on the hidden assumption that parenthood is the natural domain of women, and that it is a private affair without any connection to an enterprise's production.

Working from this assumption, Zheng holds that even though society does reach a technological stage where women are no longer less

capable commodity producers than men, and even though women are able to achieve the same knowledge as men, they still cannot transcend their physiology. Zheng, as he makes clear, does not agree with Mead's assertion that a great many aspects of the human personality have nothing or little to do with physiological sexual differences. Because he takes physiological determinism as his starting point, Zheng has an ambiguous attitude toward the gendered division of labor within the family bequeathed by patriarchal society. Zheng has a positive attitude toward patriarchy—calling it "above reproach"—because it has evolved through brutal competition among various groups and presently serves to reduce the waste of energy by providing a mechanism for cooperation. And herein, according to Zheng, lies the major advantage of patriarchy: it provides both men and women with a model for gender roles that keep them from descending into the confusing and conflictual quagmire of individual choice. Patriarchy also provides individuals with a sense of security and improves efficiency in society by fortifying the order of things. Contemporary society must, accordingly, avoid a facile negation of patriarchy because parts of the inherited tradition are still of value. Cherishing this tradition is necessary because society needs a "contemporary cultural model" for the division of gender roles within the family. "Without such guidance, everything would depend on the acumen of the individual, and this would inevitably be burdensome and lead to confusion, conflict, and chaos." Here, Zheng performs a discreet conceptual switch whereby the historical patriarchal system comes to serve as a device for propping up contemporary social order. Seeking ways to secure development and order, productive efficiency and stability in China, Zheng seems to have identified two corresponding solutions: patriarchy and the market. Of course, Zheng realizes the built-in conflict between these two solutions, but he maintains that the conflicts between social order and individual rights are "problems that today's society hasn't been able to deal with in a perfect manner."

Working within a liberalist framework, Zheng Yefu does not dispute that woman have abilities, nor does he disavow equal rights for men and women. He does, however, object to the inherited practices of women's liberation under socialism and seeks to replace this form of equality with a market version of equality. Zheng contends that the major gain from the previous socialist period is the popularization of the notion that women and men have equal rights. However, he cautions that equal rights should not be confused with equality of outcome. To what extent women will be able to realize their "rights" should be determined by the fair competition of the marketplace,

and the result of this competition should not be limited "by a ceiling at the top, or by a floor at the bottom." According to Zheng, what individuals are able to achieve on the (formally) free market is determined by physiological differences, but what he leaves out of this narrative is the very real effect of patriarchy upon individual choice. By doing so, he dresses patriarchal culture in the robes of free choice and thereby manages to smuggle patriarchal culture into the seemingly fair competition of the market. This makes it possible to pay tribute to a formal equality of rights while absolving everyone of responsibility for whatever may come about. Of the viewpoints in the four debates, those of Zheng Yefu are perhaps the most scholarly. They are also representative of the mainstream convictions held by the liberal-leaning intellectual elite of the 1990s.

The debate in the late 1980s unleashed by the magazine *Women of China* was, in the main, a debate among women. The debate in the 1990s, on the contrary, was initiated by the journal *Sociological Studies* and can be regarded as an ideological/scholarly debate among intellectuals who had come to face the advance of the market. Along with Zheng's article, the editors of *Sociological Studies* printed a statement: "The ideas propounded in this article are controversial both in the academic community and in our editorial department. The purpose in publishing these ideas is to stimulate debate and inspire future research." The events taking place in the editorial department around the publication of the article would be worth examining in a study of the history of ideas in the 1990s.

The two rounds of debate in the twenty-first century were both initiated by political figures—both were members of the CPPCC and made their remarks in sessions of political discussions—who put forth public policy recommendations at the annual plenary Lianghui Meetings of the CPPCC and the NPC. Accordingly, the site of the debates also shifted from women's magazines and academic journals to the mass media, including websites, blogs, email groups, and other electronic publications.

The third round of debate in the early 2000s was initiated when, in October 2000, the fifth plenary session of the Fifteenth CCP Central Committee reviewed and adopted the tenth five-year plan, which contained provisions for temporary and flexible employment. This was the context in which CPPCC member Wang Xiancai, during the two-sessions meeting in March 2001, presented the controversial speech "A Call for Women to Return to Housekeeping—Reflections on Gender Equality and the Division of Labor." This speech generated a heated debate and provoked the All-China Women's Federation

(ACWF) to conduct a survey of the motivations and aspirations of female urban employees of child-bearing age. The results of the survey were then used by the ACWF to raise objections to the Secretariat of the CCP Central Committee and the State Council regarding the provisions for temporary and flexible employment. In the end, the five-year plan dropped the provision for establishing a temporary employment system and instead adopted a compromise provision to deal with part-time, seasonal and other flexible forms of employment, including self-employment.

Wang Xiancai's views elaborated upon earlier criticisms of the masculinized pattern of socialist gender equality that was widely believed to have disregarded physiological differences between men and women. At a time when Chinese society was facing underemployment problems, Wang proposed that women in low-income families should focus on housework. But there is another issue of the time worth mentioning. During the economic transition, the key element in the ACWF's efforts to create employment for laid-off women consisted in trying to organize women to find employment as domestic service workers. Wang pointed to this to say that housework did, indeed, constitute an employment opportunity for women and implied that the state (the ACWF serving, in the final instance, as a part of the state apparatus) had already recognized and supported this form of gender-based division of labor. This also shows that the gendered division of labor outside the household is closely related to the gendered division of labor within the household. Recognizing the value of housework will not change structural gender oppression in a society undergoing marketization. The only way to do away with the gendered division of labor is to break apart the link associating specific gender traits with specific types of work.

Wang Xiancai uses market logic to calculate the value of housework. The cost of hiring a nanny, in effect, cuts into a woman's monetary income, and in addition, a women working in her own home creates other values for her husband and offspring by performing her motherly and wifely duties. Thus, Wang argues, from a rational choice cost-benefits perspective, women in low-income families should devote their time to housework. Part of Wang Xiancai's rhetorical strategy is to lift the notion of "housekeeping" to the level of "house management," so that it assumes a place alongside state management, municipal management, and school management. Housekeeping thus comes to acquire a higher social value because it involves not only labor but also management. In dealing with the relationship between a gender-based division of labor and gender equality, Wang's strategy

is to detach "equality" from "division of labor," insisting on the socialist idea that labor may be divided into different types, but that no type is any more or less valuable than any other type. For Li Jing in the late 1980s, equality was something concrete rather than abstract, and there was indeed a connection between child-rearing/household responsibility and the question of whether or not men and women could engage in fair competition on an equal footing (Li 1988).

Where the debate of the mid 1990s took place at a theoretical and conceptual level, the women returning to the home debate of the twenty-first century made it to the level of public policy advocacy. In the mid 1990s, when people were still exploring the legitimacy of the market system, Zheng Yefu used historical materialism as a framework for elucidating the legitimacy of patriarchy and of the market system in the context of the development of productive forces. In the twenty-first century, the market system has become the accepted starting point for any conversation. China has, in this sense, already completed the market-oriented transformation of the economy, and the concomitant differentiation of the class structure and the ideological transformation are basically in place.

A comparison between Zhang Xiaomei's proposal and Wang Xiancai's writings of ten years before reveals many similarities, even in terms of terminology. For instance, both used the same proverb, "the hand rocking the cradle is also the hand moving the Earth," as a way of illustrating the nobility and importance of motherhood. There are, however, also important differences between the arguments and suggestions presented by the two. While they both recognize the value of housework, Wang Xiancai wants to leave the appraisal of the actual value of housework to the marketplace, while Zhang Xiaomei took it one step further to propose the remuneration of housework; in 2010, Zhang Xiaomei put forward a law proposal on "Remuneration of Housework to Ensure Women's Rights." Wang Xiancai suggested that women in low-income families should return to the home, while Zhang Xiaomei focused on middle-class families (because low-income working-class families cannot do without two incomes—this also shows that social stratification in China has solidified). Where Wang Xiancai adopted an economic calculus, Zhang Xiaomei adopted a cultural one, advocating for "the perfection of every family's happiness and success so that the happiness index of the entire nation will be increased." In the mid 1990s, Zheng Yefu argued that, based on the logic of history and of productive forces, women ought to return to doing housework. Wang Xiancai on her part proposed that women should focus their energies on housework

as a means of solving China's employment problems, urging a return to the domestic sphere for the needs of state and society. From a feminist perspective it is very easy to criticize these two positions for airing a male point of view and reducing women to objects. What is special about Zhang Xiaomei's proposal is the claim that she speaks for women and from the standpoint of women. In this way, returning home seemed to become a voluntary choice for women.

Looking at the preceding four debates about women returning to the domestic sphere, the overall mainstream ideological transformation seems very clear. With the instensifying of market reforms and capitalist development, China has moved far away from the Marxist notions of women's liberation and now leans increasingly toward liberalism. If the discussions of the 1980s took place within the framework of socialism and women's liberation, then the establishment of a gender-based division of labor under the market reforms in the mid 1990s was premised on the negation of the socialist model of gender equality in the socialist period. Writing in the mid 1990s, Zheng Yefu, working within the framework of historical materialism, sought to demonstrate the rationality of a market-based and gender-based division of labor by pointing to the supposedly physiological foundation of patriarchy and the supposed social order derived from patriarchy. In the twenty-first century, the market economy was firmly established in China, the social structure underwent a fundamental transformation, and market ethics became mainstream values in Chinese society. Under such circumstances, a gender-based division of labor within the family is no longer regarded as a vestige of patriarchy; instead, it has come to be viewed as the result of rational economic calculation (Wang 2001) and as something demanded by families and individuals pursuing their own well-being (Zhang 2011). From a rejection of the state-sponsored liberation of women (Zheng 1994) to the beautification of the family as a haven for human affection and interpersonal relations (Zhang 2011), the mainstream ideology in China has completed a spectacular turn around in the sense that liberalism, catering to the market system, has finally ascended to a position of dominance.

## Conclusion

Feminist social critiques within the framework of liberalism have often focused on formal equality and equality of opportunity, suspending any criticism of the social system as a whole. They have

often overlooked the structural oppression of certain groups and viewed patriarchy merely as a form of cultural oppression. However, our examination of the four rounds of debates relating to women returning home has revealed a few key concept shifts in China's ideological transformation from a Marxist to a liberal conception of women's liberation: Freedom has replaced equality as the primary principle of society; there has been a shift of focus from outcome equality to formal equality; advocacy for individual autonomy has replaced criticism of the social structure; and a cultural angle has replaced economic analysis. I believe that, in a society undergoing marketization, in order to wage the critique of gender oppression, we must direct our criticism toward the forms of structural oppression built into society.

If we consider the epoch of socialist revolution and construction in China as an effort to pursue equality, then the thought liberation movement among intellectuals in the 1980s amounted to a pursuit of freedom. Freedom and equality are the two most precious values in modern society, and neither should be neglected. But when it becomes impossible to achieve both at the same time, investigating how the two values can best be balanced seems to be the right path to follow. If structural oppression is overlooked, then freedom risks becoming a mere moral fig leaf of the mighty. Our current gender system and gender ideology are not only by-products of China's economic transformation, rather, they are intimately connected with the entire reform process. The reconstruction of the private and public fields and the privatization of the family are often undertaken in the name of freedom—ostensibly to free the family from state control. However, freedom should not be used as a cover for structural oppression, and the search for individual subjectivity should not overlook structural constraints. Likewise, we should not forget the material nature of the economic foundation of our social structure when searching for the root of cultural oppression.

Only by giving "gender" back its original meaning—as a constitutive element of social relations—will gender studies be able to escape the corner it has painted itself into and enter the discussion of China's problems. In China's modern transformation, women's issues were treated as a key element in the overthrow of the old system and the establishment of something new. "Saving" women from the state–family system and from patriarchy was considered an integral part of demolishing the old structures. The proper position of women in society became an important topic for all the revolutionaries and reformers who sought to build a new nation and society. In this sense,

women (passively or actively) joined hands with men to tear down the old edifices and in their place construct a new nation and democratic system. Under the call for equal responsibility—rather than the equality of rights characteristic of liberalism—women have not only participated in the making of history, but have also won for themselves the status of citizens, revolutionaries, and workers. Since the middle of the twentieth century, Chinese society has repeatedly undergone tremendous transformations, and issues related to gender have consistently been targets for reform. Whether examining the past or pondering the future, contemporary social critique in China should confront and respond to gender issues so that these will find their place in our imagination of China's future.

As a force for social critique, feminism must insist on its capacity to criticize society. But, first of all, feminism must practice self-criticism. We need, for instance, to ask whether contemporary Chinese feminist thought has been complicit in the sexualization of women. Has Chinese feminism pandered to mainstream ideology in its search for recognition? Or has Chinese feminism even become an integral part of mainstream thought? We need to reflect critically on the urban feminist movement that came out of the 1980s (Wang 1998) so that we may face the diversity among women and even the conflicts within the women's liberation movement, as we continue seeking ways to unite laboring women with other social movements. In order to realize this ambition, it will probably be necessary to unmask the oppression of the capitalist system.

Translated by Iris Zhang Mochou and Bo Ærenlund Sørensen.

## Notes

1. In 1940, during World War II, the former editor of *Women's Weekly* in Beijing Duanmu Luxi triggered a debate over "women returning to the family" with her well-known article "A little touch of gloom amidst azure" (Duanmu 1940). As a woman, what Duanmu did was to criticize those who understood women's emancipation as "personal indulgence." In an era with few professional women, there was no way that Duanmu could talk about letting women go back home. Rather, the question was how to make a housewife "a good housekeeper" and "a good mother." She therefore encouraged those middle-class modern girls who idled their life away by "playing and eating, movie-watching and pet-cuddling" to take an active role in running their family and putting their education to use in daily life so that they would have a life as "human beings" rather than as"parasites."

2. Take as an example the recent Sino-Japanese conference "The Work–Life Balance of Professional Women," organized by The China Women's University and Women's Education Committee of Chinese Women's Research Society in Beijing, Oct. 27–28, 2010. The official website can be found at http://www.cwu.edu.cn/cwu/mainstation1/zxdt/n8711669312.html.
3. I would like to thank Professor Wang Zheng for pointing out that, during the socialist period, state feminists called for couples to share housework between themselves.
4. "25 year-old female Master of Arts dies from overwork," published in *Guangzhou Ribao* (Guangzhou) April 21, 2011, http://news.xinhuanet.com/health/2011-04/21/c_121330712.htm.

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# *Chapter Three*

# *Labor Markets, Gender, and Social Stratification*

*Tong Xin*

## Theories of Social Stratification

The transition from a planned economy to a market economy has given the labor market a central role to play in social stratification, and if we factor gender into the equation, the current circumstances become even more complicated. The well-known sociologist Anthony Giddens has noted that "gender itself is one of the most profound examples of stratification. There are no societies in which men do not, in some aspects of social life, have more wealth, status and influence than women. One of the main problems posed by the study of gender and stratification in modern societies sounds simple, but turns out to be difficult to resolve. This is the question of how far we can understand gender inequalities in modern times mainly within the framework of class divisions" (Giddens 2009, 460). What we need to understand, therefore, is how class-based inequality interacts with gender differentiation.

The traditional theory of stratification has three veins. The first is Marxism's analytical method, which emphasizes the importance of class and takes as its foundation the social division of labor and the unequal relations of people to the means of production. The second is the method is Weberian and investigates stratification by looking at people according to their position in the market (their income), their opportunities for participating in the market (occupation), and the prestige of their occupation. The third is structuralism, as represented by Durkheimian studies, which stress professional hierarchy and differentiation by occupational specialization. In the twenty-first century, neo-Marxism has combined Marxism with Weberian theories. The American sociologist E. O. Wright has argued that class cannot be determined simply by occupation, but should be studied

from the perspectives of social relationships and power relationships, taking into consideration the relationship between, on the one hand, the individual, and on the other, capital, decision-making power, occupational issues, etc. Apart from Wright, who has emphasized the importance of incorporating the family into the analysis and has paid particular attention to the division of labor within the household, none of these approaches have paid much attention to gender (Li and Sun, 2002).

Having noted the lack of a gender perspective in studies of social stratification, feminist researchers strive to bring gender into their studies. There are three commonly held views concerning this topic. The first sees gender stratification as an important part of social stratification. In this optic, sexual differences between the genders are seen as the prerequisite of gender stratification. Women are thought of as natural mothers, and ipso facto, they are also considered natural care-providers, ready for exploitation. Shulamith Firestone has pointed out that the natural reproductive difference between the sexes led directly to the first division of labor right at the beginning of the separation of classes, and that this furnished a model for discrimination based on biological characteristics (Firestone 2003). This form of inequality, however, retains its strength despite changes to its biological foundation. The spread of birth-control technologies, for instance, may even strengthen this deep-rooted system of exploitation. The second way of looking at the issue holds that "class" is perhaps more important than "gender" for social stratification. But since social stratification constitutes itself across gender, class, ethnicity, and urban-rural differences, the study of social stratification considers the cumulative effects of all these factors. The third view, which takes gender as a variable of social stratification, emphasizes that issues related to the family must be brought into focus. This can be done by relating the status of a woman to that of her husband and father, and then assessing how much husbands have benefited from the unpaid labor of their wives due to the division of labor within the family.

In the following chapter, I attempt to construct a theoretical framework for the analysis of gender differentiation in China's transition to a market economy. I shall do so by looking at three aspects: first, by reevaluating the status of gender stratification in the socialist planned economy; second, by examining the impact of the new labor market on stratification both between the sexes and for men and women separately; and third, by looking into the new mechanisms of social stratification and differentiation among women, especially the formation of a female elite.

## Gender Stratification under the Socialist Planned Economy

How are we to think of the effects of China's planned economy on gender stratification? Most previous research has been based on one of three foundations: one compares Mao's era (sometimes called the period of socialist planned economy) with pre-1949 China (the so-called old society); the second compares Mao's era with China's current market economy; the third compares Mao's era with a full-fledged capitalist economy.

The conclusion derived from the first comparison is that during Mao's era the traditional role of a woman as "family person" was transformed; women achieved an equal legal status with men and became "public persons" by entering the labor market and other spheres of social life (Li Xiaohong 2000). During Mao's era, gender differences were disregarded, women were "de-sexualized" and encouraged to work in the same fashion as men. In other words, the socialist planned economy swept away the traditional gender hierarchy and replaced it with a seemingly gender-neutral, egalitarian socioeconomic system.

However, some Chinese feminist critics see things differently. One view holds that gender stratification still exists, and that even though state policies were instrumental in integrating women into the public sphere, gender inequality has not disappeared. Based on her oral interviews and archival studies of a labor competition for women—known as the Silver Blossom Competition—in central Shaanxi in the 1950s, Gao Xiaoxian shows how state policies successfully drew women into production, but also shows that the state failed to recognize and deal with the unequal conditions these policies imposed upon women (Gao 2005).

A second view holds that state policies under the planned economy had a double effect: on the one hand, women were "integrated into the social transition process by political, economic, and cultural forces, their occupational activities were shaped by state interests, work-unit profitability, and family interests. Their alienation reflects that they were manipulated by forces beyond their own control…" (Tong 2002). As such, women still live in an unequal society and little has been changed by the planned economy. On the other hand, since the state has formally granted women the same legal status as men, and women have entered various public spheres, they have won both the opportunity to develop their individual subjectivity and the chance to change the unequal social structure through their own efforts.

A third view holds that the planned economy period did away with the traditional gender hierarchy and established a solid cultural foundation for the participation of women in the labor market that is still felt today. Thanks to the effect of the social mobilization of women and the political importance vested in their employment, women gained a strong foothold in the labor market. At the same time, state policies also exerted a subtle effect on the traditional gender division of labor within urban households. Although many Chinese men cherished the superiority they were granted by the custom of "men lead and women follow," they are no longer willing to provide for their family single-handedly. This is the reason why, in today's China, women's labor participation is still culturally valued, even though competition on the labor market is becoming more and more fierce and the labor supply exceeds the labor demand.

The conclusion derived from the second line of thought is that women's interests have suffered under the market economy, and that women have become marginalized because the state no longer pushes for equality between men and women (Jiang 2003). In other words, women have lost the relatively high status they enjoyed under the socialist system, and those who had been marginalized under the planned economy found themselves even more marginalized (Wang et al. 2008). The deterioration of gender equality on the labor market has had to do with the overall change of national politics, the state's weakened grasp over the labor market, as well as the lack of a well-defined legal system and effective law-enforcing mechanisms. Moreover, as gender inequality already existed before the market economy was introduced into China, market development tends to reinforce inequality rather than reduce it (Cai and Wu 2002). This implies that the system under Mao was better than the current market economy as far as gender stratification and marginalization of women are concerned.

The third comparison views the structure of gender stratification in socialist China as the mirror opposite of that found in full-fledged capitalist states. Under the planned economy, Chinese society achieved relative gender equality through "socialist redistribution." In theory, the egalitarian policies of the Chinese socialist state were to cover all members of society, but since central authorities have problems monitoring redistribution at lower levels, particularistic bureaucratic conduct may distort the outcome. This led to differentiation among women in the sense that those who were already relatively high on the social ladder benefited from state-run redistribution, while those who were already marginalized benefited little. Gender discrimination in

socialist China is thus the result of state paternalism coupled with local bureaucracy that distorts the redistribution process. The more distant from the center, the more severe the cases of gender discrimination. Even though the principle of gender equality is still formally supported by the state, the central state has relinquished some of its control over the process of redistribution. This provides local officials with the opportunities to distort national policies aimed at securing gender equality. For a time, socialist China was better at fulfilling its promise of gender equality to women of relatively high status. In the post-socialist period, however, as the state's capacity to provide protection and supervision gradually faded, women who had been socially privileged began to encounter gender discrimination, while women in the lower ranks of the social hierarchy did not see their conditions improve. Much evidence shows that women suffer more discrimination in the current market system where state supervision and intervention is weak.

Capitalist states, on the contrary, do not assume the obligation and responsibility for an egalitarian society. But modern welfare states often practice welfare policies to secure a minimum living standard. These welfare policies provide protection and safety nets for women at the bottom rungs of society.

## Gender Differentiation under the Current Market Economy

The Chinese market development has shown some distinct "Chinese characteristics." But opinions differ markedly over what exactly a market development with Chinese characteristics is. Generally speaking, it is recognized that China's marketization has been led by government initiatives, with a direct intervention by the state in the marketization process. If the government was responsible for resource allocation under the past planned economy, then the market now serves to allocate resources. In the transition to a market economy, however, the government still plays a central role, and therefore, market formation has to certain extent depend on the state. Research on post-communist countries in Central Europe has found that, in these countries, capitalism has been forged without capitalists (Eyal et al. 1998). I note this to highlight that the same phenomenon has taken place in China where a strong state has led the way toward marketization. This so-called socialism with Chinese characteristics has had a multilayered and multifaceted impact on gender stratification in China.

## *Market-Driven Differences between Men and Women*

First, due to market competition, a structural wage difference between the sexes began to emerge. In the first nationwide survey on the status of Chinese women in 1990, the average monthly incomes of male and female urban employees were 193.15 RMB and 149.60 RMB, respectively, meaning that salaries for urban women were 77.5 percent of the salaries for urban men; rural men on average made 1518 RMB per year, while rural women made 1235 RMB, 81.4 percent of the men's average (Zhongguo funü 2003, 84–89). In the second nationwide survey in 2000, the average yearly income of urban female employees (all categories included) was 7409.70 RMB, equivalent to 70.1 percent of what men made; meaning that the urban gender wage gap had increased by 7.4 percentage points since 1990. The average income of women working in agriculture was 2368.70 RMB in 1999, equivalent to only 59.6 percent of what their male counterparts made. This income gap had widened by 19.4 percentage points since 1990 (Quanguo Fulian 2001). The rapid widening of the income gap has primarily been caused by market forces. On the one hand, labor market competition relegates women to informal jobs with low pay and no social security. In other words, women are increasingly excluded from the formal labor market. On the other, marketization reinforced the tendency for men and women to go into different lines of work, which further increases the income disparity between men and women in different occupations.

Second, discrimination against women has appeared in the labor market. Having controlled for variables such as education level, workplace seniority, occupation, enterprise type, enterprise size, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) membership, and geographical region—in other words, bracketing all factors except gender—we find that the ratio between the average incomes of men and women in 1988 was 0.9039, that is, on average women made 90 percent of what men made. The ratio of the average income between the sexes declined to 0.8869 in 1995—the income of women equaled 89 percent of that of men. From 1988 to 1995, the absolute percentage of the rate of women's average income to that of men declined by 3.44 percent, while the relative percentage declined by 1.7 percent. From 1995 to 2002, the absolute percentage of the rate of women's average income to that of men declined by 1.03 percent, while the relative percentage declined

by 1.32 percent. This shows that the transition to the current market system and gender discrimination have both contributed to the growing income gap.

Third, marketization has intensified gender segregation. A survey covering seven provinces and 11 cities shows that from 1985 to 2000 gender segregation in roughly 50 occupations had increased. With the increased variety of occupations, however, the number of occupations that segregate women is far larger than the number of occupations that segregate men; white-collar jobs screen out women much more often than blue-collar jobs; private enterprises screen out women more than the public sector does; and the coastal provinces have more gender-segregated jobs than the inland provinces (Cai and Wu 2005)

Fourth, feminized occupations are devalued. Various data have shown that sectors with predominantly female employees have lower salaries, that is, gender plays an important role in stratification, which leads us to conclude that China is undergoing a devaluation of feminized occupations. In the early 1990s, sales and services underwent feminization and workers in these sectors experienced falling incomes. During the same period, it was discovered that the proportion of women in a given company was inversely proportional to the average income of the workers in the company (Parish and Busse 2000).

No doubt, there is a clear tendency of differentiation between the sexes. Marketization has brought about increased gender segregation in the labor market, increased the income gap, and caused the devaluation of feminized occupations.

## *Differentiation among Women*

Marketization has led not only to differentiation between the two sexes but also to differentiation among women as a group. Thus, women can no longer be regarded as one single, identical block.

First, the state sector and the non-state sector differ when it comes to gender segregation. Research has shown that occupational gender segregation is indeed a crucial factor in determining the gender wage gap for urban employees, but this only holds true for jobs in the state sector. This means that the mechanism determining the gender wage gap is not the same in the state sector as it is in the non-state sector. In the state sector, the gender wage gap arises from gender

segregation, whereas in the non-state sector, the gender wage gap is primarily determined by differences in human capital. On the basis of this observation, this study questions the assumption that gender discrimination is more severe in the non-state sector than in the state sector and that marketization always tends to aggravate gender discrimination (Wu and Wu 2009).

Second, there is a difference between gender segregation for white-collar and blue-collar jobs. Women are making inroads into white-collar positions, while blue-collar and semi-white-collar occupations remain largely gender segregated (Li Chunling 2009). In white-collar jobs, men and women have to compete with each other for career advancement, and any ambitious employee, regardless of gender, has to rely on personal qualifications and abilities to ascend the career ladder. Such competition habituates women to fighting on their own, and this may give them a sense of achievement and lead them to think that their "gender" is irrelevant. This kind of seemingly "de-gendered," capitalist office environment alienates women but also enables them to attain a level of independence (Zhu and Shen 2000).

Third, things change over time. Looking at occupational gender segregation in 2000, we find that the index of dissimilarity (D) (one of the most commonly used measure of segregation, measuring from 0 to 1, where the higher the number, the more segregated the two groups are) was 0.407, which means that more than 40 percent of male and female employees would have to change jobs to eliminate occupational gender segregation. In terms of time period, the 1980s witnessed rising occupational gender segregation, which declined in the 1990s (Wu and Wu 2008).

Fourth, as different jobs have different requirements, marketization serves to sort women into different groups based on human capital. Women come to be categorized into groups such as young women, women with children, and mature women. In addition, women are also increasingly divided into various categories relating to their physical appearance and society's sexualization of their body.

It should also be noted, though, that the effects of marketization for women are not necessarily all negative, even if comparisons between men and women tend to bring out the negative sides. Nevertheless, we must bear in mind that the labor market is not a singular market; rather it is marked by stratification across gender, social class, place of origin, and other overlapping markers of identity. In this way, marketization creates not only differentiation between men and women, it also creates differentiated groups of men and women.

## Social Mobility and Female Agency

From the perspective of social mobility, two distinct groups of women have emerged on the Chinese labor market. One group is made up of women with limited human capital, while the other consists of elite women. Both groups have been formed as a result of the increasing social mobility within the labor market and the growing agency of women themselves. Indeed, the market reforms have created more opportunities for upward mobility for both men and women; though gender still seems to have an influence on the likelihood of upward mobility and on how high one can ascend the career ladder.

The first group of women is mainly rural women who have migrated to the cities and found employment in typically low-paid and feminized occupations, such as domestic work, caregiving, textile manufacturing, and services. They have, in a sense, climbed up one step by leaving the land and becoming paid laborers. At the same time, however, they find themselves near the bottom rung of the labor market, having a very hard time moving further up. Researchers exploring the situation of these women usually adopt a critical stance, stressing how gender inequality seems to arise out of industrialization. Research related to female migrants shows how pervasive the influence of the modernization process is on the lives of these women (Tan 1997). Some studies point to the triple oppression inflicted upon these women—by the state, by the global capitalist order, and by the tradition of patriarchy. On the one hand, they have to fight as migrant laborers against the capitalist system, and on the other hand, they also have to fight as women against the social arrangements favored by the patriarchal culture (Pan 2005). Some scholars have found that, as marketization has progressed, the number of women working in state-owned enterprises has declined, while the number of women working in the non-state manufacturing industry has increased. That is to say, a new class of working women is emerging with migrant workers as the core component (Li Ruojian 2004).

Moreover, research on migrant workers also indicates that men and women have somewhat different migration patterns: male migrants have for quite some time outnumbered the number of female migrants roughly in a six-to-four proportion; and female and male migrant workers migrate at different ages. On average, female migrant workers leave their home at a younger age than their male counterparts, and the rate of females leaving home before the age of twenty is remarkably higher than it is for males. In addition, females

have a higher rate of return, and marriage influences the migration patterns of men and women in dissimilar ways. While the sojourns of male migrants are usually longer, less often interrupted by trips back home, and often unaffected by marriage, female migrants usually stay for shorter periods and are more likely to go back home if they marry (Jin 2009).

Surveys conducted at small restaurants, frequently staffed by migrant workers, show that the labor relations at such places are intimately linked with gender. In this family-mimicking environment, men have better chances to move upward than women, and women tend to get stuck in the more menial jobs. This may go some way toward explaining why open resistance by the workers is scarce, despite what may be considered flagrant exploitation. By relying on the traditional gender-based division of labor, the labor market provides migrant men with somewhat better conditions, and this tends to undermine labor solidarity between men and women. While these workers are involved in the same line of work, their opportunities depend upon attributes such as gender and age, and this limits their cohesion as a group (Tong 2009). Through my own investigation on domestic services, we have found that the low-end female labour market not only rose up to cope with the demand of the market, but also made it possible for women at the bottom of society to realize their economic independence and free themselves from domestic violence due to the lower entry threshold of the domestic service market. In a time of global production chains, the supply of cheap labor is necessary for maintaining China's economic competitiveness, so the market will probably continue to exist and attract rural women for quite some time.

It is, moreover, important to note that these low-paid female migrant workers, through their efforts on the labor market, have demonstrated their abilities as individual agents. Their attitudes toward their bosses, their sensitivity toward inequality, their sense of life and of themselves (including their sense of their bodies), all have changed in pace with their changing position in the workplace hierarchy. According to Pan Yi, when "treated like dogs," these women abandoned the notion of "predestined fate" in favor of a straightforward attitude of class-antagonism (Pan 1999). These young female laborers have become a labor-movement force, presaging a new form of social resistance and a new round of "silent social revolution" from the bottom of society. Their protests should not be measured against traditional forms of class struggle where workers organize collectively to fight against capitalists. Rather, these women are protesting against

both capitalism and the state, while they also have to challenge their patriarchal culture and social practices (Pan 2005).

The second new group to appear is made up of elite women, comprised of high-profiled intellectuals and political and economic professionals. In 2007, the number of female officials at prefecture/department level was 13.7 percent, up from 12.9 percent in 2005; the 2007 rate of female officials at the county/division level was 17.7 percent, up from 17.2 percent in 2005 (Guojia Tongjiju 2004; Guowuyuan Xinwen Bangongshi 2005). In 2008, the rate of female officials nationwide amounted to 39 percent (Huang 2008). In 2008, the proportion of female technical personnel across the country was 45 percent (Guojia Tongjiju 2009, 50). At the same time, the share of female entrepreneurs increased to about 16 to 20 percent. Many of these women had traveled arduous roads for their career advancement, but at least the numbers show that female upward mobility is achievable. While males still dominate in elite positions, some women have managed to overcome overt as well as covert exclusion and have made a place for themselves among the elite.

Entering higher education seems to be the key step for women who wish to change the status quo. While the effects of higher education on gender stratification have yet to be comprehensively evaluated, a study of undergraduate enrollment at Peking University in the period of 1978–2005 shows that the gender balance has changed from extremely uneven to almost even in a little under three decades. However, even though the overall enrollment numbers have come to approach gender parity, there is still a trace of gender segregation in the sense that female students are concentrated in particular majors (Liu and Wang 2008). Research into high-salary professions shows that women still face discrimination even when they do manage to enter male-dominated spheres, such as science. In the most prestigious occupations, men are in the majority, and in ways often imperceptible they continue to limit the participation of women, who find they have difficulties gaining access to the inner circles of power (Lin 2003).

Studies of rural female village leaders show that they utilize various ways to break through the glass ceiling. Some mark themselves as activists in the traditional socialist fashion, but the majority relies on their own abilities, on family/kinship networks, or simply snatches an opportunity that comes their way. This shows that although the rural reforms have not fully equalized the opportunity for participation of men and women, the gender configuration in the village leadership structure has changed markedly, and women's ability to influence rural public life has expanded (Jin 2002).

Elite women make more use of their experiences and take more initiatives than other women in their fight for upward social mobility. Compared with men, women face more limitations because of their gender, and overcoming these limitations often comes at great personal costs. Moreover, women of different classes encounter markedly different environments if they seek to advance on the labor market. More than half of the women who work in public administration, teaching, science, culture, health, or commercial management have bettered their professional position within recent years, whereas such upward mobility is rarely seen among women at the lower end of the labor market (Wang et al. 2006).

In conclusion, in the context of a transition to a market economy, the labor market has become an important force in gender stratification. It has widened the gender wage gap, increased gender-based labor segregation, and caused feminized occupations to be devalued. On the other hand, however, women are fighting tenaciously on the labor market and through their fight they have demonstrated strong abilities as independent actors. Whether they belong to the group of low-paid laborers or to the newly emerging professional elite, women in China are proudly defending their right to economic independence. In this sense we can say that women are and will continue to be an indispensable force in China's economic and urban development.

Translated by Bo Ærenlund Sørensen and Shi Duole

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# *Chapter Four*

# *Gender and Gendered Working Time Rights*

*Guo Huimin and Li Xiang*

Our interest in the relation between women's labor rights and working time can be said to have sprung from two different sources. One source was the concern over female migrant workers (known as *dagongmei* in Chinese) in the beginning of the reform period. Some scholars claim that the post-colonial exploitation of female migrant workers was perpetrated by stealing these women's "golden time"—the young-adult stage. Scholars like Pun Ngai (2005) have defined this group as a new class and have analyzed their resistance from a class point of view. The other source is the ongoing public discussion and scholarly debate related to the retirement age for women. One major point of argument is that the current labor law infringes upon women's working time by forcing them to retire five year earlier than men. What has received less attention in the previous research, however, is how the law serves to undermine what we might call the working-time rights of women by channeling women into short-time labor contracts and squeezing the total length of time women stay in the labor market. This is the topic of this chapter.

## The Question: Gender and the Gender of Working Time

Time is an important dimension of life. Feminist movements in history have usually focused on women's social liberation, but it was found that the liberation of women may have served to increase their workload, for child rearing and family caring often came to collide with women's paid work. According to "The Executive Report of the 3rd Survey on the Status of Chinese Women in 2010," urban women and rural women spent, respectively, 102 minutes and 143 minutes

on housework every day, while urban men and rural men spent only 43 and 50 minutes, respectively. According to a 2008 report from China's National Bureau of Statistics, men spent on average six hours per day on paid work, while women spent only four hours and 23 minutes.

That women spend considerably less time on paid work affects the full realization of women's labor rights. Apart from the influence of traditional culture, this situation clearly has to do with imperfections in the current labor regulations. There are no statutes dealing with housework in China's legal code, and the Labor Contract Law grants substantial freedom to employers when it comes to defining labor contracts. These legal inadequacies serve to legitimize the unfair treatment of women in relation to working time. Although China's constitution emphasizes gender equality, there is an evident gender-based difference in the distribution of working time. This difference is embodied in the following aspects:

## *"Golden Age" Employment*

Employers are eager to hire women in their "golden age" (young adult, without offspring) because they regard these women as the most effective laborers—especially when it comes to the low-tech and labor-intensive lines of manual work. When female workers reach the age where most marry, however, they will no longer be hired. This phenomenon was widespread in the beginning of the reform period, especially in the transnational and labor-intensive enterprises found along the southeast coast of China. The migration of female workers is thus made up of two flows: those leaving their village to find jobs in the cities, and those returning to their village to get married. Women engaged in this kind of temporary labor usually do not have a formal employment contract or only have short-term labor contracts.

## *The Informal Sector*

In all industrial countries, almost all part-time workers are women. Women often choose part-time work because such jobs allow them to take care of their family in addition to earning a salary. This is an important reason why more women than men are willing to work on a part-time basis (Zhang 2012, 50–51).

The Chinese government, however, also plays a role in channeling women into part-time work. In recent years, the government has urged unemployed women to seek jobs in the informal sector, especially part-time work, as a response to intensified labor market competition. In "The Dilemma of the Informal Sector, Report of the Director-General," published by the International Labor Organization (ILO) in 1991, the informal sector is defined as small production or service units of developing countries and regions, which generate low income, have no union organization, and engage mainly in activities outside the formal regulatory framework. In "Suggestion Relating to Several Problems of Part-time Employment," issued by the Chinese Ministry of Labor and Social Security, part-time employment is defined as a type of employment where laborers are remunerated by the hour, work no more than five hours per day on average and no more than 30 hours per week. While these definitions provide a legal framework for regulating time and labor in the informal sector, they also form a subtle legal basis for appropriating the working time of women. For it is mostly women who work in the informal sector, and once they take an informal sector job, they will not be able to work more than stipulated in the regulatory framework.

## *Labor Contracts for Women in the Formal Sector*

Many women who return to the labor market after giving birth find that they are transferred to a different job or encounter problems with labor contract renewal. Another problem is the statute stipulating different retirement ages for men and women. This statute, which has been hotly debated for more than 20 years, specifies that women are to retire five years earlier than men. Given that labor participation is a valuable resource in an individual's life, and that how long one can stay on the labor market is a crucial aspect of labor rights, the different retirement ages for men and women is an infringement of women's labor rights. Shortened labor contracts for women in the formal sector reduces the working time of women, and this negatively affects women's income as well as their status in the family and in society. In short, the core problems causing the unequal distribution of working time between genders are the various labor law provisions allowing the encroachment upon women's working time.

## Analysis: Gender Bias in Working-Time Regulations

Time is a resource and the law should establish a legal framework for trade in this resource. In civil law, time limits are essential when it comes to laying down rules for labor relations and safeguarding transactions (Wang 2001, 437). In a legal sense, time can be thought of as a period in which rights and obligations ought to be fulfilled. Therefore, how to define time also has immediate consequences for the definition of rights and obligations.

As time is an essential element of any employment relationship, labor contracts must deal with the issue of time. If a labor contract did not specifically stipulate the length of working time, the employer would be free to prolong it at will. Similarly, a labor contract must include provisions stipulating time for rest, lest the employer attempt to infringe upon a worker's rest and leisure time. In this way, labor laws serve to protect the rights of workers. In reality, however, Chinese labor laws have numerous loopholes and biases—these flaws can be seen clearly in the three aspects discussed below.

### *Working Time versus Women's Time*

As we know, to reduce the number of working hours was the primary goal of the early labor movements. It was exactly the definition of necessary working hours and extra working hours that inspired Karl Marx to formulate his notion of "surplus value." In recent years, China's labor law has also followed the trend to specify and regulate working hours. In February 1994, the State Council of China issued legislation limiting working time to eight-hour workdays and 44-hour workweeks, effective as of March 1994. The labor law issued in July of the same year stipulated that overtime should not exceed three hours per day and 36 hours per month. In September 1994, the Labor Department enacted a regulation: Approving Methods on Enterprises Implementing Irregular Working Time Regime and Compositive Calculation Working Time Regime. Articles 4 and 5 of this regulation have stipulated that enterprises can manage workers at special posts (such as senior managers, sellers, watch-keepers) or special industries (for instance, transportation, fishing) with an irregular working time regime or a compositive calculation working time regime.

In 1995, the State Council limited the normal working week to 40 hours and specified that both Saturday and Sunday were to count as the weekend.

While these regulations may provide a just and standardized framework for the management of working time, they fail to consider, and hence recognize, the fact that what is defined as resting time often turns into housework time for women. Thus, to require both men and women to work eight hours per working day means extra work for women, since they have hours of household chores to do right after the work. A consequence may be that women with heavy family burdens are deterred from seeking a job in the formal sector and thus end up in the low-paid informal sector and have fewer working hours. Those women who insist on working in the formal sector may have to endure both an eight-hour work day and some extra hours at home.

## *The Notion of Linear Time in the New Labor Contract Regime*

The current labor contract law of China promotes contracts without a fixed-term and strictly limits the use of fixed-term contracts. It imposes an obligatory re-signing system, prohibits agreed termination conditions, and tightens up conditions related to the termination of contract, all in order to achieve balanced employment relations (Dong 2007, 53–54). Article 14 of the Labor Contract Law requires that permanent employment is extended to workers who have worked at an enterprise for more than ten years without interruption or who have previously signed two or more fixed-term contracts with their current employer. Many young women, however, choose to bear children within their first ten years on the labor market, and thus find it difficult to fulfill the requirement of ten years of uninterrupted employment. This means that more women than men are excluded from the prospect of securing an open-ended labor contract. Moreover, since the first ten years on the labor market are considered the golden time in an individual's working life, women will face a gloomy future on the labor market if they are unable to secure an open-ended labor contract or be promoted within the first ten years.

Here, it is not difficult to see that the current law relies on a "de-gendered" notion of working time. In this fashion, working time is understood as a linear progression from one point to another, without taking into account the life cycle of women and the overlapping

of women's labor and reproductive roles. This is to say that there is a gender bias in the current labor time regime that lays the ground for gender discrimination on the labor market.

### *The "Four-Period Protection"*

Time is usually conceived as being either cyclical or linear. If time can be said to have a gender, then cyclical time is 'female' and linear time is 'male' (Sun 2010, 106). That is to say that time for women is embedded in maternity and unfolds in terms of cycles, such as the menstrual cycle, the cycle of marriage and procreation, the cycle of puberty, and motherhood. These cycles are all crucial bodily experiences in a woman's life and inevitably conflicts with the linear, progressive and aggressive male industrial time (Pun 2005, 174).

On April 28, 2012, Premier Wen Jiabao announced the Special Regulations for the Protection of Female Workers. This set of laws continues the socialist tradition of protecting female workers in national legislation, and its stated goal is to eliminate gender discrimination in employment. One of its striking provisions is the prolongation of women's maternity leave from 90 to 98 days, which did indeed bring China on par with international standards. In a sense, these legal regulations may seem to improve the "four-period protection" (the protection of time for menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding), but one consequence of the law—intended or not—is that it makes it more expensive for employers to hire female workers. Thus, although the stated intention of the new regulations is to protect female workers, the regulations may in practice deter private employers from hiring women. Moreover, by focusing on the four-period protection and defining the type of labor that is considered unsuitable or directly harmful to female workers, the regulation ties reproduction and reproductive roles solely to women and utterly fails to provide any provisions regarding the involvement of men in some of the reproductive tasks, such as shared parental leave and child rearing. And since human reproduction is considered wholly unrelated to material production, childbirth is once again thought of merely as something that cuts into the working time of women.

## Gender Differences in Working Life

Apart from the covert discrimination inherent in the current legislation, women, especially migrant women, also come to expect

short-term labor contracts, which negatively affect their career prospects. This is because a woman's career, primarily in the first ten years of her working life, will often be interrupted by life events such as marriage and motherhood. Although many male migrant workers also get married and have kids during their first ten years on the labor market, rural society places the responsibilities of family and child care squarely on the shoulders of women.

This traditional gender division of labor also fosters gendered working lives. Generally speaking, the working lives of female migrant workers are more fragmented and shorter than those of male migrants. When female migrants reach the age of marriage—typically 24 or 25—they have no choice but to terminate their career and return home. For young, single migrant workers the major events in life, such as marriage and procreation, are expected to take place in their home village (Pun 2005:47). This brings in the concept of "social time," coined on the basis of "life course approach."[1] The life course approach deconstructs biological notions of aging by investigating the interrelations of the events in an individual's life with the socioeconomic context and the larger historical setting. Social time refers to the fact that society has certain norms for when and where certain events in a person's life ought to take place. With regard to female migrant workers, society expects them to get married and have children at a certain stage of their life. Such expectations are internalized by the female migrant workers, as few choose to transgress against these norms lest they cause a family crisis.

On the surface, it appears that both males and females from rural areas migrate to the cities to serve the best interests of their families. A deeper analysis, however, shows that women and men are not accorded the same opportunity for personal development. When female migrants choose to leave their home and seek a job in the cities, their motivation is typically to escape poverty and better their family's economic situation. The family's interests are at stake, whether or not the decision to migrate is made by the woman herself or by her family. While both male and female migrant workers send their hard-earned money back home, many young female migrants feel obliged to pay for the schooling of their younger siblings, mostly their brothers. Here, the traditional gender hierarchy within the family looms large in the sense that young girls are valued much less than boys, and families with scarce financial resources commonly invest in the education of sons at the expense of daughters.

Whether or not a married woman can continue to work after marriage is to a significant extent determined by her economic situation and the opinions of her in-laws. If her husband has a paid job, the

decision whether or not the woman should seek paid employment will depend on the family's overall estimation of the economic gains therefrom. The starting point is of course the maximization of the family's income. Simply put, if the wage a married woman would be able to bring home does not exceed the value of the housework she could otherwise perform, she will choose not to take a job outside the home, and this decision will usually be backed up by the family (Li 2008, 74–75). Since married rural woman are seldom able to find city jobs with a wage high enough to substitute for the total value of their housework, these women tend to stay at home and take care of the family after marriage. For many rural women their working life thus ends at marriage.

## State and Enterprise Obligations

In an attempt to combat the unequal rights of working time, scholars have suggested a number of countermeasures, such as calling for effective supervision by administrative authorities, a more active role for trade unions, the heightening of women's right-defending consciousness, and further improvements to the legal framework. However, merely relying on the customary approach of protecting the weak will not be sufficient to solve the problem. What must be done instead is to revise the gender bias embedded in the current labor law regime as well as to oblige the government and enterprises alike to assume greater responsibility for ensuring equal working-time rights for men and women.

## *Incorporating the Notion of Female Circular Time into Labor Law*

As mentioned above, the notion of "time" in China's current labor-law regime is premised on a linear understanding of time. It presupposes that everybody's life progresses along a linear timeline, and it totally ignores the fact that women's lives are marked by circularity. Basing laws exclusively on a linear conception of time leaves a blind spot in the law, which may be turned toward the infringement of women's labor rights. For instance, by requiring an unbroken ten-year labor-employer relationship as one of the ways in which an open-ended contract may be secured, the law not only ignores the disrupted nature of the circular female working life, it also puts the open-ended

contracts out of reach for most women. In addition, the linear conception of time in the law also provides the employers a kind of legal justification for only hiring women for fixed-term jobs. That is to say that the law contains a kernel of invisible gender discrimination. Thus, in order to diminish the proportion of female migrant workers on limited-term labor contracts and to better safeguard migrant women's working rights, we need to dislodge the concept of uniform and linear time that lies at the heart of the current labor-law regime and begin to recognize the circular nature of female time.

## *The International Convention for Equal Opportunities and Equal Treatment*

In order to balance work and family life and to solve the problem that women do not have the same employment opportunities as men because of their larger family responsibilities, the ILO adopted the Convention concerning Equal Opportunities and Equal Treatment for Men and Women Workers: Workers with Family Responsibilities (C156) in 1981. The convention requires that ratifying countries make achieving a balance between work and family life a policy goal. The fact that the People's Republic of China has still not ratified this convention reflects the influence of gender essentialism as well as the private-public divide in China's labor law. It also shows the indifference of the Chinese labor-law regime toward the status and role of women (Zheng 2010, 57). The unequal share of domestic responsibilities has become an impediment for the full integration of female workers into the labor market. Since China will have to ratify this convention sooner or later, it becomes urgent for the Chinese labor legislation to consider the difficulties of workers who shoulder family responsibilities and admit that the time spent on household chores will somehow affect the time an individual has available to engage in salaried labor. These are important conditions for protecting the working-time rights of female workers.

## *Governmental and Corporate Social Responsibility*

The Chinese government is the signatory to many anti-discrimination conventions. The government is responsible for enforcing these conventions, even if it sometimes does devolve the responsibility to

employers. The Chinese labor laws also specify the range of social responsibility of corporations. The Special Regulations on Labor Protection for Female workers, for example, stipulate 22 "ought to-s" incumbent upon employers. In addition to these statutory obligations, large corporations also have the moral obligation to protect the rights of their workers. Corporative social responsibility consists primarily of legal obligations toward society (Zhou and He 2008, 37–38). These responsibilities can be divided into external responsibilities—namely, responsibilities toward the natural environment—and internal responsibilities—namely, responsibilities for the wellbeing and welfare of workers (Chang 2006, 36–37). As enterprises and companies have become the backbone of China's economy, their business conduct may promote social progress in the best case, and bring unexpected disasters in the worst. The Zhili toy factory fire in 1993 in Shenzhen is an example of the egregious suffering that may come to pass when a corporation completely evades its social responsibility and operates without the slightest sense of moral consciousness.[2]

Moreover, corporate social responsibility should also entail the responsibility for training and career development so that the qualifications of workers can be boosted and their job security strengthened. Aiming to improve the conditions of workers on temporary contracts, the European Union has, among other measures, promoted "flexicurity," which puts an emphasis on "ensuring that Member States and firms have incentives to train workers so that they have high skill levels and can adapt to change" (Davies 2012, 26). China should introduce a similar system and oblige employers to provide periodic training for their workers.

## *Paternity Leave and the Socialization of Housework*

To the extent that strenuous housework is a major obstacle for women in their pursuit of harmony between family life and career, the socialization of housework could be one solution as it will lessen the burden on women and allow them to devote more time to their career. Housekeeping is a booming sector in China, but it is still underdeveloped. In future, if properly developed, housekeeping services may help to eliminate the conflict between domestic work and waged labor for millions of Chinese women.

Resolving the time strain women experience, however, must involve the efforts of men. If men were to undertake more household work, the burden would be partly lifted from the shoulders of women. Adopting new laws is one way to bring about such change. As early as 1974, Sweden passed a paternity leave law that has clearly stimulated the labor market participation of women in the country. In 2010, a similar parental leave directive was adopted by the European Union (EU). But traditional ideas of male superiority may make it difficult to pass such a law in China, even though such a law is an important precondition for gender equality on the labor market. Laws, however, do not function automatically. No matter how comprehensive a code of law is, it is no replacement for the awakening of female workers' rights awareness. Their individual choices and collective actions will be as crucial as legal changes in shaping power relations on the labor market (Bao 2005, 129). Recently, the binding force of social norms has been in decline as many migrant women choose to deviate from what is expected of them. If women manage to break out of the cage of social expectations and resist gender discrimination on the labor market, it will definitely contribute to the improvement of their labor rights.

## Conclusion

Rights are embedded in temporality. This holds true especially for the labor rights of women. As female migrant workers are considered less strong and their time more readily divisible due to the cyclical nature of their lives, employers often offer them only short-term labor contracts. Chinese labor law, based on a linear conception of time, carries a gender blindness with it, and has therefore served to cloak the annexation of women's working time. In order to address the unequal distribution of time between the genders and better protect the working-time rights of women, the labor law legislation needs to take into account the circular nature of female time. Concretely, legislation should look to the EU and other international conventions for inspiration and add provisions such as paternal leave to the agenda. Moreover, the government and employers should assume their responsibilities. The government needs to encourage the development of the housework sector and adopt sanctions against the companies who hire only young women and offer them nothing but short-term contracts. As for women workers themselves, breaking through the

confines of social gender norms is an important step to take in the realization and protection of their working-time rights.

Translated by Bo Ærenlund Sørensen and Shi Duole

## Notes

1. Life course theory deconstructs the notion of age in the biological sense and rethinks the concept of age from three perspectives: life time, social time, and historical time. Life time refers to a person's age; social time refers to the time in which a person occupies a certain role; historical time refers to the year of birth and locates the individual in concrete historical circumstances (Bao 2005, 126). Social time also refers to the culturally shaped expectations that society places on an individual based on his or her age.
2. On 19 November 1993, a severe fire enveloped a toy factory in Shenzhen. The factory was owned by investors in Hong Kong and produced dolls as a subcontractor for a well-known European enterprise. More than 80 workers lost their lives in the fire, only two of whom were men. In addition, more than 50 workers suffered severe burn injuries, and 20 suffered lighter burn injuries.

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# *Chapter Five*

# *Urban New Poverty from a Gender Perspective*

*Jin Yihong*

In the 1990s, as rural China saw a decrease in impoverishment, urban poverty increased in absolute as well as relative terms, thus arousing concern for social inequality and polarization in academic circles and in Chinese society at large. There are many facets to urban poverty, which has arisen out of China's transition to a market economy, and in an attempt to capture the structural aspects of the development, Wang Chaoming and others began to employ the term "urban new poverty" (Wang 2000, 74–79; Knight 2000). The adoption of this term, however, meant that the gender dimensions of escalating poverty were often overlooked, which to some extent limited the analysis of new poverty in Chinese cities. This chapter aims to uncover the gender aspects of new poverty in order to highlight the link between immiseration and gender.

## New Poverty: A Structural Perspective

### *New Poverty in Western Theory*

The overseas studies of New Poverty first appeared in the 1990s when Zygmunt Bauman first conceived the notion of the "new poor." Bauman placed the concept against the background of a society moving toward consumerism, and pointed out that in a consumerism-oriented society the poor were not only short on cash, they were also, ipso facto, unable to pursue the prevailing ideals of the good life and this effectively placed them outside ordinary society and hurt their dignity. In other words, the poor were deprived of equality in material as well as psychological terms. The new poor differ from the traditional poor in that they may be either able to work but are unemployed, or they may hold a job yet still live in poverty (Bauman 2010).

What is new poverty? The formation of the new poor is different from the formation of the traditional poor. The rise of new poverty is closely connected to globalization, the international division of production, changes in international economic structures, and welfare policy reforms. In the developed economies, new poverty is the result of the flexibility created by post-Fordist production and globalization, which brought deindustrialization and job loss to industrial core areas. The dismantling of Keynesian welfare policies further fueled this process (Wu 2009, 86–95). To sum up, new poverty is an issue of structures rather than of individuals.

## *New Poverty in Urban China*

Urban new poverty in contemporary China is different from rural poverty and traditional urban poverty. Urban new poverty primarily manifests itself in the changing structure of urban impoverishment. Where the traditional poor were characterized by "three deficiencies" (they were without the ability to work, without a source of income, and without a legally guaranteed livelihood), the majority of the new poor have slid into poverty because economic reforms have left them unemployed.[1] Those who traditionally ended up poor and marked by the three deficiencies were, according to Wu Fulong, those who, for various reasons, had been unable to partake in the industrialization of the nation. The new poor, on the other hand, are a product of structural economic transformations that have deprived them of their former privileges. It is poverty produced in the intersection between new market mechanisms and established welfare systems (Wu Fulong 2009, 86–95). Other researchers consider China's new urban poor to be a product of the pauperization of the proletariat (Solinger 2002, 304–326). Whatever terms we use, there is agreement that new urban poverty in China reflects aspects of the reform period (Guan 2003, 108–115; Lü 2005, 3–8; Wang 2005).

The emergence of a new urban poverty in today's China has been accompanied by social stratification, a situation Tang Jun has described as "the poor fall while the rich rise high," and "two ends moving in opposite directions."[2] This new poverty is also an emerging structure. In 1999, Li Shi used surveys covering families in 12 Chinese cities in an attempt to answer the question, "What kinds of people most easily descend into poverty?" His research revealed that domestic laborers, laid-off workers, and the disabled had the highest risk of slipping into poverty. Compared to ordinary workers, the

unemployed and the domestic laborers had five-to-six times as high a risk of slipping into poverty. Moreover, health and place of residence also significantly impacted poverty rates, especially when they co-occurred under infelicitous circumstances. In addition, migrants, also referred to as "the floating population," constitute a vulnerable group much prone to poverty (Li Shi 2003). Li Shi's research further demonstrates that poverty is unevenly distributed between social strata, and that it is closely related to issues such as employment situation, level of education, professional skills, health, and social status.

As Wu Fulong has pointed out, even if urban new poverty in China, as in the West, is a structural phenomenon, it cannot in China, as it can in the West, be explained by job loss arising from deindustrialization and the contraction of social benefits. The new poverty emerged in China during a period of flourishing economic growth when the social security system grew and spread rapidly, and therefore the emergence of urban new poverty is a complex issue that cannot be explained simply by referring to the marketization of the economy. Rather, China's new poverty must be understood as the product of a range of factors, including the transformation of the economy, the transformation of the welfare system, and urbanization (Wu 2009, 86–95).

## Gender and Urban New Poverty

### *Bringing Gender In*

New poverty theory offers us a valuable structural perspective for studying urban poverty, but since new poverty is, in China, mostly studied from the perspective of economic demography, scant attention has been paid to gender. Feminism points out that gender is as important a factor as class and race in social stratification. By overlooking gender, the study of new poverty overlooks important dimensions and connections.

Setting out from the perspective of gender, feminism maintains that a notion of poverty must not be limited to economic factors—such as income and consumption—but must also take into account social structuralization. Moreover, the family cannot be the sole unit of analysis—the well-being of individuals must also be considered. A substantial view of poverty must pay attention to a lack of autonomy and the dearth of information channels (Kabeer 1996, 11–21).

Gendered studies of poverty often rely on two analytical concepts: the feminization of poverty and gender differences; both concepts dealing with relative positions. The notion of the feminization of poverty was first developed by Diana Pearce in her analysis of what she saw as an increasingly vicious circle of poverty among female groups suffering gender discrimination in highly developed societies (Pearce 1978, 28–36). The feminization of poverty was primarily reflected in aspects such as the increasing proportion of poor families headed by women, the increasing proportion of women in poverty, the increased poverty suffered by families headed by women (and of the individual members of these families), the average and relative degrees of deprivation, and the trend of an increasing representation of women among the poor.

Poverty levels as they relate to gender can be summarized as follows:

(1) Women generally are at a higher risk of poverty than men;
(2) At similar levels of poverty, men and women have dissimilar burdens and experiences (Kabeer 1994; Baden et al. 1998; Whitehead 2003).

In its 1995 Human Development Report, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) noted that women made up 70 percent of the world's 1.3 billion poverty stricken, thus confirming Bettina Cass's famous remark that poverty has a woman's face. Compared to men, women more easily descend into poverty; they have higher rates of poverty, their poverty is starker, they have a relatively harder time escaping poverty, and their poverty rates are rising more quickly. Being a woman seems closely related to being poor (Cass 1985; UNDP 1995, 37).

Does China's urban new poverty also exhibit traits of feminization? Is China's urban poverty related to gender differences? In the research into urban new poverty in China, the impact of gender remains murky. One reason is that the statistical data often fail to take gender into account. In addition, most Chinese studies on poverty do not take a gender perspective. And the studies that have paid at least some attention to gender have drawn contradictory conclusions.

For instance, in his 1999 analysis, which relied on surveys from towns and cities, Li Shi found that female poverty rates were only 0.6–0.7 percent higher than male poverty rates, and therefore concluded that gender was not an important factor in poverty.[3] However,

a nationwide survey carried out by Wang Youjuan showed that there are more women living in poor families than in non-poor families (Wang Youjuan 2002, 18). Yin Haijie has found that poverty in China does show tendencies toward feminization and juvenilization, with women above the age of 60 being especially vulnerable (Yin 2009, 20).

The Chinese authorities did not include gender as an index in its statistics on the minimal subsistence allowance until 2006 (it should be noted that these data only reflect absolute poverty, and some of the people who ought to receive a minimal subsistence allowance still do not) (Guojia Tongjiju 2007). In 2013, the number of urban residents living on a minimal subsistence allowance nationwide was 21,017,000, and of these, 41.37 percent were women. The general gender dimension of urban poverty is still unclear due to the substantial disparity in regional development (in some county-level cities, more than half of the people who receive a minimal subsistence allowance are women).[4]

One aspect of the theory of the feminization of poverty has been questioned in China. The statement by the UNDP that women account for 70 percent of those living in poverty around the world has, by scholars in China, been considered a rough estimate at best, as most countries do not break down poverty statistics according to gender (Li and Zheng 2007, 164). Moreover, in the United States, where the feminization of poverty was first noted, an important aspect of poverty has to do with the composition of American families. The number of single-mother families in the United States rose considerably in the 1970s, and since the mid-1980s single mothers and their children have made up the majority of Americans living in poverty. But compared to most other nations, there are relatively few single-mother families in China, and therefore the proportion of Chinese women living in poverty is not very much higher than that of men (Li and Zheng 2007, 4).

Examining these questions, feminists emphasize that the fact that women are more vulnerable and are more easily mired in poverty has long been obscured by official figures, controversial definitions, and academic niceties. One significant source of this problem is that the calculation methods rely on the household, rather than on the individual, as the basic unit of measurement, because it has been assumed that all members of a household enjoy an equal share of the household income. This, however, covers up the poverty of female members in non-poor families, as well as the fact that females living in poor

families are generally more affected by poverty than their husbands (Edwards 1982, 252–259). Moreover, feminists have pointed out that both the concept of relative as well as of absolute poverty may overlook important issues, namely, that women have a higher poverty risk throughout their life cycle, and that they are more adversely affected during times of economic downturn.

In addition, all mainstream studies of poverty conceptualize the issue by using the notion of class, focusing on the employment and spending patterns of the rich and the poor, while neglecting the imbalances between the genders caused by the factors mentioned above (Kramarae and Spender 2001, 814). Experts from the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) have formulated three suppositions that may be tested as a means to investigate the feminization of poverty: (1) family resources are not fairly distributed; (2) families headed by women more easily suffer the injuries of poverty than families headed by men; (3) poor households have more female than male members (UNIFEM 2003). Propositions one and three have been verified by international studies, but these studies do not indicate that families headed by women are more prone to poverty than households headed by men.

The present study also suffers from having limited statistical data illuminating the link between gender and poverty. In an attempt to investigate the existing data in the best possible manner, the present study uses the insights of new poverty research to divide the poor into a number of groups, which are then examined with respect to gender differences within each group. By using this method we will gain a clearer understanding of the relationship between gender and poverty in present-day China. The present study uses a broad notion of poverty, focusing especially on vulnerability and social exclusion, because by focusing on these two issues we will be able to see clearly what factors in our society render women more vulnerable and more prone to exclusion than men (Zhao and Wang 2011, 4).

## *Gender Composition of Impoverished Groups*

I divided the new urban poverty in contemporary China into six groups: laid-off workers, the working poor, the floating population, landless peasants, members of single-parent families, and the disabled.

### *Laid-off Workers*

As mentioned above, the reforms of state-owned enterprises led to the dismissal of a large number of workers who now make up the largest part of the urban new poor. Women are, without doubt, more frequently laid off due to corporate restructuring, and they have a harder time finding new employment. According to data issued by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, in the year 2000, 51.6 percent of the urbanities who registered as unemployed were women. By 2008, the proportion of women among the urban unemployed had dropped to 42.1 percent, but since women made up only 37.6 percent of the employed workers, they were continually in greater relative risk of unemployment (Guojia Tongjiju 2009, 32–33).

The above data only includes those who have registered their unemployment; the true number of the unemployed is undoubtedly considerably higher. In 2003, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) conducted a questionnaire survey of 11,422 households chosen randomly in 45 cities of the 17 main municipalities and provinces. The results showed that women accounted for 59 percent of the total number of unemployed, that is, 18 percentage points higher than the same figure for men (Du and Dong 2006). These data are consistent with the outcome of a survey conducted by the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) in 1993, covering 920,000 employees at 1,230 public-owned enterprises, which showed that female workers comprised 37 percent of the workforce but made up 60 percent of those laid-off (Chang 1995, 85). It can be concluded that women have a higher unemployment risk and are more easily discarded by the market. Once laid-off, women also have more difficulty landing a new job. A woman's statistical chance of re-employment is only 62.2 percent of a man's, and the average duration of unemployment is two months longer for women (Du and Dong 2006).

Being laid off entails not only the deprivation of a stable livelihood, but also means losing the welfare insurance and protection provided by the workplace. In a word, unemployment means pauperization. But for women it also means having to rely more on men, on marriage, and on institutional remedies. Suffering from at once a greater exclusion from the labor market and a lack of institutional guarantees, women end up having a higher risk of poverty.

### *The Working Poor*

The working poor is a notion proposed by the International Labor Organization (ILO). According to the *Key Indicators of the Labor*

*Market in 2005* by the ILO, the major problem in most developing countries was not so much absolute unemployment as it was the lack of decent and productive job opportunities. Newly emerging jobs often pay less than $2 per day, providing an income that is barely enough to escape poverty and certainly not enough to sustain a satisfactory living standard, turning such laborers into the "working poor" (Ministry of Labor and ILO 2006, 13).

But which groups on the labor market most easily end up as the working poor? According to statistics published by the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) covering 2009, the registered unemployed constituted the greatest proportion of those receiving the minimal subsistence allowance in the cities at 21.8 percent, while the unregistered unemployed made up 17.5 percent. The second largest group is made up of "flexible employees" at 18.4 percent.[5] However, in the second quarter of 2013 flexible employees had risen to 21.99 percent, which made them the largest group drawing the subsistence allowance and also demonstrated that flexible employees have become a sizable part of the new poor.[6] Other research has shown that self-employed individuals and temporary employees are all overrepresented among the urban poor.[7] Both the ILO report and the MCA data show that among different employment types, non-formal employment (including flexible employment) has a higher contribution to the incidence of urban poverty than regular employment.

A trend in China's economic restructuring that should not be overlooked is the de-standardization of employment, which has affected many women. The sectors with the most female employees have been moving toward informalization since the late 1990s, and the trend has continued into the new century. By examining data from the China Labour Statistical Yearbook, Jiang Yongping concludes that 63.7 percent of the urban female employees engage in non-regular employment, a rate that is 14.2 percentage points higher than that of men.

The nonstandardization of employment for women has increased the separation between the sexes in the job market, where women find employment in traditional women's jobs 10 percentage points more often than in other types of employment, which also gives them a lower income. Women who take informal jobs receive an average monthly income of only 416 RMB, lower than the minimum wage in most regions. In addition, the income gap has widened between the sexes. In regular employment, women's median income is 85 percent of the income of their male counterparts, whereas for workers engaging in non-regular employment, the median income of women is only 69.4 percent of the median male income. In this way, the

non-standardization of employment for women has enlarged the gender income gap by 15.6 percentage points.

Another negative consequence of the move toward nonstandard employment is the concomitant decrease in social security coverage, which is much lower for non-regular employees than for regular employees, regardless of gender. But the female employee in a non-regular position also enjoys a lower degree of social security coverage than her male colleagues. In pension insurance, the social welfare system that covers the most employees, the coverage of men employed in informal jobs is 20 percent, whereas the coverage of women in informal jobs only adds up to 16.1 percent. In addition, for non-regular employment nearly 80 percent of employed women do not have the right to paid maternity leave. What is more, many women lose their jobs when they become pregnant, either by being forced to quit "voluntarily" or by being fired outright (Jiang 2005 and Jiang 2006b, 46–50).

Non-regular employment does not necessarily cause poverty. On the contrary, during a wave of rising unemployment, non-regular employment can alleviate the situation somewhat. But due to the differentiation of employment between the sexes, the instability of employment, low income, and insufficient social security, female employees in non-regular jobs are very vulnerable to disease, work injuries, job loss, pregnancy, and retirement in old age, which all seriously threaten to send them into extreme poverty.

### *Migrant Women*

More and more researchers have realized that migration is an important factor that should not be overlooked in urban new poverty (Du 2007, 24; Li Lulu 2003). Du Yang has pointed out that the vulnerability of the migrant population is reflected in the difficulty they face in finding employment in the formal sector in a city, which means that more than 80 percent of them work in the informal sector and have neither labor contracts nor social security coverage. Their vulnerability is further aggravated by the fact that they do not have equal access to urban public services and reap wages lower than city-dwellers (Du 2007, 13 and 27). Research has found that the average monthly income of migrant workers from the countryside is no more than 60 percent of what city-dwellers make. In terms of hourly wages, migrants receive only a fourth of what city-dwellers receive.[8] Even if the average wages for migrant workers have been rising by the year as the NBS Migrant Workers Monitoring Reports indicate, the average monthly income of migrant workers was still no more than 2290

RMB by the end of 2012, a paltry sum that guarantees a life on the edge of poverty. Li Shi and others have shown that migrant workers suffer poverty rates that are more than twice as high as those of urban residents (Li 2003b, 37). A study by Li Shantong from the State Development Research Center (DRC) found that the poverty rate of the rural floating population was 50 percent higher than that of permanent city residents. The average national poverty rate of migrant workers is 15.2 percent, and it exceeds 20 percent in some cities (Li Shantong 2002, 26). In addition, as the existing poverty relief system was founded upon the division between rural and urban residents, serving either peasants living in the countryside or urbanites living in the cities, the poverty of migrants is in danger of being overlooked (Du 2007, 13, 27, and 29).

What is the poverty risk of female migrant workers? The size of China's floating population reached 260 million in 2012, and of these, women constitute an estimated 33.6 percent, corresponding to roughly 87 million.[9] Doubly affected by their rural residency and their sex, female migrant workers occupy a disadvantageous position in the labor market compared to male migrants. According to a survey conducted by the ACWF in 2006, most of the female migrant workers were employed in informal jobs, with 52.2 percent of them self-employed, a proportion that was 10 percentage points higher than that of male migrants. Female migrant workers' income was not only lower than that of urban residents but also 20.3 percent lower than that of male migrant workers.[10] A report on the living standards of China's migrant workers found the average income of female workers to be 80.45 percent of the average income for male migrant workers (Quanqiu Fanpinkun 2009). In their third survey on the status of women conducted by the ACWF, in 2010, the income of female migrant workers only amounted to 61.0 percent of the income of male migrant workers (Song Xuiyan 2013, 617).

Due to their gender identity and the gendered division of household roles, migrant women are often excluded from the labor market, giving them inferior economic strength. Research indicates that married migrant women and migrant women with accompanying children below the age of six suffer a significant disadvantage when looking for work, whereas these factors do not affect the prospects of job-seeking male migrants. In addition, female migrants have to spend more time job-hunting, as males have a 13.2 percent higher chance of receiving job offers than women. Moreover, men are 1.58 times as likely as women to find well-paid jobs (here defined as a job paying

more than 2000 RMB per month), while women accept low-paying jobs 5.7 percentage points more often than men do (Song Yueping 2010, 16–17). Gender discrimination on the labor market increases the job-hunting costs for migrant women and lowers their chances of finding well-paid jobs, which means that they often end up having to settle for poor paid jobs and substandard working conditions.

One the leading causes of income difference between men and women is the physical isolation between the two in the workplace. According to data published by the NBS covering the year 2012, male workers predominantly find employment in well-paid industries such as transportation, storage, postal service, and construction, whereas female workers mostly find jobs in low-paid industries such as service, catering, and manufacturing. The average monthly income in the service sector amounts to no more than 75.2 percent of what workers make in transportation (Guojia Tongjiju 2012).

Research by Du Yang has shown that there is wage discrimination in the urban labor market, meaning that migrant workers have to work harder than registered urbanites to achieve a comparable income. Thus, a comparison between the number of hours worked also reveals much about the stratification of the labor market. Du's research brought to light the surprising fact that migrant women work an average of 315 hours per month, far more than the 192 hours put in by women who are native to the city, and also more than the 301 hours put in by migrant men (Du 2007, 28). Together, longer working hours and a lower income speak volumes for the disadvantages facing female migrant workers.

In addition, the vulnerability of female migrants is reflected in other aspects, such as social security coverage, personal safety, and health conditions. Most female migrants have neither a labor contract nor any form of social security, and the rate of insured female migrants is lower than that of male migrants. Most small and medium-sized private enterprises do not provide any protection or benefits to pregnant women, to new mothers, or to those who are breast-feeding. In fact, it is quite common for female migrants to be fired if they become pregnant. However, the individual poverty that comes with this kind of exclusion from the labor market is often concealed by the fact that pregnant women are considered provided for by their families.

To sum up, migrant workers are a vulnerable group in cities, but migrant women are an even more vulnerable group as they are disadvantaged by their gender as well as their migrant status.

*Female Landless Peasants*

In the process of accelerating urbanization, some of the peasants who have lost their land contribute to the new poverty in cities. However, due to a lack of official statistics, it is difficult to get a clear picture of how many peasants have lost their land, but researchers estimate the figure to be in the 45–120 million range.[11] As the Chinese State Council's DRC research group has pointed out, the most significant problems for landless peasants is that "due to the instability of employment, income, and other factors, relying on family support has become increasingly precarious, and some families live on the compensation they have received for their land, existing in a state of 'no land for farming, no place to work, and no coverage from social security.' Living on the outskirts of cities they increasingly find themselves among the urban poor."[12]

There is a dearth of statistics relating to the gender distribution of landless peasants. The third survey on the status of women conducted by the ACWF suggested that the problem of rural landless women was progressively aggravated by the process of urbanization. By 2010, 21.0 percent of the rural women were landless, registering an increase of 11.8 percentage points since 2000, which makes it 9.1 percentage points higher than the ratio of landless male peasants.[13]

There is very little gender-specific research examining the poverty of landless peasants. One exception is the work by Wei Jinsheng in 1999, who examined random groups of inhabitants living on the minimum subsistence allowance in three districts in Xi'an. Wei concluded that women accounted for 62.5 percent of those living in poverty in those areas. To explain this very high rate of women living in poverty, Wei pointed to the semi-urban status of the three neighborhoods under examination, and noted that this was a place where retired landless peasants tended to congregate.[14] This is, at least, indirect proof of the vulnerability of landless peasant women.

Similar research focusing on landless peasants from 600 families in three districts in Nanjing indicates that 62.2 percent of female landless peasants were not satisfied with their lives and that 79.1 percent of them were anxious about their future. Their degree of discontent was 10 percentage points higher than that of men, and their degree of anxiety was also higher.[15] The difficulties of landless peasant women are often related to the gender-specific policies enacted by local governments. One report from Nanjing's Qixia district showed that, due to a gender-differentiated policy, "men between the age of 50 and 60 received 30.000 RMB as a settlement allowance, while women in the same age group received only 18.000 RMB." In addition, according

to the existing retirement insurance regulations, in order to qualify, one had to make payments to the system for 15 years, meaning that people who had less than 15 years left before retirement were ineligible to join the insurance scheme. This made men who had lost their land after they turned 45 ineligible, while women became ineligible at the age of 35.[16] A report from Jiangxia district in Wuhan found unfairness in the placement of landless peasant women in all of the three examined districts. In one district, women who had lost their land were neither provided with a place to live nor offered compensation. In one of the other districts, men received a two-storey house with a shop front (which they could either manage themselves or rent out) in compensation, whereas women received a house placed in the back rows of the placement area with no shop front.[17] From the examination above it is obvious that the policy of "trading land for security" often leads to gender discrimination. Moreover, under the existing patrilineal landholding system female family members often do not figure on the deed for the house or land, which further disadvantages them under the scheme of trading land for security.

Another common problem is that landless peasant women often have a harder time finding new employment. Driven by profit maximization, those who acquire a plot have a much greater need for land than the people they leave unemployed. And in the cases where they do have a need for employees, they usually set the bar much higher for women, justifying their choices by saying that the women are "too old," "lack skills," or "do not have a strong desire to find a new job." This way of attributing the unemployment of newly landless women to their personal qualities is extremely unfair. A considerable number of women were skilled before losing their land, and even though they are ready to learn new skills, there are few training opportunities available to them. In one example from the Xilin neighborhood committee in Changzhou, the committee had offered three training courses for dispossessed peasants, and even though 51 percent of the participants were women, 90 percent of the women did not find employment afterwards.[18] In other words, we cannot attribute the difficulty that landless peasant women have in finding employment to their personal qualities.

### *Single-Mother Families*

Another factor that increases the number of new poor is the increasing number of single-parent families, which is a common trend accompanying the modernization of family life. Families headed by a single mother have a very high risk of falling into poverty. Indeed, from her

study of the global feminization of poverty, Valentine M. Moghadam lists the expansion of single mother families as one of the three primary contributing factors to the feminization of poverty (Moghadam 2000, 31–37).

There are no comprehensive data on single-parent families and female-headed households living in poverty in urban China, but we can conclude from samples that, among single-parent families, female-headed households make up a larger proportion than male-headed ones, and they tend to be more affected by poverty.[19] As a study of 2100 households headed by single mothers from eight districts in Beijing has shown, due to the fact that the father's income has played a major role in most families, and that the social security system is characterized by work welfare, women who are divorced experience a significant reduction in their living standard, and 25 percent of divorced women would experience at least one period of poverty within the first five years after the divorce. Indeed, many women had no choice but to remarry if they wished to regain their previous standard of life. In a survey of 3926 households headed by single mothers from five districts in Jinan carried out by Yang Xiaoping, the poverty rate was 46.7 percent (Li 2008, 131–134). The higher rate of poverty among single-mother families can be attributed to their being disadvantaged socially as well as economically—nearly 95.2 percent of them had an average monthly income of less than 600 RMB (the average monthly income of Jinan was 2193 RMB). Women who had been divorced or widowed had to support their family and raise their children on their own; for example, 86 percent of them had to take care of their children's tuition, while 2.4 percent had to raise a disabled child with their own means, and 3.2 percent had to take care of their parents without any help. Consequently, family responsibility placed single mothers in a very difficult position. Indeed, 43.3 percent of them were unemployed, while 6 percent of them were unable to work because of illness. In addition, 39.85 percent of them did not participate in the old-age insurance scheme, and 60.62 percent of them did not have health insurance. In spite of their meager income, 13.7 percent could not, for a variety of reasons, draw the minimum living standard allowance (Yang 2009, 11–13). In short, the pauperization of single-mother families is an indisputable fact.

### *Disabled Women*

The disabled are the most vulnerable group in Chinese society. Research has concluded that, even in the fast growth decade of

2001 to 2010, the disabled benefited less than others groups, and disabled women benefitted even less than disabled men (Guo and Min 2012, 20–24). The biggest problems faced by disabled women are discrimination in the labor market and the lack of assistance. According to national statistics, the employment rate of disabled women is only 16.9 percent—15.2 percentage points less than the employment rate of disabled men. A questionnaire survey conducted among the disabled in Heilongjiang Province found that disabled women had a 41.5 percentage point lower employment rate than the average for women. Moreover, 13.3 percent of the disabled women were self-employed. The survey also revealed that disabled women suffered discrimination more often than disabled men. 72.1 percent of disabled women reported that they had suffered discrimination when job hunting, whereas 60.5 percent of disabled men reported the same. In addition, their average yearly income only reached 4,447 RMB, adding up to only 29.7 percent of the average income for urban women and 85.9 percent of the income of disabled men.

Apart from discrimination on the labor market, disabled women also suffer the lack of insurance. Only 25.2 percent of disabled women have old-age insurance, against 56.3 percent of the urban population as a whole and 28.3 percent of disabled men. Disabled women are also worse off economically. Only 19.1 percent own property in their own name, whereas 34.5 percent of disabled men are property owners. Moreover, 27.1 percent of disabled women have to rely primarily on family support, while this is only the case for 14.8 percent of disabled men.

The social predicament of disabled women is, in a sense, caused by the scarcity of support provided by the social system. The questionnaire survey from Heilongjiang Province showed that 90.4 percent of the disabled women had not received any vocational training in the previous five years. The tax relief provisions, which are supposed to counteract labor market exclusion suffered by people with disabilities, have proven ineffective (Guo and Min 2013, 20–14).

From the above we can conclude that women are more vulnerable and more subjected to poverty in every single group faced with the threat of urban new poverty. Although there are enormous differences between women when it comes to poverty, they have one thing in common: they find themselves in a difficult position as the system for allocating economic and political resources is stacked against them.

## Concluding Remarks

Townsend once pointed out that poverty is intrinsically related to inequality (Townsend 1979, 31). In China, the gender differences that characterize urban poverty arise out of the overlap between social inequality and gender inequality. The exclusion that women suffer in the spheres of the market, the public system, and the family is the structural cause underlying women's shortage of resources and social rights.

As transformational poverty, urban new poverty is heavily influenced by social transformation and economic reconstructing. As Elson and Cagatay have noted, economic transition and structural adjustments are either gender-neutral or pro-male. In the reform period, macroeconomic policies have given rise to three policies with discriminatory effects. The first comes from fiscal restraint in times of inflation; the second comes from the concept of "men govern what's outside the house, women govern what's inside," placing employment in the man's domain; the third stems from the commercialization of welfare benefits. Due to these three forms of policies, women more often lose their job and are often not as well covered by the social safety net as men (Elson and Cagatay 2000, 1347–64).

It is worth noting that the fiscal restraint and commercialization of the marketizing economy profoundly affect gender equality due to number of biases. According to the traditional patriarchal ideology where men are responsible for earning money while women perform housekeeping, women who have family responsibilities tend to be excluded from the labor market and more easily lose their jobs, or they end up in informal jobs with low income, low stability, and low security. In addition, the weakness of the established welfare system and the dismemberment of the planned economy's collective security system have, more or less imperceptibly, transferred a considerable part of the social reproduction costs onto individual families. Changing patterns of production, reproduction, and economic redistribution interact to strengthen the traditional gender-based division of labor. All in all, women suffer heavier burdens from economic restructuring than men and thus face a higher poverty risk.

As for the future of China's social structure, Lu Xueyi and other scholars remain optimistic and predict the evolution toward a middle-class society.[20] Others, such as Li Qiang, argue that China's social structure is coming to resemble not just a pyramid but an inverted t-shaped structure with the poor vastly outnumbering the rich

(Li Qiang 2005, 55–73). Sun Liping has described China as a "broken society" (Sun 2003, 59–60), while Li Lulu uses terms such as "structuralization" and "routinized reproduction" to depict a society where social boundaries are hardening and vertical social mobility is becoming a thing of the past (Li Lulu 2003, 42–50). The increased social stratification and the increased solidification of this stratification are intimately related to the formation of urban new poverty. Considering the key importance of gender in the social structure, and the unambiguous feminization of poverty, anyone who wishes to see clearly the features of China's emerging social structure needs to take gender and poverty into account.

Translated by Bo Ærenlund Sørensen and Shi Duole

## Notes

1. According to a statistical bulletin issued by the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) in 2002, among the poor living on the minimum subsistence allowance, those with the "three deficiencies" only added up to 4.3 percent, while the proportion of laid-off workers and unemployed had increased rapidly to 59.2 percent. Besides, an additional 31.9 percent were found in the category of 'other' and they were needy workers, family dependants of laid-offs and unemployed.
2. Tang Jun's sayings, "the poor fall while the rich rise high" and "two ends moving in opposite directions," were quoted in by the survey team of the Xinhua News Agency, "Wealth Gap is Approaching the Red Line of Tolerance," in *Economic Information Daily* (May 11, 2010).
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# *Chapter Six*

# *Son Preference and the Tradition of Patriarchy in Rural China*

## *An Empirical Investigation of the Sex Ratio Imbalance at Birth*

*Li Huiying*

## Introduction

In China, the severe imbalance of sex ratio at birth (SRB) is one of the key social issues that warrant both attention and policy solutions from the government. Generally speaking, the sex ratio imbalance at birth is closely related to son preference, whereas son preference is often attributed to conservative thoughts and conventional customs. What is frequently overlooked is the deep-seated interplay between conservative thoughts, family traditions, the collective life of rural communities, and public administration.

This chapter explores the root causes of China's sex ratio imbalance at birth, in the hope that locating the causes will be the key to finding solutions. The chapter will demonstrate that the patriarchal family system is a main reason for son preference and, hence, for the sex ratio imbalance at birth. The basis for the patriarchal family system will be analytically separated into three distinct elements: first, the tradition for married couples to live with and take care of the husband's parents; second, the patrilineal naming system and the influence of the family clan; third, inheritance and the continuation of the family line. In order to tease out the roots and implications of these three factors, a questionnaire was designed to investigate intra-family old-age support systems, property inheritance and post-marital residence, the distribution of community property between

men and women, and both the attitude and the engagement of the public administration toward the patriarchal family system.

We have selected two distinct types of regions for comparison. One comprises areas where the sex ratio at birth is severely skewed—mainly counties chosen as pilot locales for the Care for Girls campaign sponsored by the National Health and Family Planning Commission. This includes District A in Henan (one of the most populated provinces in China), County B in Jiangxi (the county with the most skewed SRB), and County C in Guangdong (an economically developed county that has a severe SRB imbalance). The other type of region is made up of Han Chinese residential areas and villages with a much less pronounced SRB imbalance. These include Lueyang County in Shaanxi Province, a model county for promoting new marriage practices; Meiwan village in Yihuang County in Jiangxi Province; and Yichang District in Hubei Province. The inhabitants in these regions differ from Han Chinese in other parts of China in terms of the households' involvement in supporting the elderly, in post-marital residence, the patrilineal naming practice, and in inheritance of property. A comparison of these two types of regions makes it possible to examine the issues in greater detail.

We made use of three surveying techniques. One was the questionnaire. Of the 700 questionnaires sent out in the pilot counties under the Care for Girls campaign, 670 were completed and returned. To obtain as accurate and complete information as possible, the interviewers were available to answer questions posed by the interviewees.

The second kind of surveying was a participatory survey, an innovative technique developed by the Centre for Women Studies at the Party School of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in collaboration with the Henan Community Education Research Centre. A team of county family planning officials were trained and assigned to conduct participatory surveys on the topics of post-marital residency, surnaming customs, household conditions, and inheritance practices.

The third technique consisted of seminars and interviews. In almost every county under examination, seminars were conducted with participants from the local family planning committee, the local women's association, and local departments of agriculture, statistics, and other relevant departments in order to acquire an understanding of the local conditions. Afterwards, interviews were performed with, among others, families consisting solely of women and families where the groom had moved into the household of the bride's family.

## Background

After the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Chinese socialist regime launched a series of economic, political, and cultural campaigns to transform rural (as well as urban) society. In the first thirty years of the PRC, socialism and the gender equality movement had quite an impact on private ownership, on the sexual division of labor, and on family property ownership, but the three basic elements of the patriarchal family system—practices related to inheritance, surnames, and post-marital residence—remained largely unaffected. Although the marriage law and the inheritance law adopted in the 1950s stipulated that males and females had equal rights of inheritance, no provisions directly restricted the three patriarchal elements mentioned above. Thus, despite the supremacy of state ownership and collective ownership in the rural economy during the socialist period, the traditional patriarchal family system remained intact. As Jin Yihong has pointed out, in the 1970s, feminists in the West began to reexamine the relationship between the socialist revolution in China and women's liberation from anthropological and sociological perspectives, and in doing so, they were able to study the patriarchal elements that continued to exist under socialism. Referring to "Collectivization, Kinship, and the Status of Women in Rural China" by Norma Diamond, Jin notes that the (still) subordinate status of women in socialist China cannot be attributed to remnants of feudal ideas but should be examined in relation to the social structure erected by socialism. Rural collectivization had not altered the traditional family structure, as most clearly exemplified by patrilocal marriage, and this is the reason for the persistence of the patriarchal family system under socialism in China (Jin 2000, 340).

Meanwhile, we must recognize that socialism in China (the period from the 1950s to the 1980s) had transformed private property into state-owned and collectively owned property. This transformation had seriously diminished the power of clans and increased the clout of nuclear families in the countryside. From the 1950s to the 1980s, the rudimentary social welfare system was established (under which urban residents were granted public health care and a retirement scheme), providing a "five guarantees support system" and cooperative health care to the vast population in rural areas. Furthermore, a nationwide compulsory education system was established. With the state's involvement in education, health care, and elderly support, the financial burdens of individual rural households diminished. In

addition, powerful political campaigns were waged to attack the so-called four olds (old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas), driving a number of sexually discriminatory marriage and funeral customs into hibernation. However, since the campaigns never completely uprooted these practices, there was always the possibility that they might return once the political climate changed. And this is exactly what has happened in post-Mao China.

The post-Mao reform and opening up policy was introduced in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Since then, Chinese society has changed fundamentally. The economy has become more diversified, state-ownership and collective-ownership has been significantly scaled down, the rudimentary system of public services and social security rapidly disintegrated, forcing the already weakened rural families to reassume their previous roles and functions. Simultaneously, with the weakening of social control and political pressure, both people's freedom to choose and the social space for people to realize their choices have expanded. Traditional social customs, once vociferously condemned by the authorities, have been revived. Not only that, these customs have also infiltrated the mechanisms for resource allocation as well as community life in rural society. In this chapter, we focus our attention on domestic patriarchy and examine the causal relations between domestic patriarchy and son preference, which are at the root of the sex ratio imbalance.

## Patriarchal Tradition and Son Preference

Our survey shows that there are three fundamental causes underlying the pronounced proclivity for son preference in rural China: notions of continuing the family line, the tradition of raising sons as insurance against the insecurity of old age, and clan influence. All three are closely linked with domestic patriarchy.

### *Lineal Descent: Family Names and Property Inheritance*

One of the rules of domestic patriarchy is that the right of inheriting property, surnames, and reputation belongs to sons, not to daughters, not even to a princess in a noble family. In other words, power,

status, property, and family names are passed down from fathers to sons and further on to grandsons, whereas daughters are bypassed and excluded. Patrilineal inheritance rules apply in all classes. As surnames are also inherited through the male line, children belong to the father's lineage, while women are regarded as merely tools of fertility. Freidrich Engels, who knew much about patrilineal inheritance, held that class oppression initially occurred in tandem with the subjugation of women by men. The rise of patriarchy accompanied the devaluation of women.

The concern in China with continuing the family line is intimately connected with son preference. In the West, it has primarily been aristocrats who have concerned themselves with issues of bloodline, whereas in China approximately 80 percent of the population (mostly of rural areas) regard continuing the blood line as one of their primary duties. It has even been claimed by some Western scholars that familial continuity is the sole religious belief in China (Li 2003, 121). Indeed, in China a childless life is considered a misfortune. Childlessness means having no descendants, but in this context it refers especially to having no son. The value of familial continuity is deeply rooted in the popular belief system and is commonly seen as the purpose of life. Similar to a religious belief, the importance of familial continuity needs no substantiation and is not considered in terms of material gain or rationality. In the process of our investigation, we frequently heard people saying, "What would life be for without a son to carry on the family line? Why build a new house? You could just live in a shabby cabin, and if it crashed, what the heck. Just have some food and wait to die." Due to this kind of reasoning, people will try to have a son no matter how much they may be fined.

The custom of maintaining a family tree is an important part of patrilineal descent. Without sons, family trees wither; this custom thus strengthens the preference for sons. In Guangdong, Fujian, Jiangxi, Hubei, and Henan Provinces, this practice is in the ascendant. Our survey found that over 80 percent of families in rural Jiangxi follow this tradition. In rural Guangdong, people not only maintain family trees, they also build ancestral halls. The wealthy businessmen who spend money on having a family tree drawn up or donate to an ancestral hall are concerned not with support in their old age but with making sure that their son inherits the family property. What is passed on to the next generation, apart from the family name, can be property, skills, or social status. As a son is a permanent family member and the prerequisite for continuing the family line, he becomes successor to any such inheritance. The son, being a blood descendant

as well as heir to any property, is duty-bound to support his parents both financially and emotionally. This is, however, not merely a matter of obligation; it is also about the son attaining the qualifications and identity of a successor. In real life, it has become almost a kind of normative economic transaction that family property goes to the son and the son in turn takes care of his parents. Parents elicit the loyal support of their son by helping him set up a new household and by leaving their property to him, and these practices are supported by most people.

*Old-Age Support and Patrilocal Marriage*

Our survey found that, in regions with a strong son preference, sons are in fact raised for the purpose of supporting their parents. Such support can come in two different forms: financial support and everyday attentiveness. When it comes to financial support, however, there is considerable agreement to the proposition that sons and daughters should share the responsibility. One of the questions we asked in our survey was "Should daughters take (some part of) the responsibility for supporting their parents, even if sons are generally regarded as the sole supporter of their parents?" In County C, 56.1 percent of the respondents answered "yes," and in County B, 50.4 percent took the same position. Responding to the question of who should be responsible for the medical expenses of parents, 47.7 percent in County C and 34.4 percent in County B held that this responsibility should be shared between sons and daughters. In terms of undertaking a parent's funeral costs, 34.5 percent of the respondents in Lueyang held that these costs should be shared between sons and daughters; 37 percent in County B and 52.9 percent in County C were of the same view. This proves that married daughters are no longer regarded as "spilled water." They are expected to support their parents financially if they have the wherewithal to do so.

But this should not obscure the fact that the son is still the main financial provider of parent care, as illustrated by the following figures. In County B, sons were the sole provider of medical expenses in 61.5 percent of households, whereas daughters were the sole provider of medical expenses in only 3.5 percent of households. In County C, these figures were 52.9 percent for sons and only 2.6 percent for daughters. In the cases where sons and daughters shared the medical expenses, the son provided the lion's share. As a son is entitled to inherit property whereas a daughter is not, he has to take more responsibility for supporting his parents financially.

The survey also shows that sons and daughters-in-law assume a larger share of the responsibility for helping parents in their daily lives than do daughters and sons-in-law; although the tendency for both sons and daughters to take care of their parents is indeed increasing in recent years. In County C, 47.7 percent of the elderly are cared for by a son, 2.6 percent by a daughter, and 38.6 percent by both. In County B, the duty of caring for parents falls exclusively on sons in 60 percent of the cases, on daughters in 2.6 percent of the cases, and is shared between sons and daughters in 31.2 percent of the cases. Nurturing a son for old-age support has thus become necessary for practical reasons (see Figure 6.1).

Why is it primarily the son who supports the parents? This has to do with the prevalence of patrilocality in marriage. Under domestic patriarchy, marriage has a different meaning for men and women. A man does not have to leave his home, his family, or his village upon marriage, whereas a woman who marries must relocate to the family and village of her husband, where she must take part in supporting his parents. Thus, examining whether post-marital patrilocal residency—an institution that embodies the superiority of the male over the female—still prevails is a key element in our survey on sex preference (an aspect that is, incidentally, often ignored in the official marriage registration by the Ministry of Civil Affairs). In the questionnaires distributed in District A in Henan, we included the

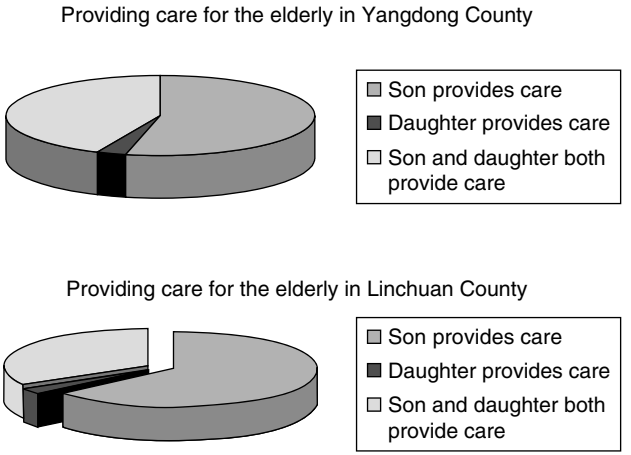


**Figure 6.1** Who Cares for the Elderly in Yangdong and Linchuan?

question of whether matrilocal residency could be found in that particular village. This questionnaire was completed by family planning officers from 131 of the 194 villages in the district. The result shows that there were 143 cases of matrilocal residency in total, constituting roughly 1 percent in every village. The remaining 99 percent abides by post-marital patrilocal residency.

Since a woman has to move to her husband's village upon marrying, she automatically becomes enrolled in the patrilineal family network, even if she and her husband do not actually share a house with his parents. The results from our survey in County B in Jiangxi and County C in Guangdong confirm this pattern. In County B, 33.3 percent of married couples formed independent households, 61.2 percent shared an abode with the husband's family, and 5.4 percent stayed with the wife's family. In County C, the figures were 11.1 percent, 82.4 percent, and 2.6 percent, respectively. There has been rapid growth in the number of independent households in both counties. This correlates with the scale and speed of urbanization. However, the reason for this shift is not that so many couples have suddenly become financially independent; rather, these couples often rely on the husband's parents for financial assistance, and with this assistance goes the tacit understanding that the son will take care of his parents. This underscores the fact that patrilocality is still much more common than matrilocality. Therefore, the notion that sons serve as old-age insurance should not been taken as an indication that peasants have conservative mindsets, rather it should be seen as a practical choice following from the persistence of the patrilocal model of marriage.

### *Clan Power*

In our survey in County C, there was a question concerning the dominance of specific families in the villages. It turned out that 83 percent of the villages were predominantly populated by inhabitants belonging to a few large families (the "big surnames"). In such a village, complicated interpersonal networks have formed as families have resided in the same area, generation after generation. "Quite often there is a direct correlation between the size of a given family and the influence of individual members from that family" (Li 2003, 73). Basing influence on numerical strength has at least three merits for clan members.

First, members of the large clans cannot be bullied and their interests are better protected. As the rule of law has remained of limited effectiveness in rural China, clan power trumps law and justice in

cases of interest conflict in a village. In facing a big and strong clan, the rival has no choice but to back down, even if their claim is just. As a saying goes in the countryside, three sons are the equivalent of a local police station.

Second, clans also wield considerable power over the distribution of communal resources. In the late 1990s, direct election of village committee members replaced the system of appointment by higher authorities. As many villagers tend to vote for people from their own clan, the position of village head usually falls into the hands of a candidate from a large clan, even if there are very qualified candidates from smaller clans. We have discovered in our investigation that clans seem to play an increasingly important part in village elections.

Third, clans form supportive social networks. Nowadays, it is rare to find extended families living together in the countryside. Instead, smaller family have become the units of production, daily life, and economic bookkeeping. In this sense, the traditional extended family has ceased to exist. However, many tasks cannot be completed by one small family on its own; this is especially true for important issues such as building a new house, child rearing, marriage, and medical visits, all of which usually involve a larger social network. After the collapse of the rural collective structure, male bloodlines became the nexus of social networks. The larger the clan, the wider and stronger the social network its members are able to draw upon.

We have, nevertheless, spotted signs of change in some of the Han Chinese areas, such as in Meiwan Village of Hua County in Jiangxi, Lueyang County in Shanxi, and Yichang in Hubei, where different modes of post-marital residence are found. We saw not only patrilocal and matrilocal post-marital residence, but also ambilocal residence. Meiwan is a small and remote village in Huang County, Jiangxi, consisting of five village groups with a total of 138 households and a population of 597. In Meiwan, 52 males resided with their wives' family, corresponding to 46.4 percent of the married women and 37 percent of all households. Of the remaining families, three married couples travelled back and forth between both sets of parents, while the rest lived with the husband's parents.

Moreover, we also found diverse systems for passing down the family surname. A child can be named after either her or his father or mother, or even after either of the grandmothers, and both sons and daughters support their parents in old age. Lianghekou, a town in the mountains of Lueyang County in Shaanxi, also has quite a high percentage of matrilocal residence, as 265 out of the 1124 households (24 percent) in the township have sons-in-law living with them. In

Yichang in the Three Gorges Region in Hubei, a noticeable shift has taken place and both post-marital residential practice and the distribution of inheritance may now involve the female line. It seems that the idea that boys and girls are equal has struck deep roots in this area, and the parents' expectation for boys and girls has also ceased to be distinctively different. Of the families, 43 percent would prefer to see a son continue the family line, against 41 percent who would prefer to have a daughter continue the family line. When it came to children looking after their parents in old age, 38 percent would prefer a daughter for that task, and only 36 percent would prefer a son.

## *Revitalized Patriarchy and Village Culture*

This section discusses how domestic patriarchy has been revitalized in post-Mao rural China, following the collapse of the collective welfare system, the increased importance of family, the revival of late marriage and traditional funeral customs, and the expanded space for public opinion expression in rural society. In combination, these factors have facilitated the strengthening of domestic patriarchy, not only as a family value but also as "the rational" basis for the distribution of public resources. This expresses itself primarily in two ways: one is the peer pressure of village culture, and the other has to do with the connection between village membership and village resource allocation. Both will be examined in detail below.

### *Village Culture and Peer Pressure*

Village culture is the culture existing within a given rural community, including the peer pressure of everyday life. In 1990, sociologist Li Yinhe studied village culture peer pressure in the village of Nanshantou in Qin County in Shanxi Province. In her book *Fertility and Village Culture* she noted that important life events, such as childbirth and the rearing of children, marriage and burial, and constructing homes and tombs, are somehow involuntary acts for the villagers. Why does everyone want to have a son? It is because of the fear of being deemed "barren" by others. Why do marriage ceremonies have to be grand? For the fear of losing face. "Vanity and the opinions of others are the prime sources of peer pressure in village culture. . . . The villagers all feel the pressure both to abide by village custom and to surpass everyone else" (Li 2003, 77). Anyone transgressing the rules

will suffer the displeasure and gossip of the other villagers, and this holds especially true in close-knit villages where network support is the foundation of survival. It is under circumstances such as these that villagers feel they have no choice but to follow customs—and thereby reproduce patriarchy.

Son preference is often based upon this culture of peer pressure. The women participating in one of our seminars described their experiences with this kind of pressure in the following ways: "If a woman gives birth to a son, other villagers will say something like 'You can now relax because the family line can continue; your ancestors' grave has excellent *fengshui*'"; or, "The Buddha has heard you prayers. Having a baby boy, you don't have to worry whether you have more children." But if a woman gives birth to a girl, the villagers will try to comfort her, saying that first comes the flower and afterward comes the fruit (the meaning being that government policies allow a couple to have a second child if the first one is a girl—and if this child, the fruit, is a boy, everything will be fine). When a woman with no son gets into a fight with other villagers, it is not uncommon to hear insults such as, "You can't even have a son, you good-for-nothing!" Or, "You're the one breaking the family line!"

Village culture involves customs associated with marriage, death, and childbirth. All of these customs imbibe the message that "having sons are of the highest priority." In the central plains of China, funeral arrangements place sons in the center and exclude daughters. After a parent passes away, it is customary that a son relays the event to other family members on the paternal side, while there are no customary prescriptions for daughters or to involve the maternal side. In the funeral procession, the oldest son leads, carrying the cremation urn in his hands, and he is followed by the other male members of the clan. Daughters and the other female family members are to follow behind. The son is to "break the pot," a ritual showing that earthly possessions are passed on to the next generation. If the deceased does not have a son, a nephew will have to perform the ritual. If the deceased has neither son nor nephew, the ritual can be performed by a daughter, but a daughter still cannot receive the inheritance. In a family without any male offspring, a daughter has to seek help from other senior family members to handle the many strenuous arrangements. Unmarried sons and daughters are not buried in the same place when they die. While a son is interred alongside the ancestral tomb, a daughter is buried by the side of the road, some distance away from the ancestral tomb. This funeral folk culture strengthens the status and role of males in the family, especially the role of the eldest son,

while the role and status of women are diminished. For this reason, a family without male offspring cannot arrange a proper funeral, and this means that such a family is often treated with condescension by the local community.

In short, it is these often taken-for-granted village cultures and folk customs that penetrate into every aspect of village life. By simply following traditions, village inhabitants unintentionally internalize and strengthen patriarchal norms such as son preference, and it is due to the powerful impact of village culture that patriarchal traditions not only continue, but are constantly reproduced.

*Village Membership and Resource Allocation*

Resources in rural areas, primarily land and cash, are allocated in accordance with certain village conventions. The conventions in a given village are a set of shared norms developed over time. Let us first look at the allocation of arable land. The current land-allocation system took shape in the early 1980s with the promulgation of the household contract responsibility system. The introduction of this system had two primary consequences. First, as the basic public welfare provisions provided by the previous collective economy were gradually abolished, individual families were once again left with the responsibility of supporting the elderly. In the small-scale peasant economy, the demand for more children, and especially for sons, increased. Second, the use rights and the ownership of rural land was changed. In the past, both of these rights belonged to the state, and villagers merely exchanged their labor force for work points. The notion of use rights simply did not exist, and there was no tie between an individual peasant and any particular plot of land. After the reforms, village committees now hold title to the arable land in a village, while use rights are distributed among the villagers. Villagers no longer work for work points, instead, a household now contracts an individual plot of land, and the notion of use rights has become established. In this way, the reforms have also created a new kind of connection between the state, the village committees, and rural households. The Chinese government formulates the broad terms of the national land policy, such as contract duration, and types of appropriate land usage, whereas village committees specify the concrete details of the land allocation agreements. Rural households may apply for a plot of land and manage their individual plots.

Under normal circumstances, the government delegates the responsibility for land distribution to local village committees who then distribute the land in accordance with rules adopted by the village

community. Village committees usually set aside reserve land that can be used in case of population growth, but this is usually a small fraction of the village's total land holdings. Of the counties in our survey, County C had 8.1 percent of its land set aside, County A had 12.5 percent, and County B, 33.3 percent.

Land distribution is usually based on the number of heads in a household, regardless of gender. However, when it comes to marriage, there is differential treatment. Men who marry maintain their right to the plot of land in the village, as long as they do not leave the village. In many cases, a woman who marries, on the contrary, loses her right to the contracted plot of land in her natal village, even if her household registration remains with her natal family. This had happened in 25 percent of the cases examined in County A. Even a local family planning cadre, who hoped to keep his daughter in the village, was refused when he applied to the village committee to let his daughter and her future husband contract a plot of village land. The village committee rejected his application, saying, "Other families marry off their daughters, why can't you? There is no more land in the village. We can't allow more men to come here and divide up our land." In County C, men who choose to live with their in-laws after marriage were usually not be able to contract any of the reserved land the village had set aside. Of the locals surveyed, 59.5 percent confirmed that this was the case. Daughters who return to their natal village after a divorce would not be allowed to contract any land again either. When a village committee allocates land according to the rules of domestic patriarchy, a woman who marries loses not only her place in her natal home, but also loses her membership in the village where she had grown up. For women, then, marriage means not only the loss of family property, but also the loss of access to the means of production in the village.

There are also important differences between urban and rural settings when it comes to the significance of plots of land for housing. For most rural young couples who wish to set up a home, they must either live with their parents or acquire a place of their own. In the cities, apartments can be bought on the market, but setting up a home in the countryside often involves acquiring a plot of land. Since village land is administered by village committees, establishing a place of residence in rural areas is not merely an internal family matter but involves the village committee and the local rules guiding the allocation of resources.

The rules for allocating land for housing differ from the rules for allocating land for farming. Where the allocation of land for farming

is based on the number of heads in a household regardless of gender, the allocation of land for housing involves marriage and the use of resources for construction. In other words, allocating land for housing is intimately related to the issue of gender. As such, adjusting the traditional marriage system so that greater attention is paid to the wishes of the marrying couple when it comes to the distribution of land—instead of mechanically applying the traditional rules—will serve to weaken the strength of domestic patriarchy. Paying increased attention to the opinions of both the bride and the groom were at the core of the revisions of the Marriage Law in the 1980s; unfortunately, however, the public authorities responsible for land allocation have not taken the spirit of the Marriage Law to heart, but have instead chosen to rely on "popular will." Under the banner of "popular will" the traditions of domestic patriarchy continue to be reproduced.

In some of the areas covered by our survey, there seems to be an implicit rule that sons are always prioritized in the allocation of land for housing. In families with both sons and daughters, the son(s) were given a plot of land to build a house, but not the daughter(s). In families without sons, only one daughter (even if there were several) could be granted the right to a piece of land for housing. According to village committees, this practice is based on the fact that daughters give up their membership in their natal village upon marriage. Once married, a daughter belongs to her husband's village, regardless of what the laws say, and she is therefore not eligible to enjoy any of the material benefits offered by her natal village. This is clearly based on the logic of domestic patriarchy, which has it that a married woman's identity is determined by her husband's identity.

This situation was found to be particularly grievous in District A in Henan; an area with a total of 194 village committees, all abiding by the same precedent. In this district, the eldest son must cohabit with his parents, while younger sons are able to contract plots of land for housing. Unmarried daughters must cohabit with their parents and are not eligible to acquire housing land, even in families with several daughters. The deadline for applying for a land allocation in the villages is also problematic because, in most places, such an application has to be made at the age of 18 or even earlier. In only 4.5 percent of the cases covered by our survey was the application made in connection with a marriage, whereas in 10.5 percent of the cases, the application had to be made at birth, and in 85 percent of the cases, it had to be made when the son turned 18. This shows that land allocation for housing is not meant to reflect the wishes of individuals, but is instead structured around the patriarchal system, where it is assumed that all

boys will remain in the village and that all girls will leave. Rules such as these serve to ensure that boys and girls will eventually follow the patriarchal assumptions. Consequently, 99 percent of the women in these rural areas had no choice but to move away to join her husband, rather than staying at home and supporting her parents. Even though parents are quick to acknowledge the care and filial piety shown to them by daughters, they have no choice but to rely on their sons for support in old age.

As has been demonstrated, male preference is not just a tradition, it is also institutionalized practice. Male preference is embodied in the distribution of household resources and extends to the distribution of resources in collectives and in companies, forming commune patriarchy and corporate patriarchy.

## *Patriarchal Elements in Public Policy*

As China entered the 1980s, family planning was initiated and quickly changed from encouraging "one couple and one child" to a strict, nationwide system to control the number of births. At the same time, a very large number of family planning officers were appointed to implement this policy (what we might call policy implementation with "Chinese characteristics"). Since then, family planning has no longer been simply a household matter, but has become an integral part of government responsibility and public administration. Since the revision of the Marriage Law in 1980, both the wife and the husband have been made responsible for abiding by the strictures of birth policies. This was the third revision of the marriage laws, promoting monogamy and gender equality, that were first adopted in the areas controlled by the Red Army in the 1930s. With the 1980 revision, what used to be seen as a household matter became an issue of national policy.

The family planning policy has touched upon some of the firmest notions of Chinese culture, where having many children (especially many sons) is equated with happiness. The family planning policies were initially established as a pilot program in Dingzhou in Hebei in the 1970s. The local officials immediately realized that there was a conflict between domestic patriarchy and the family planning policy, so they made efforts to reform the patterns of post-marital residency and the exclusive reliance on the support of sons in old age by encouraging matrilocal marriage. The success of the pilot program came to inspire the revisions made to the Marriage Law in the 1980s. The

revised law contained two provisions aimed at fighting the patriarchal practices surrounding inheritance, naming, and post-marital residency. Article 8 states that, after a marriage has been registered, the woman may become a member of the man's family or vice versa, depending on the wishes of the two parties. Article 16 states that a child may be given the surname of the father or the mother. These changes, it must be said, were formidable challenges to the long-standing patriarchal system.

However, the deep-rooted patriarchal system cannot be changed simply by adopting a few laws; rather, a series of effective measures needs to be taken if cultural conceptions of gender are to be challenged This requires collaboration between public authorities and civil society groups, not to mention relentless promotion and tireless determination. Regretfully, the authorities seem not to have acknowledged the difficulty and severity of the challenge, and the new stipulations in the Marriage Law have proved insufficient to provoking change in culture and daily life. In 2007, we conducted a survey among 157 lower-level government officials. In our survey, 82.6 percent of the officials chose the option "It is perfectly normal for a bride to move to her groom's place of residence upon marriage, and this is not an issue of gender inequality." Only 10.1 percent thought otherwise. That is to say, these officials are more or less ignorant of the impact of domestic patriarchy on women in terms of exclusion and violation of interests. This has a number of consequences for policy-making and implementation.

### *Gender-Blind Spots in Policy-Making*

One such gender-blind spot in the land policy is the distribution of arable land among households. Household is the fundamental unit to consider in the allocation of both arable and housing land, and, in the eyes of policy-makers, gender issues within the household are not amenable to regulation by public policy since each family is seen as an entity of common interest and mutual assistance. Thus, in actual rural life, existing public policies are not only unable to prevent domestic patriarchy—instead, they often increase its power. In Lianyungang in Jiangsu, the court often receives complaints from rural women. Some of these women have seen their parents' plot of land seized by relatives at the demise of their parents, while others have found themselves being dispossessed of their land upon the death of their husband.

When it comes to land allocation, the government plays the dominant role, as is well illustrated by considering the extension of land contracting periods. A new policy was launched by the Ministry of Agriculture in 1998 where, to secure the willingness of peasants to

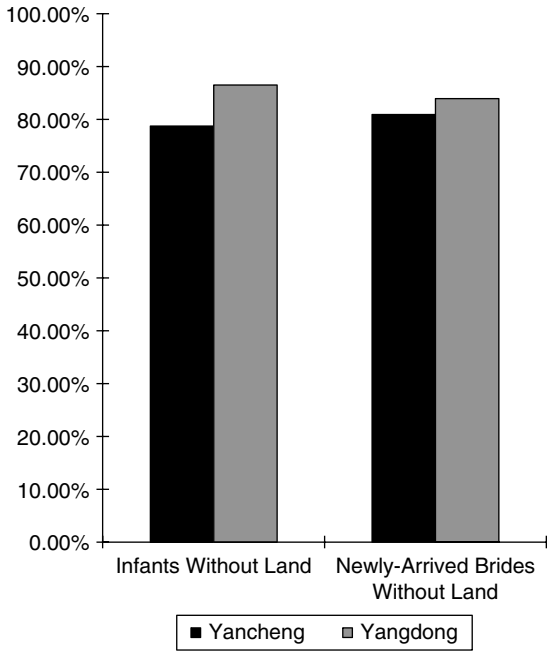


**Figure 6.2** The Proportion of Newborn Babies and Newly Arrived Brides without Land.

invest in their land, land allocation for farming would no longer be adjusted according to the number of heads in a household. Many problems arose as a consequence of these reforms, yet the new policies were implemented without hesitation. Under the new policies, newborn children are usually not allocated any land. This was the case for 78.8 percent of the newborns in District A and for 86.5 percent in County C. Likewise, newly arrived brides are usually not allocated land. This was the case for 80.9 percent of the newly arrived brides in District A and for 83.9 percent in County C. Not only were these women allocated no land in their new village, the land they had held in their natal village was "voluntarily transferred" into the possession of their brothers, which meant that these women suddenly became peasants without land (see Figure 6.2).

### *Domestic and Communal Patriarchy*

In China's rapid urbanization in recent years, a number of peasants have had their land requisitioned and have seen their official status of residency change from rural to urban. As a consequence, they can

no longer acquire a piece of land for housing, but will have to buy a house like other urban dwellers. Housing in the newly urbanized areas is traded in two different ways. One is through the property market, where prices have soared out of reach for people in the lower income brackets. In other cases, housing is sold at much lower prices to collectives or certain workplaces that in turn allocate the housing to their employees. In the latter case, a confirmation of one's membership in the collective or workplace is usually a precondition for being considered in the allocation process. This is, however, often done in a way detrimental to the interests of women, simply because many workplaces do not recognize a woman's individual membership and hence tend to deny women entitlement to allocated housing. In a city in Jiangxi, for instance, the local committee members agreed upon a rule that allowed male farmers under the age of 60 who had had their land requisitioned to buy a set of subsidized apartments; women were not given the same preferential treatment.

In reality, some villages, especially some of the more prosperous ones, allow a groom to marry into the family of his bride, instead of the reverse. Even these women, however, are often not accorded the same rights as their brothers and husbands, and frequently are not awarded any compensation in cases of land requisitioning. In Nanning in Guangxi, 1200 rural women signed a letter requesting a solution to issues of land compensation. In some villages in Shandong, women who stayed at their natal village after marriage had to pay twice as much as other villagers for collectively built commercial housing, and they were only allowed to buy half as many square meters as other villagers. In other places, village committees have cancelled the household registration of women and children, turning them into illegal residents and making it very difficult for them to find jobs. This has unleashed a significant number of collective complaints. According to local rules in Sisheng in Zhejiang, women who marry non-agricultural registered residents are dispossessed of their contracted land and lose their rights to enjoy local village subsidies. An exception can be made, however, for those willing to pay 20.000 RMB into a local fund for agricultural development. Moreover, many villages force women to live with their in-laws by forbidding them to stay at their natal village after marriage.

As a result, there is a conflict between the communal rules of land allocation and the interests of married women. Obviously, women often find themselves the weaker party in conflicts with village committees, and this is even true in many cases where women seem to have the law on their side. Many female rights activists consider

public authorities the most just mechanism for solving such problems, not least since the authorities are in theory vested with the power to offer effective help. In actual fact, however, local administrators often administer policies against the law and help to shore up domestic patriarchy. For instance, one of the municipal committees covered by our survey had issued a document stipulating that a woman who had not moved away after marriage should be strongly encouraged to relocate to the native place of her husband. The document also stated, though, that should a woman prove unwilling to relocate, she could become eligible for a piece of land if the "majority of her fellow villagers allow it." In a political environment where stability is prioritized above all else, so-called respect for public opinion is often an excuse for allowing tyrannical majorities to ride roughshod over the interests of minorities.

Moreover, a large number of cases involving problems such as those discussed above are denied a hearing by the judiciary. Many of these cases could properly have been solved by administrative authorities, but they pile up due to understaffing in the relevant agencies and end up in court. In addition, in their tenacious efforts to defend their rights, some women invest their final hope in the court, believing that a court hearing offers them their best chance. In this way, the judicial system, which ought to have been the last line of defense, becomes the sole line of defense. Since the 1990s, China's higher courts have, however, routinely denied hearing such cases, and a large number of them have therefore been shelved. Under heavy pressure from various sectors of society, the court reversed this practice in 2005. Statistics from the court system in Guangxi show that from January 2002 to November 2003, the Guangxi court system received a total of 555 cases brought before it involving land disputes and women's rights, and 265 of those cases were rejected. These 265 rejected cases accounted for 19 percent of the total number of cases involving land disputes during this period. Due to these judicial deficiencies, rural women have often found it very difficult to use the legal system to fight for their rights. In the limited number of such cases where a court ruled in favor of the female plaintiff, she often found it impossible to obtain the awarded compensation, because the village committees involved often offer the excuse that they have no more land to allocate. Even a court ruling may thus turn out to be nothing but empty words on a page.

In the interactions between state and family, and between company and community, the Chinese authorities have not actively sought to provide guidance or to strengthen rule-bound governance. Instead,

government policies have tacitly supported patriarchal allocation practices and widespread traditional notions of gender. This means that the scales of justice have been tilted and that unlawful acts detrimental to the interests of the minority have been permitted. As women and other disadvantaged social groups seeking justice have no help to count on and no way out, there is only one conclusion available to them after banging their head against the wall: give birth to a son!

## Conclusion

There are three root causes for the prevalence of patriarchy in China: a bride usually moves to take up residence in the home of her husband; surnames and inheritance are passed down on the male side; and the continued influence of clan structures. Son preference is a structural issue and it is intimately connected with gender discrimination, which manifests itself in a number of areas. These include social norms, resource allocation in families and in clans, implicit conventions in grassroots organizations, and government policies at all levels. Patriarchal dominance is not a thing of the past, but an elemental fact of life in current rural China. Patriarchal dominance not only pervades cultural notions, but is also embedded in the practices of resource allocation; it not only arises out of the interactions of families and village customs but is continually reproduced by tacit government approval and judicial negligence. These are all reasons for the strong son preference in rural Chinese society and for the imbalanced sex ratio at birth.

Translated by Tony Kang Zhili and Bo Ærenlund Sørensen.

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# *Chapter Seven*

# *The Everyday Lives and Media Representation of Rural Left-Behind Women*

## *A Study of Songzhuang in Southern Shandong Province*

*Zhu Shanjie*

Over the past decade the number of young migrant workers leaving my hometown—a small village in the southern part of Shandong Province—has been steadily increasing.[1] Most of the migrants are men, and some of them leave their wives and children behind. Media and scholars refer to the women as "rural left-behind women."

This group of people exists not only in my hometown, but are found in thousands of villages across China, in nearly every underdeveloped area, and are estimated to number 50 million (Xinhua News Agency 2011.03.07). When I started to study this problem by searching for materials published domestically and abroad, I found that research in this area is still in its start-up phase, with few results and many things were still left to be done.

Studies by Chinese scholars can be grouped in roughly the following manner: first, research probing into institutions, policies, and management, such as the study of the choices of the left-behind women in matters of reproduction, production, and community management (Luo 2014). This includes studying the "dual-track strategy" to identify effective social management strategies for caring for the left-behind women (Du 2013).

Second, there are analyses based on surveys starting from the perspectives of gender and marital relations as, for example, analyses of the conjugal satisfaction of left-behind and not-left-behind women (Xu 2009), and analyses of the impact on marital relations when husbands migrate to find work (Ye and Wu 2009), and studies of

all the factors that influence the conjugal happiness of left-behind women (Wang 2008). Third, there are studies related to psychology and faith, including surveys investigating psychological pressure (Bu et al. 2008), and religious beliefs (Wu et al. 2010). Fourth, there are studies of social support, such as analyses of what contributes to the improvement of the living situation of left-behind women (Ren 2011), and discussions of social support and existential problems (Wang and Xiang 2009).

For the most part, however, these studies remain at the macro level and seldom attempt in-depth investigations of changing family vicissitudes, nor do they explore the differences among individuals, groups, and regions. For this reason, there is a lack of knowledge of individual left-behind women, as well as a lack of knowledge of the relationship between inequality, gender equality, and urban-rural differences. Moreover, scant attention has been paid to epistemological and methodological issues related to studying the groups and individuals excluded from the mainstream media. A few studies conducted by scholars working abroad, on topics such as urban-rural differences (Whyte 2010) and the feminization of agriculture (Meng 2014), have also touched on the issue of left-behind women. There are also studies focused on the left-behind women, investigating their mobility, housekeeping, and welfare (Jacka 2012), but the media representation of left-behind women is never discussed.

Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to try to understand the daily lives as well as the representation of the left-behind women. Delving into their everyday lives gives us the best way of grasping their real-life situation, their richness and diversity as individuals and subjects, and the roles they play in the contemporary social structure. Whether and how these factors can be represented in the media crucially influence our investigations of social justice and gender equality.

The notion of "everyday life" is both multifaceted and complex. *Everyday Life* (Heller 1984) offers a systematic and wide-ranging examination of the topic, but there are, of course, insights to be found in other works as well. These include *Culture and Everyday Life* (Inglis 2011), *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman 1959), and *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction* (Highmore 2002), all of which offer valuable ways to approach the research of everyday life. The reason why I study everyday life is that such an approach sheds light on cold statistics, bringing to light the individual and revealing the relationship between the individual and society. It is, of course, not possible to examine every facet of the

daily lives of left-behind women, so I focused mainly on their survival strategies and on their marital feelings.

This project relies mainly on fieldwork and textual analysis. By participant observation and interviewing focused on personal narratives, I will try to unveil the details of the everyday lives of the left-behind women in Songzhuang Village, Shandong—details from a relatively independent system, one village, in order to shed light upon the question of their representation.

## The Setting

The place I chose to study is a medium-sized village in the southern part of Shandong Province, known as Songzhuang, not very far from my hometown. Songzhuang is located in the plains south of a mountain range. Within its square-shaped boundary there are eight rows of houses from south to north, with more than 100 families, numbering roughly 500 inhabitants. A 20-to-30 meter wide river zigzags by close to the fields, greatly easing irrigation. The agriculture there has long been dominated by grains and vegetables, and it is famous for its garlic cultivation. Songzhuang is thus a typical, traditional agricultural village. But recently influenced by urbanization, Songzhuang is quietly undergoing a transition. Therefore, it serves as a good example of present-day rural China.

The garlic is harvested once a year. Sown in early October, it can be reaped in early May the following year. In April, just before the harvest, farmers plant corn amidst the garlic, looking forward to harvesting in July. Therefore, the period from the middle of October to mid April in the next year is a slack season for the farmers. In 1998, a few youngsters from Songzhuang began to go look for work in the cities. By year 2000, many more young people joined the ranks of those searching for city jobs. Since then, the number of young migrant workers leaving Songzhuang to look for jobs elsewhere has continued to rise, and by 2013 it had passed 100.

The annual rhythm of life in Songzhuang has given rise to two kinds of migration: the short-term and the long-term. The former category is comprised of those who, during the autumn and winter slack season, head for the Jiaodong Peninsula to look for work. At this time of year, the fishermen are busy gathering mature scallops and preparing the larvae for the following year, and they are badly in need of hands from inland villages like Songzhuang. In other words, the agricultural production cycle of Songzhuang and the Jiaodong Peninsula

are perfectly complementary, allowing farmers from Songzhuang to make extra money by working at the seaside during slack season. Some farmers, however, decide to stay in their new place of occupation, rather than return to Songzhuang. They then become long-term migrants. Roughly one-third of this group stay on the Jiaodong Peninsula, engaging in garbage collecting, street cleaning, security, and construction work. The remaining go farther afield to cities in South China, like Shanghai, Suzhou, and Wuxi, where they engage in the transportation, processing, and peddling of vegetables, or find jobs in factories, at building sites, or with delivery companies.

Accordingly, the left-behind women of Songzhuang fall in line with two types: the short-term left-behind and the long-term left-behind. The former group consists of those who are left alone at home for about half the year, whereas the latter group comprises those who have been left behind for more than one year. The number of these women change from year to year, but let us take 2013 as an example. The total number of the two types of women was 54, out of which short-term left behind accounted for 39, and long-term left behind numbered 15. From 2012 to 2014, I visited Songzhuang about a dozen times and selected a group of representative households for interviewing. For the purposes of this chapter, I will go over five representative cases below.

## Three Short-Term Left-Behind Women

The first interviewee is Tang[2] who, aged 30, is three years younger than her husband. They have an eight-year-old daughter, and two boys aged ten and six. After completing the agricultural work for the year in the fall, the husband goes to Yantai to work for six months, while Tang stays at home looking after the house and the three kids, cooking, cleaning, and accompanying their youngest to kindergarten. The two older children go to a primary school in the neighboring village, and they do not need her to accompany them or to pick them up.

Tang's schooling did not extend beyond three years of primary school, and she has problems helping her children with their school work. Managing the parent-teacher conference is difficult enough for her. She repeatedly exhorts her children to study hard so they won't grow up to be uncultured like her, but she understands only little of their concrete academic challenges. She is not particularly excited when they receive high grades, but she does occasionally beat them when they do poorly. She relies on what is sometimes called

"cudgel education." With all three children naughty at times, the two older ones regularly receive a box on the ears from their mother. Occasionally, when Tang is in a bad mood, she vents her frustrations on the children. Therefore, the children are in a state of constant alarm if their mother is in a gloomy mood.

Once, when Tang went in to the kitchen, her daughter secretly told me that her elder brother was beaten the most often, with "old scars covered by new ones" on his hands and face. She also explained that her mother loved her younger brother the most, and did not care much about her. She is grateful, though, that she is not her elder brother, while she envies her younger sibling. I carefully checked the elder boy's face and hands, and did indeed find multiple bruises. The bruises, however, seem nothing to him. It is clear from his face that he is influenced by the local ideal that the elder son should be "a manly man."

When I asked Tang, "Do you find any difficulties during your husband's absence? What is your main feeling about that?" She paused and spoke slowly:

> There are many difficulties. For example, once during a rainstorm in the middle of the night, the power suddenly disappeared and I did not know what to do. It was dark everywhere, which made me nervous. That was really bad; I had no choice but wait until dawn and ask my neighbors for help. Had my husband been at home, he would have dealt with it. He would have taken a flashlight and gone to check if the problem was a switch or the wires. Had it been a simple problem he could have fixed it quickly. I felt quite helpless. In addition to dropping off and picking up the younger boy and doing the housekeeping, I have to water the garlic. We've planted more than an acre of garlic, so the large field takes me five or six days to water. As you know, I have three kids to look after, and I can only do farm work for so many hours every day, and so it always takes me much longer than my neighbors. After watering the garlic, I go back home, and even though I am sometimes so exhausted that I feel like throwing up, I still have to cook food for the kids, even if I don't have the energy to eat anything myself.
>
> The most difficult time is when one of the kids falls ill and needs to go to the hospital, because then there is no one to take care of the other kids. My parents make a living by collecting trash in Qingdao. My parents-in-law live with their daughter in another city. If one of the kids falls ill, everything becomes very difficult. I try to take them to the nearest clinic, avoiding the hospital whenever possible because it is so far away. Our only way of getting to the hospital is on a motorbike, and since we can't afford hospitalization, we need to take the sick kid back and forth on the motorbike, and that may slow down the child's recovery. When one of the kids gets really ill and the doctors insist

> on hospitalization, then I have to leave the other kids with a neighbor. When that happens, the pressure makes me feel extremely lonely and helpless. My husband calls very often, but he can't do much from where he is.

Tang also mentioned that she is in poor health. She has hypoglycemia and often feels dizzy. When she falls sick, her energy and strength are sapped for several days, and it is virtually impossible for her to keep an eye on the children. When she needed intravenous therapy, I asked: "Given these circumstances, why does your husband leave to find work elsewhere?" She shook her head in dismay and replied,

> What else are we supposed to do? If we had two girls, then we could save a lot of money, for girls only need primary education.[3] But we have two boys and only 4 years separate them. If both go to high school and college, we simply can't afford it. And if they don't, we have to buy apartments or build houses for them, and that is even more expensive. That will cost us two to three hundred thousand for each. Not to mention the dowry. Our boys are growing up so rapidly, and there are many expenses ahead. We couldn't make that kind of money even if we worked ourselves to death in the fields. I try not to think of it, but pinching and scraping isn't enough—we have to focus on nothing but earning and saving up money. We would like to leave the village and work in the city the both of us for a few years to save up money, that's much easier outside of the village, but we don't have anyone here to look after the kids. Bringing them along would be expensive and, besides, I've heard that it is difficult for country kids to be allowed into city schools. For the time being, that's all we can do. Take one day at a time.

Every family in Songzhuang has at least two to three children, no family has only one child, and a few have four to five children. Those who, like the Tang family, have two boys are under immense pressure.

Qin's situation is a bit better than Tang's. She is 25 years old, her husband 27, their son is six, and their daughter three. Her husband and Tang's husband are cousins, and they get along very well. They always go together to the Jiaodong Peninsula where they help fishermen with fishing and breeding scallops. They always leave for half the year, and they don't return home for Chinese New Year—both because they are busy, and to save on traveling expenses.

I learned from my interview that Qin faces the same difficulties as Tang, such as dropping off and picking up her children, cooking for

the family, and watering the crops. However, as she does not know how to drive the motorized tricycle used for watering the crops in the village, she always asks her brother to do it for her. Her mother-in-law died more than a decade age, and this year her father-in-law had married another women, aged 50 or so. Her father-in-law extends a helping hand when they are busy. Since they have only one boy, they do not face nearly as much pressure as the Tang family who has two sons to marry off. Moreover, since they also have one child less, they also have less land to work.

When I asked her during our first interview what was the most difficult, she did not respond. When I asked again during the second interview, she hemmed and hawed. For the third interview I brought Tang along, and this time Qin finally consented to talk about the matter. It turned out that her husband was not only good-looking, but was also very fond of female company. Every year when he goes to Jiaodong to work, he uses the opportunity to chase other women. At first she had known nothing about this, until she overheard one of the other workers from the village letting his tongue run away with him. She was very sad and upset but could do anything, because her husband would not admit it. He claimed that the other worker had merely been joking. Besides, she had no evidence, so in the end she had to let the matter rest, but it cast a shadow over her. As a consequence, during the six months when her husband is away working, Qin constantly suffers from doubts and becomes so filled with suspicion that she calls dozens of times to check up on him. However, working with scallops means 24-hour shifts, and after working through the night, her husband switches off his cell phone the next day to get some sleep. This is the most tormenting time for her, and every second causes her suffering.

When her husband finally turns on his phone, Qin carefully questions him about his whereabouts, and even calls Tang's husband for confirmation. Her life is made wretched by this perpetual state of anxiety. When he returns, he always brings back less money than his fellow workers, probably because he spent them on other women, but to her he claims that money was spent calling home, smoking during his night shift, and so on. She has no choice but to suffer her pain quietly. When I asked why she still lets him go away to find work, she replied with what seemed a heavy heart:

> Our family only has a small plot of land. When we drew lots, we drew a plot of unfertile land, and even though we work our land just as hard as everyone else, our harvest is always smaller. Five years ago,

> my husband slipped on a rock when he was watering the crops and broke his left leg badly. To save money he left the hospital early, which meant that his leg didn't heal properly, and now he can't use his leg for heavy work. Of course, going out to work is also exhausting, but not as hard as farming. What's more, we earn so little from farming. When the price of garlic is low, our income after paying for seeds, pesticide, and fertilizer is just enough for us to get by. Going out to work pays better.

Having mulled over the pros and cons, Qin has decided that in order to make a living she has to suppress the pain deep in her heart and even sacrifice her dignity. She sees no choice but to bow her head to the harsh realities. "Even if he really does chase other women when he is away, I have to support his going away to work. This is both a great sacrifice and a most painful choice."

The other three left-behind women, Fei, Jiao, and Ling, face somewhat different situations. The three are of similar age and have similar family situations. They all agree that their husbands have to leave to work outside the village during the slack season, while they stay at home and take care of farming and various daily life chores.

It is unnecessary to go into details for each of them, so here I will briefly describe Fei as an example. Fei's mother-in-law suffered hemiplegia in 2011 and permanently lost her capacity to work and to care for herself. Fei's father-in-law, who suffered from polio as a child, can barely support himself and his wife, and he takes care of their medical fees by repairing locks and shoes on the street. Therefore, when her husband is away, Fei has to wash and cook for her in-laws, and this keeps her so busy that her feet hardly ever touch the ground.

The short-term left-behind women, represented by these five women, live in a situation where "every family has its own problems" as Jiao puts it, even if they are all faced with the same responsibilities, such as taking care of their children, farming, doing daily chores, and all share the same worries for the future of their family. Moreover, they share the same belief that they, as Ling puts it "have to endure their suffering in order to have a better future." However, compared to the long-term left-behind women, they still seem fortunate. Even if they live apart six months of the year, and even if they cannot be with their husbands for Chinese New Year, they are still better off than the long-term left-behind. After all, they can look forward to their husbands coming home and staying half the year. The long-term left-behind women, however, only see their husbands a few days every six months or once a year. Below, I detail the results

of my interviews and investigations conducted among this group of long-term left-behind women.

## Long-Term Left-Behind Women

Xiaohai's father was born in 1982 and only finished primary school. In 2005, at the age of 23, he went to Shanghai with some men from his village to work as a security guard at a hotel. It was in Shanghai that he met his girlfriend, Yan, a co-worker of the same age, who also came from Shandong Province, though from a different county. After their wedding followed the birth of Xiaohai, and the family's expenses increased dramatically. Because of their financial difficulties, and because they had no one to help them look after Xiaohai, Yan and her son moved to her mother-in-law's house in Songzhuang. Here, Yan's life became considerably easier, she no longer had to worry about not having enough money for food, and her mother-in-law was ready to help taking care of Xiaohai. Yan lives in a tile-roofed courtyard family house, instead of the iron-sheet shack that was her abode in Shanghai. After another two years, she gave birth to another boy, and Xiaohai started kindergarten.

Except for Chinese New year, Xiaohai's father is away from Songzhuang. As a young woman living away from her husband, she often runs into the young men of the village, which has made her parents-in-law so nervous that they never give her as much as half an hour to herself. As everyone in the village knows each other, and as Yan lives with her in-laws, there is no way she could ever engage in inappropriate behavior with a man.

The interview with Yan went very smoothly. She is frank and speaks without reservation. She dresses stylishly, unlike other rural woman. One glance at her is enough to reveal that she has lived in a city. She hopes for a chance to return to the city to find work and has not resigned herself to spending her entire life in a village like Songzhuang.

The word she mentions most frequently during the interview is "boredom"; it doesn't matter if she is talking about little annoyances or more significant problems, she invariably returns to the word "boredom." When further questioned about the cause of this feeling, Yan gave a strange smile, and it took me a while to realize that she was hinting at missing physical intimacy with her husband. For her, this longing was much worse than the hardships of work and daily life.

Wei was born in 1981, her husband in 1973. Both are natives of Songzhuang. They have a ten-year-old daughter and a six-year-old son. After graduating from high school, her husband went to Shanghai where he works on the construction of the subway. He returns at most twice a year—during national holidays—and he stays no more than three-to-five days. Wei has been a left-behind woman for eight years and has never been to Shanghai. When her husband is away, they only have contact over the phone. Both of Wei's parents-in-law are dead, and her own parents are too busy to find time to help her, so she cultivates only 1 *mu* (one-sixth of an acre) by herself and leaves the rest of the land for her brother to farm. Her main task is to take care of her children, giving her less of a workload than most other left-behind women. Having had no formal education, and having never learnt how to read, Wei's greatest difficulty is helping her children in their schooling.

Wei mentions two unforgettable events during the interview. One took place a cold winter's night two years before. It had started to snow heavily after supper, and in the middle of the night, her son suddenly developed a high fever. Since she had no antipyretics, she had to lock her daughter in the house and carry her son in her arms, stumbling in the snow all the way to the hospital three kilometers away. When she brought her son back it was already dawn. After such a cold and terrifying trip, she caught a bad cold which lasted more than three months. The other event was when a burglar broke into the house in the middle of the night. When she woke up, she screamed and tossed a bowl from her bedside table, which caused the burglar to flee. Wei had been scared out of her wits, though, and it took several days before she regained her normal self.

A word she keeps coming back to is "suffering." Her husband misses them very much, and he often bursts into tears when he calls home. She misses him very much too, and on such occasions she cries even more bitterly than him. Wei finds it so hard to go on that sometimes she even dreams of an end to it all. She says she hopes her husband will soon get his senior artisan's certificate, so that he can make more money. With any luck, his company may help him settle down in Shanghai, and then they could all move there and not have to suffer the pain of being separated. As Wei says this, her eyes twinkle, and something like a vision of future happiness drifts across her wrinkled face.

Yun was born in 1971, her husband in 1973. They have three daughters, aged 14, 12, and ten. She went to Shanghai with her

husband in 2002, and they lived there together for ten years. Their third daughter was born there. They chose to stay in Shanghai for so long in order to evade the one-child policy in Songzhuang.[4] They had hoped for a boy but things did not turn out that way, and with age it became difficult for Yun to have more children. Besides, their eldest daughter had to start high school and prepare for the college entrance exam, and therefore they had to move back to Songzhuang.[5] So, in 2012 Yun brought the three girls back with her to Songzhuang, while her husband stayed on, working at a vegetable market in Shanghai. Yun's mother died a while back, and her sick father is unable to take care of himself. Thus, Yun has one more person to take care of, in addition to her three girls.

From being a migrant worker, Yun has now become a rural left-behind woman. She farms roughly an acre of land on her own. She rises between four and five in the morning, and her workday lasts until after midnight, leaving her with only four or five hours of sleep. Her husband returns to help during the busy season, and for the rest of the year she turns to her brother or neighbors for help if she cannot manage by herself. She is in her early 40s, but looks to be over 50, with a wrinkled face, grizzled hair, and a pair of callused hands. She looks the typical old Chinese peasant, and one would never guess that she has urban experience. Her largest problem is that she is overworked. During the interview she kept returning to being "too busy, too exhausted." What she wished for most was simply a good rest, or at least to be able to sleep till dawn.

The two other left-behind women I interviewed were Mei and Hong. In the interview, Mei frequently described life as too bitter:

> How can a woman, who not only has to take care of kids and the elderly, but also has to work like a man, doing all kinds of work in the field, be called a woman, when she is dressed like a man, lives like a man, and has to behave like a man?

The last time her husband came home, it was empty-handed after half a year's work because his boss had absconded without doling out any wages. He was so frustrated that he spent entire days drinking by himself. In those days, Mei tried to console her husband by asking him not to go away for work anymore. Come spring, however, her husband made up his mind to go away to find work again. Working away from home for so many years, he is no longer used to the country life in Songzhuang. Mei had no choice but to go on

carrying the burden of taking care of the family alone. In her words, it is because

> I love that good-natured man so much that I can't stand to see him suffer. Our kids are growing up, and we are short of money. We can't make it through by farming, so I have to let him go. One can't be so unlucky as to meet a boss like that again.

Hong has been left in the village for five or six years, while her husband has been selling vegetables in Suzhou. Due to a difference of personalities, they have communicated less and less over the years, and usually speak for only a few minutes on the phone; if they talk longer, they invariably begin to fight. In recent years her husband's business has done very well and he has even bought himself a car. However, Hong has heard some villagers say that her husband has a mistress living with him in Suzhou. As Hong has a child to care for, she cannot go to Suzhou, nor does her husband want her to come there. She has obviously lost faith in their marriage. At one point during the interview she mentioned that "sometimes I feel an indescribable confusion in my heart." When this feeling comes over her, she weeps for a marriage that exists in name only and finds it difficult to fall asleep.

Generally speaking, both long-term and short-term left-behind women in Songzhuang assume similar responsibilities of farming and looking after their children, and they are faced with the same kinds of problems, the knottiest of which is the education of their children in the absence of their husband. They are all overworked, tired, sad, and lonely, they all feel frustrated and helpless, but the long-term left-behind women suffer the harder lot, both in terms of emotional hardship and daily-life tribulations. Moreover, their husbands' long absences from home seriously affect their children who are often timid, irascible, or headstrong, especially the boys. In addition, this group of women are the most sexually deprived, and all of their marriages face some degree of problems. They suffer from feelings such as boredom, pain, confusion, and hopelessness. When asked how they could improve their situation, most of them have the same reply: "What can we do?!" They all choose to endure the harsh reality and keep going forward, even though there is no bright horizon ahead. This in turn intensifies the negative emotions, and when these bubble over, the children are often the only targets on which they can vent their frustrations. Children growing up under circumstances such as these often suffer personal and educational difficulties.

## Media Representations

The left-behind women in Songzhuang play a dual role in family and society. First of all, they are women shaped by a conservative tradition. They join a family, give birth, and look after the whole family, young and old alike. Secondly, in many ways they behave like men, for they have to do farm work in the field, something that has long been regarded as a man's job. They also assume the man's traditional role in heading the household when their husbands are away for work. Mei describes herself as "a women hired to be a man." In other words, they are woman and man in one body. Or to put it more precisely, the left-behind women have a dual function in social life and production, fulfilling the roles of both men and women, constituting the backbone of the left-behind families.

It is their execution of this dual function that balances the life and production system of the village. And in doing so, their role as human subjects, that is, their role in the village, is not a marginal one but rather a very central one. The importance of their contribution is reflected in two facts. One is that, under their continued support, their husbands contribute a wage income that amounts to one-fourth of the total income of the village. The other is that it is their management of family matters that permit the normal functioning of the village. They contribute greatly to the social and economic development of the village by pronounced personal sacrifice.

They are, however, an overlooked group in Songzhuang. Every day they are busy farming and caring for their families from dawn to dusk, saving no time to think of themselves. Consequently, they have no opportunity to represent themselves, nor do the local media ever pay attention to them. Songzhuang is a typical village in rural China. A left-behind woman in Songzhuang is just one of 50 million such women across rural China. Living in tough situations and selflessly dedicating themselves to their family, with no extra energy to spare, they are involuntarily excluded from self-representation, and thus become part of the "silent majority." How, then, does the mainstream media present the situation of this large group of people?

A study involving film, television, newspapers, and the Internet reveals that the daily lives of these women are largely ignored, and when they are finally portrayed, it is usually in distorted fashion. They are generally absent from television, films, and newspapers. They are sometimes portrayed online, but almost always with an exaggerated focus on their sexual desire, loneliness, and marital infidelity, feeding

the public appetite for lurid stories in order to attract netizens. A typical example was provided by a story about a left-behind woman and her extramarital affair that was featured prominently on all the largest websites (Xinhua News Agency March 2014). This kind of story stigmatizes the left-behind women and does not present an accurate picture of their everyday lives, let alone of their important structural function in rural society, which has long been ignored by the media.

How do we account for this state of affairs? I think there are five primary factors.

First, over the past 30 years, with social transition along with globalization and urbanization, all the advantages of politics, economics, culture, and society have been enjoyed mainly by cities. Cities have dominated the process of social development, while the countryside has been relegated to the margins. Though frequently appearing in policy documents, such as in the much talked about *Three Rural Issues* and the subsequent *New Rural Construction Program*,[6] the countryside has been less present than the city in mainstream ideological propaganda. Very occasionally, the countryside has been more accurately portrayed in documentaries, but these are mostly of the underground variety and exert little social influence outside their own circles. Compared to how much attention migrant workers in the city have received, it must be concluded that the left-behind women have been systematically ignored.

Second, rural life has been represented on television and in films, but this representation usually deviates from the real situation in the rural areas. First of all, this kind of representation of rural life is commercialized, and the producers of such programs and films simply try to attract viewers and capital by presenting rural people as laughingstock, for instance, by focusing on instances of extreme consumerism among farmers. This not only misrepresents the lives of most peasants, it also makes light of the grave situation they face under the social transition. In addition, such representation has acted as political propaganda. By only covering stories related to entrepreneurship, participation in cooperatives, and the amassing of wealth, all other issues have been pushed to the side.

Third, in a society ripe with gender inequality, the left-behind women are the weakest of the weak. In a male-dominated society, their suffering, along with their tough and bitter experiences, are interpreted by mainstream discourse as either examples of traditional female virtues, which deserve to be broadcasted, or as a natural consequence of the division of labor. The harsh circumstances of the left-behind women are never considered an aspect of the social transition, and thus the women never have the opportunity to make their voices heard.

Fourth, left-behind women are considered to be of low news value and are thus neglected by the media. Like slag from ore, the city discards the wives and families of the migrant men whose labor is then extracted cheaply. The male laborers are regarded as valuable metal while their wives are condemned as slag. Besides, the media dress these women in "cloaks of invisibility" and utterly disregard their existence.

Fifth, the media are severely restricted and monitored by the authorities, and they are prevented from probing rural suffering and even from dealing in any detail with the aspects of rural life that are not joyful or positive. So even though the media may be aware of the issues facing left-behind women and are aware of their news value, they may have the heart but not the strength to report on these issues.

## Recognizing the Social Value of Left-Behind Women

Still, the fact that the media neglects the issue does not mean that it does not exist or that it is unimportant. As for how to change this situation, the most realistic way is for academics to stress the importance of the issue. Since there is still far too little domestic and foreign research on the topic, scholars should first of all emphasize the pivotal role played by the left-behind women in current transitional society. This point then needs to be explained to the mainstream media, which can then provide the women with the opportunity to express themselves to the general public. Only this way can they raise their concerns on the scale they deserve.

Therefore, it is particularly important for us academics to view the issue of left-behind women in the proper light. In essence, this is a question of epistemology, and without dealing with this question, the left-behind group would never be seen/represented, not to mention attain any kind of freedom. On the basis of my investigation in Songzhuang, I think that we should first and foremost pay attention to two closely related issues.

### *First, Recognize and Respect Their Social Value*

We should fully understand that the left-behind women are the main force of units "386199 army" in rural China, and as such, they are not just holding up half of the sky, but rather the entire sky.[7] They

are both iron men and androgynous,[8] maintaining the functioning of family and society with little aid from public policies.[9] In addition to all the suffering and the inequalities inflicted upon them, they are the forgotten part of society. But one can easily predict that there would be hundreds of thousands of elders and children left behind without care, wandering in a country like ruins, if we erase the left-behind women from the picture.[10] That would be an even more serious issue than the "empty-nest villages" described by the mass media.

The left-behind women are regarded as leftovers by the city, even though their husbands—the labor force that built and is building the city—could ill live without them. They are, therefore, an indispensable component of urbanization. To sum up, they do not only indirectly take part in building the cities, they also hold up the villages. They are the unsung heroines of the city and the guardians of the countryside. They are the builders of a new countryside and the caretakers of tradition. Their figures appear in the city as well as in the countryside, directly or indirectly, even if they are used to remaining silent and never appear in the mainstream media. But we have to admit that they have the right to their share of the credit, in the city as well as in the countryside. It is hard to imagine what the world would be without their contribution. Their social value, like their subjectivity, is a product of human history, and this brings us to the question of how to treat the historical significance of their subjectivity.

## *Second, Recognizing Left-Behind Women as a Product of Their Time*

First of all, we have to ask if the situation for left-behind women was always the way it is? To answer this we must examine the historical and social roots of the situation. The left-behind women did not just emerge out of nothing; rather they are a product of the labor migration wave that began in 1989.

Their "other halves" go to the city to support their families due to the combined force of a "push" from the countryside and a "pull" from the city. In the first years of reform, these migrant workers did not want to leave their homes, but things changed in the middle of the 1980s, when labor redundancy appeared in rural China and the income from farming declined. Some rural families could not make a living simply by farming, and as the cities were simultaneously growing, there was a great shortage of labor; therefore, many farmers chose

to go to the city to increase their earnings. However, what the cities need from the migrant workers is merely their labor, and in a situation of labor redundancy, the employers will pay them no more than the lowest possible salary. As a result, these workers do not have the financial wherewithal to take their children with them. In addition, adhering to the old concept of "raising children for the sake of one's old age" and facing an imperfect social pension system, these workers have to take responsibility for supporting their parents by themselves.

So, after discussing it in the family, the couples divide according to their labor: one goes away to work, leaving the other to look after the house. Due to the gender inequality in education and employment, the men can more easily find work in the city than the women, so for an ordinary married couple the most common choice is that the husband leaves to look for work, while the wife stays at home.[11] In the end, they decide to "split up their families to maintain their families." The wives assume the responsibility of farming and securing the family's existence through incredibly hard work that is not recognized by society, nor is its value easily appraised in hard currency.

The separation of husband and wife can easily produce instability, emotionally as well as mentally. The husband is faced with a comparatively open-minded, modern society, with little restriction on matters of emotion and sex. On the contrary, the wife is tied by all the restrictions of traditional rural society. The husband has many opportunities for extramarital affairs, while the wife is expected to behave according to the strict, traditional virtues of women under the watchful eyes of relatives and neighbors. This also reflects the gender inequality. In addition, we need to raise the question, "Will the phenomenon of left-behind women exist forever?" Here, we should estimate the future trend. What we know for sure is that there has never before been such a huge number of left-behind women. But what about the future?

From the contemporary distribution between regions and among age groups, we can arrive at two basic conclusions: in villages where the economy is strong, men are less likely to leave, which means fewer left-behind women. Second, men are less likely to leave to find work in families where the husband and wife are over 60. According to my investigation in Songzhuang, people over 60 rarely choose to lead lives like those who were in the 24–45 age group, while people under 20, born and raised under urbanization, were also unlikely to copy such a way of life. So, the family pattern of Songzhuang is bound to change. The left-behind women, such as those in Songzhuang, is probably a temporary

phenomenon, tied to a particular area and a particular age group, occurring exclusively in a transitional society. This situation neither can nor should persist, but it is hard to predict just how long it will last. At least, we should figure out how to deal with it, that is, how should a society treat, or perhaps attempt to eliminate, the ever-growing group of people left-behind? This is tantamount to inquiring about the direction of the social transition—and the direction taken by China as a whole.

Living in harsh times such as these, we should take concrete action to improve the living situation of this group of people. Fifty million, or perhaps even more, is not just a cold figure, it is a huge group of people struggling to make ends meet. Fifty million souls with feelings and brains, with needs for love, happy marriages, and comforting homes—this is certainly a concern for society as a whole. As members of this society, we cannot simply shift all of the responsibility to the individual. Instead, it is essential that the government introduces pertinent policies. On the one hand, such policies should speed up the elimination of the urban-rural difference, such as envisioned in the *Opinions on Further Promoting Reform of the Household Restriction System* issued by the State Council (www.chinanews.com, July 2014). On the other hand, the government must reform the income and redistribution system in order to raise rural incomes and close the gap between rich and poor, so that migrant workers can have decent jobs, and those left-behind can live comfortably. Or to put it differently, social development should never be pursued by "colonizing" the lives of women, by splitting apart families, and by bringing great misery to ordinary people. Solving the left-behind problem is a condition necessary to secure social justice and gender equality. This may, of course, amount to having another round of "women's liberation."

Translated by Bo Ærenlund Sørensen and Shi Duole

## Notes

1. Most are aged 18 to 45. Those who are younger are still in school, while those who are older hardly ever travel to look for jobs.
2. To protect the interviewees, all the names in this paper are pseudonyms.
3. This village presents a typical, traditional Chinese rural society along with pronounced gender inequality.
4. According to the family planning policy, a rural couple is allowed to have a second child if the first-born is a girl. So some families choose to move away for a while to deliver their third child—impermissible regardless of the sex of their two first kids—in an attempt to evade the family planning policy.

5. Children of people like Yun, who do not have a local residency permit, cannot attend the local college examination; instead they have to attend the exam where they are officially residents. Yun's child is registered in Songzhuang.
6. "Three rural issues" was a phrase coined by Wen Tiejun (the dean of the School of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development at Renmin University) and other activists in the late 1980s. They argued that the rural economic reforms that began in the late 1970s no longer benefited rural communities and called for alternative policy inputs to solve the many problems facing *nongmin* (rural people or peasants), *nongcun* (rural society or villages), and *nongye* (rural production or agriculture). Since then "three rural issues" has become a popular phrase that is widely used in academic and NGO-based discussions of rural problems as well as in governmental documents on rural issues.

   Some years later, in October 2005, the Fifth Plenum of the 16th CPC Central Committee adopted "the Proposal for National Economy and Social Development in the 11th Five-Year Plan period," which specified that building a new socialist countryside (New Rural Construction) would be the major task of the party. This proposal is commonly considered as the event that marked the beginning of the official New Rural Construction program.
7. In recent years it has become common in China to describe villages as "empty nests," as only children and the elderly remain when all the grown-up laborers have left to find work. "38" refers to March 8 (Women's Day), "61" refers to June 1 (Children's Day), and "99" refers to the elderly because a traditional holiday celebrating the elderly falls on September 9.
8. Referring here to social gender.
9. They have no choice but to suffer the unbearable heaviness of being.
10. As for as Songzhuang, there could be over 100 left-behind children and elderly.
11. In rural society, men usually have a higher education level than women, while in cities, men's opportunities of employment are somewhat better than that of women.

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# *Chapter Eight*

# *Gender and Rural Crises in China's Transition toward a Market Economy*

*Hu Yukun*

## Introduction

China's countryside has seen problems for a long time, but since the end of the 1980s, these problems have turned into a crisis—which in China is known as the "three rural" crisis (the "three rural" refering to the countryside, agriculture, and peasants). Chinese peasants benefited from the economic reforms in the early reform period, but starting in the late 1980s, they began to face multiple serious problems, such as stagnating income, deteriorating agricultural infrastructure, and the gradual disintegration of the rural local community. In addition, the gap between the rural and the urban, as well as the income gap within rural areas, has widened, adding fuel to already existing conflicts. In the twenty-first century, the "three rural" problem has become too serious to ignore. As a township party chief expressed in a letter to Premier Zhu Rongji, "Peasants lead tough lives, their villages are poor, and agriculture is truly in a state of crisis" (Li 2009). The mounting three rural problems have attracted much attention from scholars as well as from party and government policy-makers. But a fundamental solution to the problem has yet to be found.

This chapter focuses on women to bring out the gendered aspects of the three rural problem. Such a focus is warranted by the fact that among the two-thirds of China's population registered as rural inhabitants, half are women. In addition, men from the countryside increasingly engage in industrial work in the cities, leaving agriculture nearly entirely in the hands of women. This feminization of agriculture, together with the large number of left-behind elderly women and children in the villages, have given rise to a new colloquialism in China where these groups are known collectively as "the 386199 army."[1]

In the present-day pattern of men work in the industry, women farm the land, rural women face multiple challenges and problems, and the problems derive from multiple sources, such as structural social inequality, poverty, gender bias and discrimination, flawed policies, and inadequate legal protection. Very often, these factors are interwoven, yielding some formidable negative consequences for rural women. Gender is thus not just a part of the three rural problem; it is at its very core.

## Current Policies and Research

In recent years, there has been an increased volume of interdisciplinary research on the subject of the three rural problem, but little research has been carried out from a gender perspective. When researchers do write about women, it is usually only in passing. In addition, these discussions are often marred by blind spots and biases. Many researchers consider "peasant" an androgynous term—some even seem to think of peasants as men by default—while others focus only on the household level and fail to recognize gender (and generational) relations within the household. Some even believe that gender issues are women's issues, and that these issues ought to be dealt with exclusively by the Women's Federation.

Likewise, there is a lack of appreciation for the importance of gender in the three rural problem. For instance, from 1982 to 1986, the central government issued an annual "No. 1 Document" to address problems in the countryside. In 2003, the government resumed the practice of issuing an annual No. 1 Document, as the three rural problem had become more pressing than ever. But of the 16 No. 1 Documents that have been issued thus far, only three of them have mentioned women and women's problems (see Table 8.1).[2] The word "gender" is nowhere to be found in the 16 documents, and none of the documents have ever brought up the issue of the feminization of agriculture—nor is the increasing average age of the people working the land ever brought up.

These omissions are alarming when considering the actual size of the rural female population and the significant role women play in agriculture and rural society. What is even more alarming is that such omissions reflect an ignorance of gender in government, which may leave gender-blind spots on the policies. With gross domestic product (GDP) growth being the overriding goal of rural development policies, many aspects of social progress, including the improvement of

**Table 8.1** The Three References to Women in the Government's "No.1 Document"

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| 1984 In recent years, it is a troubling fact that serious problems like feudalistic superstition, theft, gambling, *the abuse of women*, the dissemination of pornography and unhealthy cultural activities exist in rural areas. Effective measures must be taken to deal with these problems. |
| 2010 Improve rural *maternal* and child health, improve disease prevention and control, strengthen food and drug control. |
| 2013 Party committees and governments at all levels, as well as people from all walks of life should attach importance to problems concerning rural children, *women* and the elderly who are left behind, and make efforts to improve and strengthen production support, social assistance and humane care for its groups, and make sure to protect their basic rights, interests and security. [Italics added] |

women's conditions, are awarded little or no attention. This happens even though rural reform is supposed to generate beneficiary results in all spheres of rural society, including the political, the economic, the social, the cultural, and the ecological.[3] Therefore, Judd (1994) was right in pointing out that all reform policies affect the rural areas and that the impact of these policies can never be gender neutral. The lack of a gender perspective (or sensitivity) in China's rural reform policies has also been reflected in the fact that development—in official discourse, in national policies, and in development programs—is invariably described in economic and narrowly defined political terms, while its impact on issues having to do with gender is never discussed.

China has, however, been increasingly exposed to the influence of the international trend of development over the last 20 years and is obliged to adopt gender-equality-promoting policies and regulatory measures. At the United Nation's (UN) Fourth World Conference of Women in 1995, for instance, China's government declared that equality between the sexes is a fundamental policy goal. The living conditions and the marginalization of Chinese rural women have also attracted the attention of international organizations. In August 2006, in the concluding observations made by the UN's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) based on considerations from the fifth and the sixth periodical reports on the implementation of the convention signed by China, at least six substantial sections deal with the special problems facing Chinese rural women. The committee urged the Chinese government to pay particular attention to the disadvantageous positions of rural women in matters concerning employment, political

participation, health care, education, mortality rates related to giving birth, suicide, and land ownership and use (UN CEDAW 2006). Yet, in spite of the loud slogans and the solemn declarations of the government regarding gender equality, the capacity of the Chinese state to protect women from the negative impact of the market economy has considerably weakened, and the constitutional guarantee of women's rights has so far remained little more than empty talk.

## "Winners" and "Losers" among Farmers

The sixth national population census found that mainland China had a population of 1.34 billion. Of these, 660 million live in cities and towns (49.68 percent), while 674 million live in the countryside (50.32 percent) (Guojia Tongjiju Renkou he Shehui Kejisi, 2011). At the end of 2012, the urbanization rate had reached 52.6 percent, and the urban population stood at 712 million. The number of people officially registered in the countryside, however, was about 900 million. According to recent official data, the per capita yearly disposable income of urban residents is 24,565 RMB, while that of rural residents is only 7,917 RMB. At the same time, the income gap among rural residents has been expanding, and it is far larger than the income gap between rural and urban residents. For instance, the yearly per capita income among the rural poor is 2,316 RMB. Peasants at the upper-middle level of income make 10,142 RMB annually, whereas high-income peasants make 19,009 RMB. In other words, the gap between the high and low income groups in the countryside is more than eight-fold (Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China, 2013).

Comparing rural men to rural women, rural women are disadvantaged politically, economically and in all other domains of social life; this is especially true for women who are old, disabled, left behind, or live in China's poorer western regions. In the initial stages of the reforms, the provision of social services was made the responsibility of local governments. However, as the people's communes were dissolved and collective ownership collapsed, many local governments in poor regions found that they were unable to provide the social services they were supposed to provide. Subsequently, the marketization of health care and education has added severe financial burdens to the economy of rural households and many now struggle with heavy

debts. Marginalized rural women and children have thus been put in even more disadvantaged positions when it comes to obtaining health care, education, and other public services.

As a consequence of privatization, commercialization, and migration, peasants in today's China have become a very heterogeneous group, with "winners" living side by side with "losers." One thing remains clear, though, most rural residents can still only afford a basic level of food and clothing. According to official statistics, in 2011, the average annual income of rural residents was 9,833 RMB, of which 5,940 RMB came from household production. However, the annual total expenditure per person reached 8,642 RMB, of which household production consumed 2,431 RMB and personal living expenditures consumed 5,221 RMB (Guojia Tongjiju Zhuhu Diaocha Bangongshi 2012, 46 and 69). This means that most rural households still have to struggle to make a basic living. The following three subsections will look into peasant life in three areas: education, health care, and social security.

## *Education*

There is a large gap between rural men and women in respect to education. The second Survey of Chinese Women, conducted in 2000, reveals that 42.3 percent of the female rural population had been educated above junior high school level, which was 20.8 percentage points lower than rural men. Rural women with only primary school education accounted for 58.8 percen,t which was 21.9 percentage points higher than for rural men (Di'er qi Zhongguo Funü Shehuidiwei Diaocha Ketizu, 2001).[4] When it comes to adult rural literacy, the gender gap becomes even more evident. According to data from the national census, in 1990 the illiteracy rate for rural women above the age of 15 was 37.1 percent (compared to 15.7 percent for men in the same age bracket). In 2000, the rate had dropped to 16.9 percent (while that of men had dropped to 6.5 percent). In 1990, rural illiterate women accounted for 69.5 percent of the total rural illiterate population, and by 2000, the rate had risen to 71.4 percent. As a comparison it may be noted that in year 2000, 4.3 percent of urban women and 1.7 percent of urban men were illiterate.

To put these figures into the context of everyday reality, let's take a village in Inner Mongolia as an example. I did six months of ethnographic field research in this village (let us call it "Y Village")in 2003–2004. At that time, most women in Y Village above the age

of 40 were either completely illiterate or could make out at most a few words. Some could not even write down their daily expenditures. According to my estimates, of the 374 villagers aged twenty and above in the 146 households in 2004, the average length of education received by women was three years, while men of the same age group had received 4.4 years. The average length of education received by women aged 40 to 59 was 2.2 years, while men of the same age had received on average 5.1 years. Of the 71 illiterate villagers, 51 were female, and 34 of them were aged 40–59 (i.e., they had been born between 1944 and 1963).

The underprivileged educational situation of rural women has to do with the high costs of education, which contributes significantly to their poverty. When expenditures on education were too high, a rural couple with both son(s) and daughter(s) have often been unable to afford tuition for both, and daughters have usually been the first to be deprived of their right to go to school. The lack of education (or proper education) further hampers the development of rural women, making it difficult for them both to increase their productivity and to find paid jobs in the non-agricultural sectors. Moreover, illiteracy also thwarts rural women's acquisition of knowledge of their basic rights as well as their ability to safeguard these rights.

## *Health and Medical Care*

Following the collapse of rural collective ownership as well as the marketization and privatization of medical and health institutions, the injustice that rural women encounter in health and medical care has become more severe. In general, reliance on fee-based services in rural areas has severely hindered the poor from acquiring essential preventive and curative services. For poor rural women in remote areas, it has become almost impossible to obtain essential medical care like prenatal care, postpartum house calls, hospitalization during childbirth, or gynecological examinations (Zhonghua Renmin Gonghe Guo Weishengbu, 2008, 192–193; Kaufman and Fang 2002).

Some aspects have changed remarkably in recent years. For instance, urban and rural hospital parturition rates in 2010 reached 99.2 percent and 96.7 percent, respectively (Zhonghua Renmin Gonghe Guo Weishengbu, 2011: 217). According to the third survey on the status of Chinese women carried out in 2010, in the three previous years, 42.2 percent of all women received health checks. Of these, 53.7 percent of urban women had received checks, as had 29.9 percent of the

rural women. Of all women, 54.9 percent had received gynecological examinations, a number that can be broken down to 62.8 percent urban women and 46.5 percent rural women (Disan qi Zhongguo funü shehuidiwei diaocha ketizu 2011, 7). These figures indicate a large gap between the health care received by rural women, and the Chinese government's commitment to "health for all by the year 2000," which was declared in the 1970s.

The most prominent aspect of health disparities between rural and urban women, as well as between women of different social groups, is that of the maternal mortality rate. For a long time the maternal mortality rate of rural women has been higher than that of urban women; that of women from peripheral regions has been higher than that of inland women; and that of inland women has been higher than that of women from coastal areas. In 2010, the five provinces and direct-controlled municipalities with the lowest rates of maternal mortality were Jiangsu (3.6/100,000), Shanghai (6.6/100,000), Zhejiang (7.4/100,000), Tianjin (9.6/100,000), and Guangdong (10.5/100,000). These figures are close to the averages of developed nations. At the other end of the list, however, we find Guizhou (35.4/100,000), Yunnan (37.3/100,000), Xinjiang (43.2/100,000), Qinghai (45.1/100,000), and Tibet (174.8/100,000), all with shockingly high maternal mortality rates (Zhonghua Renmin Gonghe Guo Weishengbu, 2011:219). In other words, the difference between Jiangsu and Tibet is almost 1 to 49, a clear reflection of the colossal gap in social and economic development found in contemporary China.

During my research stay in Y Village in 2003–2004, the physical and psychological distress of rural women became clear to me. Some of the middle-aged women suffered from back pains that they contracted as young girls when they first started to work in the fields during the time of collectivized agriculture. They labored beyond their natural capacities in the years before and during the Cultural Revolution when they were known as "iron girls." Back pains had been a part of their lives for as long as they could remember, clinging to them like shadows, and some of them had to take painkillers to get through the day. Some of the middle-aged women had sacrificed their own lives for their family and children and were now suffering from various chronic diseases. As they explained, they did not have time to fall ill during the farming season, and many of them had both small children and aging parents to take care of in addition to the long days of labor in the field. They told me that they felt hopelessly exhausted, in addition to experiencing loneliness, fear, anxiety, and frustration.

## *Basic Social Security*

With the implementation of the household responsibility system in rural areas, rural residents and households are left facing the responsibilities and risks of life and agricultural production all on their own. At the same time, China has entered the ranks of ageing societies. Data from the Fifth Population Census in 2000 reveal that those aged 60+ made up more than 10 percent of the population, and that those aged 65+ made up roughly 7 percent. Data from the Sixth Population Census in 2010 show that the number of those aged 60+ was 178 million (13.3 percent of the entire population), while there were 119 million aged 65+ (8.9 percent of the population) (Guojia Tongjiju Renkou he Shehui Kejisi, 2011). In 2012, people aged 60+ made up 14.3 percent of the population, while those aged 65+ made up 9.4 percent. Because of the massive migration of young adults from the rural areas into cities and towns, the average age of the rural population is increasing quickly, making the problems more severe in the countryside. In addition, the ratio of the elderly—particularly the female elderly—in the countryside who are in urgent need of basic health care and social security, is not only higher than it is in cities, but is also increasing.

Since there is no effective social safety net, vulnerable social groups, particularly elderly women, often have great difficulties dealing with the various kinds of risk they encounter. According to the third survey on the status of women, the income of rural women aged 65+ was only 49.6 percent of the income of rural men of a similar age; for female and male urbanites of the same age the figure was 51.8 percent. Moreover, 49.5 percent of the elderly women were widows, while only 20.1 percent of the elderly men were widowers. The primary source of income for elderly, widowed rural women was financial support and assistance from other members of their household. This source constituted 59.1 percent of their income, while it only constituted 38.8 percent for elderly rural men (Disan qi Zhongguo funü shehuidiwei diaocha ketizu 2011, 8–9). Compared to rural men, rural women live longer with illness and disability, hence they have to depend more on the support and assistance of their families.

In recent years, the central government has introduced a new rural cooperative medical care system—as well as pilot projects aiming to provide old-age insurance in the countryside—which means that 95 percent of rural women and 96.5 percent of rural men now have some form of health insurance coverage against serious ailments. As

for old-age insurance, 31.1 percent of all rural women have coverage, as do 32.7 percent of rural men. These figures are, however, very low compared to urban women and men, of which 73.3 percent and 75.9 percent have old-age insurance coverage (Disan qi Zhongguo funü shehuidiwei diaocha ketizu 2011, 8). At present, the system still does not cover all those who are entitled to the minimum living allowance, and there remains a significant difference between social security coverage in rural and urban areas.

Education, health, and social security are crucial to the well-being of men and women alike. The brief depictions above reveal to us the existence of a big gap between the ideal of equality between the sexes and the highly unequal social reality. It is therefore both urgent and important to remind policy-makers and government agencies that investments in women's human capital are severely needed and that significant improvements of rural women's condition will in the long run not only benefit the rural economy but also the healthy development of rural families and communities. At a time when human rights are high on the agenda, the basic needs and rights of rural women cannot be ignored any longer if the three rural problem is to be solved.

## The Feminization of Agriculture

Looking around the world, the feminization of agriculture is characteristic of many third-world countries when they get involved in the process of globalization (Deere 2005).[5] In the recent ten or twenty years, the "feminization of agriculture" has become a popular term in international academic and policy-making circles. It is used to indicate two possible situations: one is that the absolute number of female laborers engaged in agricultural production is increasing; the other is that, compared with the number of male laborers, the ratio of women engaged in agricultural production is growing.

According to various surveys and statistics, female laborers in agriculture, forestry, herding, and fishery—taken as a whole—accounted for 46.8 percent, 47.9 percent, and 48.5 percent of the total in 1982, 1990, and 2000, respectively (Guojia Tongjiju Renkou he Shehui Keji Si, 2004, 43). In addition, according to the "Bulletin of the Main Data of the Second Agricultural Census (the Fifth Period)," by the end of 2006, the total number of rural laborers was 531 million, among these 270 million (50.8 percent) were

male (Guowuyuan di'erci quanguo nongye pucha lingdaoxiaozu bangongshi he Zhonghua Renmin Gonghe Guo guojia tongjiju, 2008). The second Survey on Chinese Women's Status, conducted in 2000, revealed that 70.5 percent of all employed women worked in agriculture, forestry, herding, or fishery, compared to 63 percent of all employed males. The ratio of rural women working in agriculture strictly defined (i.e., plant farming and animal breeding) was as high as 82.1 percent, which was 17.4 percentage points higher than for rural men (Di'er qi Zhongguo Funü Shehuidiwei Diaocha Ketizu 2001, 10).

According to the "Report on the Survey and Monitoring of Migrant Workers of 2012" compiled by the National Bureau of Statistics, the total number of rural migrant workers in 2012 was 263 million, out of which 163 million (62.2 percent) had migrated to find work, while 99 million had found non-agricultural work in the vicinity of their home. Sex-disaggregated data show that males accounted for 66.4 percent of the total number of migrant workers, while females accounted only for 33.6 percent. There was also an age difference, with young adults comprising the largest group. Of these, those aged 16–20 accounted for 4.9 percent; those aged 21–30 accounted for 31.9 percent; those aged 31–40 accounted for 22.5 percent; those aged 41–50 accounted for 25.6 percent; and those aged above 50 accounted for 15.1 percent. As far as native place is concerned, migrant workers from the eastern regions made up the largest group with 42.6 percent of the total, those from the central regions accounted for 31.4 percent, and those from the western regions accounted for 26.0 percent. Peasant workers from the eastern regions usually found jobs close to their native place, while those from the central and western regions tended to find work far away from home (Guojia Tongjiju Renkou he Shehui Kejisi 2013).

But, because most of the married young male adults who migrate from the countryside for jobs in the cities do so alone, a disproportionate number of married rural women were left behind in the increasingly desolate countryside to engage in low-paid crop-farming. In some rural areas, female laborers make up 60–80 percent of the agricultural workforce, and the notion of a feminization of agriculture has become popular in both the media and in academia, at home as well as abroad (Bossen 2002; Gao 1994; Jin2000;; Jacka 1997; Judd 1994; Song et al. 2009; UNDP 2003). Some scholars summarize this division of labor as "male workers and female farmers." In more and more places, women become the chief workforce in the fields, performing a variety of functions that were previously shared among

all family members. They provide food, clothing, and livelihood for everyone left behind, and they also keep the home to which their migrant husbands periodically return.

The patterns of peasant migration, however, differ from region to region. In the eastern coastal regions where the economy is relatively more developed, the expansion of township enterprises and other non-agricultural enterprises have provided the local agricultural surplus workforce with local opportunities for work, so that farmers can "leave the land without leaving home." In these regions, rural households can choose to let some family members do the farming, while letting others work in the secondary or tertiary sectors. Or they can choose to work primarily in agriculture during the busy season and engage in non-agricultural work during slack season. In the central and western regions, however, the majority of the rural migrants migrate far away to the eastern regions, since the development of local non-agricultural industry in their home region is too modest to offer most of them salaried jobs. They leave the land and the home at the same time.

Agriculture has long been the occupation with the most meager remuneration, due to the low price-level for agricultural products. Along with China's integration into the global economy, however, agriculture has increasingly become "an unprofitable, unattractive and barely worthwhile economic activity," and it has become choice of last resort for many rural people (Huang and Croll 1998; Bossen 2002; Song et al. 2009). As Bossen has insightfully observed, crop farming activities, which have long been accepted as a masculine occupation, is now increasingly spurned by rural men who instead attempt by every means to find jobs in more profitable lines of work. Participation in farming, which used to be seen as the liberation of women, is now increasingly coming to be seen by young rural women as a dead end that they had better avoid. To some extent, the feminization of agriculture can be seen as the latest variation of the age-old labor division where "men go out while women stay at home."

The fact that most rural women work in low-paid crop farming is the major reason behind the growing gender income gap in the countryside. According to the second survey on the status of women (1999), the average annual income of the rural women who worked mainly in agriculture, forestry, herding, or fishery was 2,368 RMB, which was only 59.6 percent of what rural men made that year. The income gap between the sexes was 19.4 percentage points higher in 1999 than it was in 1990 (Di'er qi Zhongguo Funü Shehuidiwei

Diaocha Ketizu 2001). This explains why the economic position of the left-behind women has deteriorated.

Evidence from many parts of the country show that men are more likely than women to eschew agricultural labor in favor of non-agricultural labor, as they typically possess more social resources and have more access to modern technology. Taking Y Village as an example, rural women have long been at a disadvantage in terms of finding non-agricultural employment. As early as at the beginning of the reform period, the early bird migrant workers were all males who found jobs such as tractor drivers, craftsmen, and production brigade cadres, based on skills learned under the period of the collective economy. In the past decade, where more and more young, unmarried women have left home to seek their fortunes, married rural women are left behind because of tangible or intangible barriers such as, inter alia, the cultural role they are expected to play, the social norms requiring women to stay at home to serve as homemakers, their low level of education, and the need to preserve the household's allocated farmland as a way of ensuring against possible future adversity.

But there is a significant difference across households when it comes to how much the husband and wife participate in agricultural work. In those households where the husband is not absent from the family for extended periods, or where he does not work far away, the division of labor between the male and the female is flexible. In Y Village it was in every case the 386199 army who stayed at home to farm, but in most cases it was the wife who did all or most of the work that was previously shared by all family members. Only 91 (or 62.5 percent) of the 146 households in the village lived primarily from crop farming, and all of these families also raised domestic animals and engaged in odd jobs to earn extra cash. Of the 207 people in the village who engaged solely in crop farming, 130 were women and 77 were men. Of the 68 who engaged in gainful activity in addition to working the land, 58 were males (Hu 2005). When asked why they had stayed behind, many of the women answered in a similar fashion: "Even a run-down house can be home. If everyone leaves to work elsewhere, then that home might not be there when people return." Interestingly enough, several of the households in Y Village did better economically when the husband was away, whereas many households where a man stayed behind were badly managed. Most of these men chose to plant easy and less labor-demanding crops even though this would hurt their income. Ironically, women's ability to run both the family and the family economy is also the rationale behind many families' decision to let them stay in the village.

## *Women's Labor*

To comprehend what a woman's labor entails in a rural village is key to understanding the nature of the "feminization of agriculture." One of the enduring aspects of gender inequality in rural China is to be found in the fact that women, in addition to participating in agricultural labor, also take on all the time-consuming housework, including cooking, washing, raising children, tidying up, and so on. In her 2005 book, the Canadian scholar Laurel Bossen gave a vivid description of the labor-intensive mornings of a particular Chinese rural woman. She describes how the woman manages to pick vegetables for her daily cooking while fertilizing and watering the vegetable garden, and how she then picks and cleans the vegetables for breakfast while preparing pig feed. Immediately after that she cooks breakfast for the family and then goes on to feed the pigs. Bossen's account shows how rural women's reproductive labor is routinely mixed together with productive labor. Very often, the value of their housework is belittled because of its private nature.

Shouldering the double burden of farming and labor-intensive household work, many rural women find themselves without time for leisure or even for the restitution needed to maintain their health. According to a survey conducted by the All-China Women's Federation in September 1990 on the social status of women, rural women aged 15–64 spent three hours more every day on housework (in the slack season) than rural men. In the second survey on the status of women in 2000, the overall time spent on housework in rural households had declined slightly, but women still spent three hours more than men (Guojia Tongjiju Renkou he Shehui Kejisi 1999, 36; Guojia Tongjiju Renkou he Shehui Kejisi 2004, 103). The unfair distribution of housework within the family is one of the causes for gender inequality in the countryside. It is even more unfair that woman's agricultural labor is often seen as merely an extension of her household work, even though her labor does produce market value. For this reason a great deal of rural women's productive labor has been left out of statistics and censuses.

## *Resources for Agricultural Production*

The agricultural support system—including education and training, the credit market, technology, the promotional system, sales services, and rural organizations—is crucial to the sustainability of agricultural

productivity. Yet for a long time, the distribution of agricultural production resources has remained male-focused, especially after the abolition of collective ownership and the restoration of small-scale farming by individual land owners. Many kinds of rural development programs and projects, including various training and promotional services run by government agencies, have been carried out at the household level, commonly targeting the head of the household (usually the man). And this practice continues even though women are de facto in charge of many household matters in today's rural society (Hu 2005). Jin Yihong has perceptively argued that the progress of rural women depends not upon how large a part of the agricultural labor burden they undertake, but rather to what degree they will be able to use their labor to attract new resources from the agricultural support system (Jin 2000).

Another fundamental problem for women in agriculture has to do with the distribution of land and land-use rights. Even though the marriage law stipulates that men and women must be treated equally in terms of land distribution, the dominant patrilocal mode of settlement means that women lose their land entitlements when they marry and move to their husband's village. Over the years, there have been frequent reports in the newspapers about married women and their children who have had their legal land rights violated. Adding to this problem is the highly problematic land policy endorsed by both central and local governments. The policy is based upon the idea that "land does not increase when households become bigger, nor does it contract when household sizes shrink." This means that, upon marriage, a rural woman will not bring more land to the in-law family, but that her natal family will have one person less for the same amount of land. This unequal and unfair distribution of land assets undermines women's prospects for improving their basic economic standing and limits the potential of women to become a significant contributor to the in-law family's economy. Nationwide, women make up as much as 70 percent of the landless rural population (Agarwal 1994; Brauw et al. 2008).

## *Market and Business Related Skills*

The majority of rural women in China engage primarily in subsistence farming and have little access to trading in the market. Consequently, they are in a disadvantaged position in the markets of labor, commodities, and capital, because they cannot compete with men who

have control over information, resources, and power. When I was in Y Village, I discovered that most women in the village were only very occasionally able to sell small amounts of surplus agricultural products or buy daily household necessities anywhere near where they lived. The women were confined by the poor local transportation system as well as by their unfamiliarity with doing business. It was primarily men who sold agricultural products and bought fertilizers and the such in substantive quantities, even though only a handful of the men were able to consistently stay in the vanguard of the village market. Women were also excluded from both the regular and the irregular financial markets. Most villagers were in no position to obtain loans from rural credit cooperatives or agricultural banks. Whenever an unforeseen need for cash arose, a household usually had to depend on the man to raise money from relatives, friends, or other villagers (Hu 2005). For these reasons, rural women are more vulnerable than men to market fluctuations.

### *Network Organization and the Social Support System*

Chinese peasant society generally has a low degree of organization. In addition, rural organizations are usually highly gendered and tend to exclude women, particularly vulnerable women. This is why rural women are more dependent on other household members, neighbors, and networks of relatives. According to fieldwork done by Ye Jingzhong and Wu Huifang (2008), rural women in need of help first turn to family relations, next to neighborhood connections, and only as a last resort do they turn to official organizations. In the past, helping others with farm work, or exchanging labor with others, was done for mutual benefit. But with the penetration of the market economy, relationships between relatives and neighbors have taken on a commercial flavor. The most significant aspect of this is that temporarily hired farmhands have come to replace the neighborly exchange of labor, and this adds extra costs to the family budget that is tight enough already.

## Rural Life

Seven hundred million people live and work in rural China. Dramatic changes have affected the lives, local societies, and human relations in

rural China during the reform period, but institutional and structural gender inequalities are still deeply rooted in domestic and communal life. For instance, the reconstruction of marital, family, and gender relations have not fundamentally altered the male-centered nature of families and communities. Due to the large-scale population migration and the lack of social security, serious problems have come to affect the households and individuals who are left behind when one or more family members migrate to find work.

## *Marriage*

Despite the decades-long socialist revolution aimed at, among other things, gender equality, deeply rooted patriarchal traditions have never completely vanished. In most Chinese rural communities, the traditional patrilocal marriage model remains as powerful as ever. Traditions like paternal inheritance of household property and the general tendency for family structures and community life to revolve around men persist in contemporary society (Potter and Potter 1990; Liang 1997;Judd 1994). Even with government efforts, both in the past and in the present, to implement the marriage law, contemporary rural marriages are still dominated by traditions and local conventions. Illegal practices like disregarding the minimum age for marriage, bigamy, marriage within the family, arranged marriage, selling women into marriage, child betrothal, girls being reared by the family of their future husbands, and families exchanging future daughters-in-law are still common in rural areas, as are betrothal gifts. These practices and inequities are difficult to eliminate because families often consider the arrangements to be "private."

## *Family*

As in other developing countries, Chinese households produce indispensable services and commodities. This "small factory" function of the family is even more prominent in rural China due to the sudden disappearance of the collective economy and the still low availability of social welfare provisions for the rural population. The heavy reliance on individual farming households to secure virtually all the necessities of life—such as nutrition, child care, health care, elderly care, domestic chores, and emotional binding—is, however, seriously

challenged by the migration of millions and millions of adult men away from their homes and home villages. Many households have become half empty and consist only of women, the elderly, the feeble, and children. The disintegration of rural households poses not only a series of problems to the survival of the family economy and kinship relations, but also undermines the stability and daily functioning of the village community. As conflicts and mistrust between spouses arise, family harmony is endangered, and divorce is becoming increasingly common. The plight of the left-behind women, children, and elderly is particularly harsh. Some of the elderly lead miserable lives because they have no one to rely on (Yan 2006; Hu 2005).

## *Gender Norms*

While the notion of gender equality has attained considerable ideological and institutional prominence in recent decades, traditional ideas, such as the belief that once a woman is married she must stick with her husband, still have deep roots, and male chauvinism remains ingrained in both cultural and social practices. An obvious symptom of this is that the sex ratio at birth has become ever more skewed in recent decades. In 1982, the sex ratio at birth was 108.5; by 1990 it had increased to 111.3; by 2000 it was 116.9; in 2005 it reached 118.9; and in the countryside it was even higher at 121.2 (Division of Social Technology and Cultural Industry Statistics, National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China 2012, 10). I learned in Y Village that endless rumors trailed any married women who left home to work in the cities without her husband. Some residents would even claim that such women came by their income in morally unwholesome or maybe even illegal ways. On the other hand, left-behind woman who ask a man for help also attract gossip about striking up an inappropriate relationship. The fieldwork done by Huang Ping and others (1998) also revealed that the cultural belittling of women's work was ubiquitous and multifarious. In the minds of the locals, only those incapable of doing anything other than crop farming should stay behind to work the fields. It was also widely believed that such people needed no training or education. These cultural prejudices adversely influenced both those who worked outside the village and those who stayed behind. This further illustrates how entrenched the contradiction is between, on the one hand, formal policies and laws, and on the other hand, the force of custom and tradition.

### *Community Decision-Making*

State policies regarding agriculture and rural communities are usually implemented through local administrative institutions, but these institutions are usually dominated by men. In many places, all members of the village committee and the village party branch are men, and even the work of family planning commissions is directed by men. It is not at all surprising that a national survey found that, while 74.8 percent of the 1184 village committees examined had female members, only 2.3 percent of the village committee chiefs were women; and while 42.4 percent of the village party branches had female members, in only 2.5 percent was the branch secretary a woman (Ding 2006, 235). Another study performed by the All-China Women's Federation in 2006, involving nearly 10,000 women in 100 villages in ten provinces, revealed that only 0.5 percent of the village committees had female heads, and that no village party branches had female secretaries (Zhen 2008). This provides us a glimpse of the "absence" of women in the decision-making power structure in China's countrysides. Even when women are elected, they are often given the less-important positions. This not only undermines the political esteem and interests of the elected female representatives, it also prevents issues of particular concern for women from being taken into consideration by local authorities (Yang and Liu 2005; Jacka 2008).

## Conclusion

All the facts and problems discussed above, though far from providing a complete picture of the lives of rural women, do reveal the disadvantageous position of women and the measure of gender discrimination inherent in the process of rural development. At every stage of their lives, rural women encounter both tangible and intangible manifestations of institutional and structural barriers. Overt and covert gender discrimination is present in every aspect of agricultural production and rural community life. The predicaments faced by rural women are, however, not merely the problems of women, or the problems of "the others." They are, rather, an integral part of the three rural problem and must therefore be dealt with as so.

In today's China, politicians, development agencies and intellectual elites all participate in the chorus for a new rural China with "production increase, well-off lives, civilized rural customs, tidy

and clean villages, and democratic local government."[6] Such a grand vision of rural construction is indeed sorely needed in China, but any attempt to construct a new rural China without a fundamental change in the conditions of women or without the active participation of the female population would be akin to setting out on a march with one leg tied up. The three rural problem is, first and foremost, a matter of politics and economics, but the social and cultural dimensions are also too crucial to ignore. Thus, what scholars and decision-makers ought to think about is not *whether* gender inequality and injustice embedded in the three rural problem should be dealt with, but *how* to deal with it with vigor, determination, and effective policy devices.

All in all, fair and sustainable policies concerning agricultural development should systematically and effectively attend to the connection between gender and the three rural problem. There is reason to believe that only when the gendered nature of the three rural problem is fully recognized will it be possible to formulate effective policies to address the demands of rural men and women, especially those of the 386199 army. In an era of globalization, state policies and interventions should be aimed at improving the circumstances of women. Ample evidence from other epochs and countries has shown that a nation can only achieve common wealth and well-being when gender equity and equality has been achieved. This is a big challenge that China must face up to!

Translated by Ge Lunhong and Bo Ærenlund Sørensen

## Notes

1. The term refers to the dates when holidays are celebrated for women, for children, and for the elderly, respectively.
2. The 16 No. 1 Documents have established policy frameworks to address problems concerning agriculture, the countryside, and peasants.
3. Government pronouncements concerning women always emphasize both the protection of women's rights and the importance of women and their contribution to society. Actual policies, however, are usually gender neutral, leaving the pronouncements little more value than rubber checks.
4. There must be a slight error in the data compiled during the survey as they do not add up to 100.
5. The feminization of agriculture refers to the tendency that female laborers perform more and more of the small-scale farming work. The concept has been debated by domestic and foreign scholars ever since its introduction. (Gao 1994; Judd 1990, 1994).

6. The five elements of the new rural construction program put forward by the Fifth Plenum of the 16th CCP Central Committee in October 2005, adopted from the Eleventh Five-Year Plan proposal.

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# *Chapter Nine*

# *Village Women's Participation in Local Public Affairs*

## *Test Results from Democratic Consultative Meetings in Zhejiang*

*Guo Xiajuan and Zhang Jing*

## Introduction

Do women have the same set of skills for engaging in decision-making and management as men? This question can be answered from different perspectives. Since the mid-1990s, activists in China have, with the help of funds from sources both domestic and from abroad, put great effort into training women to participate in village politics. The purpose has been both to improve and to demonstrate rural women's ability to participate in local decision-making and community management.[1] Meanwhile, researchers who have performed empirical studies have fervently argued about women's potential for political participation—paying particular attention to why such a potential might be weak and coming up with possible remedies (Lin 2004, 35; Zuo 2005, 163–164; Sun 2000, 97–103; Li and Yin 2004, 39–42; Wang and Shi 2005, 31–33). Activists and researchers have all evaluated the political ability of rural women by comparing their score on an evaluation index to the score achieved by rural men, and on this basis they have all concluded that rural women are less politically competent than rural men. This has usually lead to two different "solutions." The first solution relies on having women compete politically with men on a "level playing field," which has often led to the marginalization of women in the power structure. Alternatively, under the assumption that women have lower political competence than men, affirmative policies have been adopted and seats allocated

for women. This second solution, though, only serves to affirm that women are inherently less qualified to serve in politics.[2]

In this chapter, we take a different perspective. We use a series of experimental consultative meetings in the township of Zeguo as a "controlled experiment"[3] to examine three questions: (1) in which ways did these meetings manage to create an equal condition for village men and women to participate in politics? (2) How did men and women learn about and debate the township's public affairs in this controlled setting? (3) How did these meetings function as kind of "democratic experiment," allowing men and women to exercise their rights on a relatively equal footing? By analyzing the responses to 1190 questionnaires that were distributed to the participants before and after three such rounds of consultative meetings between the years 2005 and 2008, we compare the performance of men and women, evaluate women's ability to assess and prioritize local public affairs, and from there we further discuss the potential political abilities of village women.

How did these experimental consultative meetings, which have been convened annually in Zeguo Township under the administration of Wenling Municipality in Zhejiang since 2005, create fair and equal opportunities for men and women to participate? To answer this question, we need to look into the various new forms of "experimental" deliberative meetings, known as *kentan* (heart-to-heart talks) in Chinese. At these deliberative meetings, the township government presents their policy proposals to the delegates, listens to the delegates debate, and evaluates the proposed policies.

The format of these meetings was innovative in the following three ways. First, in contrast to the traditional approach of "guiding public opinion," the township government made their policy proposals known to the general public prior to the meetings, and at the meetings the participants were invited to voice their opinions and suggestions. At the meeting in 2005, 30 construction projects, estimated to cost 136,920,000 RMB, were put on the table, but since the Zeguo Township government had only 40 million RMB to spend on construction, the purpose of the consultative meeting was to foster debate over which projects to prioritize and to obtain public support for the government's eventual decision. In 2006, 38 construction projects were proposed needing a total of 98,690,000 RMB against a budget of 50 million RMB. In 2008, the township government took a step further by announcing its entire 2008 budget of 248 million RMB and asking the consultative meeting participants to help the government decide how to allocate its funds. The proposed projects,

together with feasibility studies of the projects, were handed out to the meeting participants before the meeting to ensure that all of the representatives would have the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the issues ahead of the meeting.[4]

Second, the meetings were innovative in how citizen representatives and chairpersons were selected. The three meetings in 2005, 2006, and 2008 had different themes and topics for discussion, but the mode of organization was the same.[5] Representatives were invited to participate in the meetings on the basis of random selection.[6] By this method, 275 representatives were invited in 2005, and of the representatives who showed up for the meeting, 33.2 percent were women. In 2006, 237 representatives were invited, and women made up 44.8 percent of the participants. In 2008, 197 representatives were invited, and women came to make up 37.1 of the participating representatives. This method provided women with the same opportunity to participate as men and, as a matter of fact, the proportion of female representatives produced in this way was far larger than the proportion of women elected in other formal institutions of today's China. For instance, in 2007, women accounted for merely 19.2 percent of the participants in the People's Congresses at the county level and 16.8 percent at the township level.[7] In the 14th Wenling Municipal People's Congress, women accounted for only 11.4 percent of the representatives.

Third, the meetings were innovative in terms of procedure. Speakers were chosen by lots drawn by the chair. When a speaker took the floor, she or he had to limit their contribution to a single topic, so that the discussions would stay focused. When a speaker had finished talking, other participants could win the floor by raising their hand, with priority given to those who had opposing opinions. This was followed by a plenary discussion. After the discussion of one topic had concluded, the meeting would proceed to the next topic. It was emphasized that all speakers had to be respected—wandering off or speaking loudly was not allowed, and cellphone conversations had to be conducted at whispering volume. A speaker was allowed only three minutes to speak. In the panel discussions, the chair was not allowed to attempt to influence the ideas of the representatives, but should limit himself or herself to encourage the representatives to speak and stay on topic.

This innovative forum attempted to put women and men on an equal footing, offering them equal opportunities to both learn about and voice their opinions on local public affairs and policies. This carefully crafted form of deliberative democracy is still experimental.

Compared with the formal systemic channel of political participation for women, this approach attempts to transcend the fact that women and men are typically assigned very different roles in society by creating equal conditions for participation. As such, the format of the meetings bracketed the traditionally defined gender roles and restored men and women to the equal status of human beings. By relieving women of their traditional gender roles and instead allowing them to play the role of representatives of the people, we were able to examine both the capacity and the hidden potential of women for political participation.

It is from the vantage point of the deliberative meetings that this chapter examines women's knowledge of public affairs and policies, their understanding of public affairs, and how they adjust their original preferences according to new information. In order to do so, we study the results of the questionnaires that we distributed before and after three of the consultative meetings. In other words, we chose this research design in order to investigate whether or not women's participatory ability would be weaker than men's when the conditions of participation were equalized. On the basis of our findings, we are able to respond to the doubt of women's capacity for participating in local public affairs that permeates the current public discussion of gender and political participation in China. The analysis in this chapter is based on the questionnaires that were distributed immediately before and after the meetings in 2005, 2006, and 2008.[8] A total of 1275 questionnaires were distributed, and the analysis in this chapter is based on the 1190 questionnaires completed correctly.

## Knowledge about Local Public Affairs

Since household-based farming replaced the People's Commune system in the countryside in the early 1980s, rural women have returned to the private sphere and have had fewer opportunities than before to participate in local public affairs. Where women cadres had been needed to organize women's participation in collective agricultural production, the abolishment of the People's Commune system pushed rural women out of the local rural power structure. In the series of public discussions about village democracy since then, a dominant view has been that rural women work within the confinement of their household and hence lack the necessary ability to get involved in public affairs. But is that true? This is what we aimed to find out. We

started by analyzing the views of both men and women on the proposed construction projects in 2005 and 2006.

According to the surveys from 2005, men and women favored the same five projects before the meeting, and after the meeting they still agreed on the relative importance of each project. This indicates that women do not differ from men in terms of political participation and knowledge of local public affairs, and that women, like men, are also concerned about the public affairs that are closely related to their own lives. The survey results from 2006 are comparable to those from 2005 (see Table 9.1).[9]

Despite being largely unfamiliar with the specifics of the local township government budget, women also indicated the same priorities as men in 2008, rating most highly "Education," "Health," and "Social Security & Employment."[10] The results show that neither men nor women changed their opinions fundamentally as a consequence of the meetings. This consistency proves, to some extent, that women have knowledge of public affairs and generally understand how township governments make decisions. This strengthens

**Table 9.1** The Importance Attached to Major Construction Projects at the Township Level by Men and Women

| *Average Score* | *Before Meeting* | | *After Meeting* | | *Difference* | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *Men* | *Women* | *Men* | *Women* | *Men* | *Women* |
| **Year 2005** | | | | | | |
| Road/Bridge Construction | 6.05 | 5.89 | 5.6 | 5.95 | −0.36 | 0.06 |
| Facilities in the Economic Zone | 6.11 | 6.44 | 5.94 | 6.62 | −0.17 | 0.18 |
| Sanitation & Greening | 7.13 | 7.12 | 7.15 | 7.60 | 0.02 | 0.48 |
| Environment | 7.37 | 7.12 | 7.05 | 7.27 | −0.32 | 0.15 |
| **Year 2006** | | | | | | |
| Facilities in the Economic Zone | 6.73 | 7.12 | 6.74 | 7.22 | 0.01 | 0.10 |
| Road/Bridge Construction | 7.40 | 7.44 | 7.69 | 7.71 | 0.28 | 0.27 |
| Sanitation & Greening | 7.65 | 8.18 | 7.92 | 8.15 | 0.27 | −0.02 |
| Planning & Design | 8.45 | 8.36 | 8.43 | 8.35 | −0.02 | 0.00 |

our distrust in the validity of the widespread view that rural women, being confined to their private households, are not capable, or at least not as capable as men, of handling public matters. Our examination shows that when given the same opportunity to participate as men, such as in the case of these deliberative meetings, women exhibit the same level of knowledge and ability as men. They can function as "citizen representatives" equally well, and their roles as caregivers in the "private" sphere do not hinder them from playing a role in the "public" sphere.

## Acquiring and Applying Public Knowledge

Are women only adept at acquiring knowledge about private sphere issues—such as learning about parenting and caring—or do they have the same capacity as men for engaging in public affairs and decision-making? In Western political history, the division between "culture" and "nature" was of foundational importance.[11] In political theory, women have always been considered less rational, and they have therefore been excluded from playing key roles in the public domain, which also means that they have been ineligible for full citizenship (Barker 1995. This convention has survived into contemporary society. In modern political theory, women are believed to be emotional and less rational. In early political theory, only men were deemed qualified to participate in public affairs or to hold public office and politics was the exclusive domain of men. Today, many still regard women to be first and foremost emotional creatures and, as such, unfit to truly fathom the rational nature of politics.

But what about in the consultative meetings analyzed here? Did women display poorer skills for understanding public affairs, as traditional beliefs would lead us to expect? Do women lack the rational capacity necessary to participate in politics? According to deliberative democratic theory, the democratic consultative process not only helps elected representatives gain a comprehensive and rational understanding of politics, it also expands their knowledge of related fields. Given equal opportunities to learn, how proficient are women when it comes to understanding public affairs? (see Table 9.2)[12]

As the data shows, before the 2005 meeting women generally answered the questions less accurately than men. After the meeting, the accuracy of the answers provided by women increased, but not

**Table 9.2** Comparison of Relevant Knowledge in 2005 and 2006

| *Year* | *Questions* | *Before Meeting (in %)* | | *After Meeting (in %)* | | *Change (in %)* | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | *Men* | *Women* | *Men* | *Women* | *Men* | *Women* |
| 2005 | How much did the fiscal revenue grow from 2003 to 2004 in Zeguo Township? | 24.29 | 27.54 | 43.70 | 38.10 | +19.41 | +10.56 |
| | How large is the floating population in Zeguo Township? | 47.92 | 45.21 | 59.09 | 63.64 | +15.72 | +13.89 |
| | Which of the following products are not produced in Zeguo Township? | 60.14 | 43.94 | 52.31 | 66.94 | +6.80 | +8.37 |
| | How many parks are there in Zeguo Township currently? | 7.75 | 5.71 | 10.40 | 4.48 | +2.65 | -1.24 |
| 2006 | How much did the fiscal revenue grow from 2004 to 2005 in Zeguo Township? | 4.17 | 5.33 | 27.78 | 33.78 | +23.61 | +28.45 |
| | How many migrant workers are there in Zeguo Township? | 24.24 | 18.42 | 63.54 | 78.08 | +39.30 | +59.66 |
| | Which company was the first joint-stock cooperative enterprise in Zeguo Township? | 75.61 | 84.38 | 88.51 | 91.55 | +12.90 | +7.17 |
| | Which of the following agricultural products in Zhejiang Province is the national A-level green food, provincial green food, and has won the gold medal for high-quality agricultural product for three consecutive years at the Provincial Agricultural Fair? | 83.13 | 90.77 | 87.91 | 94.74 | +4.78 | +3.97 |

remarkably more than did the accuracy of the answers provided by men. This, however, changed significantly in 2006. Before the meeting, women answered every question but one more accurately than men, and after the meeting women had further increased the margin vis-à-vis the men. In other words, although the daily lives of women are mainly taken up by household chores or "natural" agricultural labor, they did not demonstrate any weakness in terms of fulfilling their roles as "citizen representatives." When given equal opportunity to participate, they demonstrated an ability to understand public knowledge that was every bit as strong as that possessed by men.

This result is largely due to the ten years of experience with consultative meetings in Wenling. During the meetings, advertising banners were displayed in public places, and a large number of pamphlets were distributed in order to inform and encourage people to involve themselves in the democratic process. Local radio stations, television stations, and newspapers covered public affairs, including regional economic growth, per capita income change, the increasing number of migrant inhabitants, enterprise development, municipal construction projects, and so on. Women in rural Wenling spend more time at home on average than Wenling's men, since most of the men spend periods of time working away from home. Over the years, more and more women have had the opportunity to participate in grassroots governance and have gradually come to know more about local economic and social development. The democratic design of the consultative meetings has enhanced their sense of learning and helped them better understand the decision-making process of the local government.[13]

The preparatory work conducted prior to the meetings to encourage women to become involved did help spur their enthusiasm for learning and for expressing themselves. For example, one woman made it clear at the preparatory meeting that she would not participate in the consultative meeting because she lacked the requisite experience. The organizers patiently encouraged her by stressing that her ideas and views would be very important, and after a while she changed her mind and expressed great enthusiasm about the prospect of attending the meeting. In the end, she did participate and spoke very eloquently at the meeting.[14] A town head who became involved in organizing the meeting told us, "Women did a wonderful job at the meeting. Not only were they most willing to share their ideas, they also did so clearly and logically. Much better than the men. This we had not expected." Despite the fact that the role of women in rural areas is largely confined to the household economy and family

care, rural women are nevertheless fully capable of contributing to the rational sphere of politics. When it came to participating in the consultative meetings, and when it came to learning and applying pertinent knowledge, women proved in no way inferior to men.

## Preference Change and Consensus

Are women as capable as men when it comes to revising their ideas to conform to public interests during discussions? In traditional political theory, traits such as compassion and thoughtfulness, which are conventionally associated with women, are construed as "explaining" why women are headstrong and prejudiced. Therefore, "anti-rationalism" theorist Genevieve Lloyd argues that it is crucial to prove that women are as rational and able to partake in the public domain as men (Lloyd 2005). To gauge how much women gained from participating in the consultative meetings, we had to examine whether women were able to adjust their preferences to accord with the common interest as it was revealed during the deliberative process. In other words, did the personal preferences of women change to become more public-oriented after they received more information through the consultative meetings?

We selected representatives to participate in two rounds of surveying by questionnaire in 2005 and again in 2008. In 2005, 100 men and 61 women completed both questionnaires; for 2008, the numbers were 83 men and 50 women (see Table 9.3). The results of the first questionnaire survey (based on average score) are labeled Male1 and Female1, and that of the second questionnaire survey (also based on the average score), Male2 and Female2. We entered the data into SPSS, using $\alpha = 0.01$ (providing a reliability of 99 percent), and did a

**Table 9.3** Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test

| | *Year 2005* | | *Year 2008* | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *Male2–Male1* | *Female2–Female1* | *Male2–Male1* | *Female2–Female1* |
| Z | 2.273[a] | –2.725[a] | –2.241[a] | –3.514[a] |
| Asymptotic Significance, 2-Tailed | 0.023 | 0.006 | 0.025 | 0.000 |

[a] Based on negative ranks.

**Table 9.4** Rating the Importance of the Public Education Budget in 2008

| *Education* | *Before* | | *After* | | *Difference* | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *Men* | *Women* | *Men* | *Women* | *Men* | *Women* |
| General Education | 7.99 | 8.00 | 8.07 | 9.17 | +0.08 | +1.17 |
| Adult Education | 7.55 | 7.92 | 7.42 | 8.44 | −0.13 | +0.52 |
| Other Educational Expenses | 6.14 | 6.56 | 6.37 | 6.93 | +0.23 | +0.37 |

Wilcoxon test[15] to analyze how "significantly" men and women were influenced by participating in the consultative meeting.[16]

The Wilcoxon test showed that the consultative meetings had a more significant impact on women's decision-making than on men's. That women were more influenced by the meetings indicates that they were able to change their own preferences in the light of changing policies. To further examine this, we analyzed the results of the surveys conducted in 2005 and 2006 from the three perspectives described below.

First, the degree of change in men's and women's preferences after the meeting could be examined by analyzing the evaluations they made of each specific project.[17]

By scoring four health projects in the same manner, we found that men and women altered their preferences in different ways: Disease Prevention & Control (M +0.28, F +0.49); Medical Insurance (M+0.19, F +0.43); Health Authority (F −0.07, F +0.29); and Rural Health: Rats and Cockroach Prevention Fund (M +0.25, F +0.4). The two sets of data show that, before and after the meeting, women's average scores were higher than men's, with all scores rising after the discussions. In addition, the women changed their preferences much more than the men did.

The main reason for this is that the above two categories (Education and Health) are closely related to family life. Compared with men, women seem to attach greater importance to these areas. After the meeting, men assigned lower preferences to these categories. Women are aware of the importance of the government's investments in projects related to education and health because of women's traditional roles in the family. In this sense, women's lived experiences and family roles play a significant role in affecting their policy preferences.

The discussions about these issues reinforced women in their initial preferences.

Secondly, we need to ask if this means that women always take their lived experiences as a reference and therefore lack the ability to alter their preferences in a rational manner. The answer to this is no. When we broadened the range of options to include what must be considered more important issues, women demonstrated a great willingness to change their priorities. Table 9.5 shows how women lowered their estimation of the importance of education after a discussion of what must be deemed more important issues.

It is worth noting that women changed their preferences more than men did. The women adjusted their preferences in accordance with the "four priorities" investment plan proposed by the township government, whereas men continued to rate education as their top priority.[18] This shows that women are good at reflecting upon their own standpoint when they come face-to-face with the opinions of others, be these officials or laymen.[19] After the meeting, women had reevaluated their standpoint and demoted "education" to their fifth priority, while they now awarded higher priority to projects of public interest—such as Sanitation and Land Leasing Expenses. Therefore, we may say that after the meeting women had chosen to place the pursuit of the public good above their narrow self-interest. This demonstrates that women have a good understanding of public policies and the public interest.

Finally, however, we have to ask whether women truly changed their convictions, or if they merely seemed to do so out of deference

**Table 9.5 The** Five Items Women Rated Most Highly on the Public Budget in 2008

| *Order* | *Before the Meeting* | | *After the Meeting* | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Education (national affairs) | 9.64 | Environmental sanitation | 9.82 |
| 2 | Education (community affairs) | 9.62 | Land leasing expenses | 9.78 |
| 3 | Drinking water in rural villages | 9.52 | Medical care | 9.62 |
| 4 | Environmental protection | 9.23 | Environmental protection | 9.57 |
| 5 | Disease control and prevention | 9.13 | Education (national affairs) | 9.51 |

to the opinions of others? This very much impinges on the ability of women to make political decisions, and therefore, we need to investigate the impetus that spurred the women to change their priorities.

We have tried to probe the deeper motives determining how women changed their priorities by analyzing how they answered a question relating directly to this issue in the consultative meetings in 2005 and 2006 (see Table 9.6). As is apparent from the available options, choosing options (2) or (3) indicates a greater willingness to place public interests above more personal and narrow interests.

For both men and women, the percentage of those who chose that "New construction projects should improve our village or the areas close to our village" reduced after the meeting in both 2005 and 2006. In 2005, the percentage of women who chose to shift their priority to the general interest of the "whole township" was 4.17 percentage points higher than men. In 2006, although a lower percentage of women chose to abandon support for option 1 after the meeting, there were still more women than men who shifted their support to options 2 and 3, which gave greater weight to broad public interests. This shows that women do not change their preferences due to overt pressure from others or out of ignorance, but because they endorse the public interest. As can be seen, women have come to better understand the public interest after the consultative meetings.

## Conclusion

We have analyzed the capacity of men and women for engaging in local public affairs by examining three rounds of consultative meetings in Zeguo. In undertaking this innovative controlled experiment, we made sure that some basic preconditions were met.

First of all, men and women were given equal opportunities to participate and to express their views; second, men and women were exposed to the same amount of information; third, women were encouraged to act in the role of "representatives of the people" during the meeting. In short, women were placed in the role of public representatives, asked to leave their family roles behind, and made to focus instead on performing a public duty. Admittedly, this setup was somewhat artificial, but it did make it possible to examine men and women's potential capacity for participating in the local decision-making process.

**Table 9.6** Reasons for Choosing Specific Projects

| | *(1) "New construction projects should improve our village or the areas close to our village."* | | | *(2) "New construction projects should help the whole township, rather than just my village or the areas close to my village."* | | | *(3) "Both (1) and (2)."* | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *Before Meeting* | *After Meeting* | *Difference* | *Before Meeting* | *After Meeting* | *Difference* | *Befor Meeting* | *After Meeting* | *Difference* |
| **2005** | | | | | | | | | |
| Men (%) | 7.77 | 5.68 | −2.09 | 62.14 | 64.77 | +2.63 | 23.30 | 25.00 | +1.70 |
| Women (%) | 8.70 | 5.13 | −3.57 | 52.17 | 58.97 | +6.80 | 30.43 | 20.51 | −9.92 |
| **2006** | | | | | | | | | |
| Men (%) | 16.05 | 7.58 | −8.47 | 41.98 | 43.94 | +1.96 | 38.27 | 36.36 | −1.91 |
| Women (%) | 16.42 | 14.89 | −1.53 | 41.79 | 38.30 | −3.49 | 37.31 | 44.68 | +7.37 |

Although rural women have long occupied the roles of mother and care provider in the private sphere and are kept far away from the public political domain, they did not exhibit any of the weaknesses commonly associated with women when the consultative meetings presented them with the opportunity to participate in public affairs on an equal footing with men. Instead, they displayed a level of concern for, and knowledge about, public affairs on par with the participating men. This shows that women, when given fair opportunities, are fully competent to participate in the local public affairs and to play the role of citizen representative.

Second, in our controlled experiment with democratic consultative meetings, women outperformed men when it came to the ability of acquiring knowledge about public affairs. In other words, when women were given opportunities to participate, they proved fully able to learn about and understand politics. Even though the lives of many rural women revolve mainly around issues of family, children, and household-based farming, they are not inferior to men when given the opportunity to acquire the knowledge that is important for participating in the political process.

In the course of the consultative meetings, the female participants proved themselves fully capable of learning from their environment. When it came to forming their own policy preferences, they were very adept at measuring their own personal interests against those of the public at large. At the consultative meetings, women proved to be more receptive to messages relating to the common interest than men. One reason for this is that women turned out to have a high capacity for putting themselves in the shoes of others and for incorporating the views of others when forming their own preferences.

Finally, to use the controlled experiment of consultative meetings to examine women's participation in public decision-making is like creating an artificial environment in which to test women's political ability and potential. In this controlled environment, we found that rural women's political ability and powers of judgment were in no way inferior to those of men when they were given the same opportunities and the same information as men. But why, then, do women generally occupy a highly marginal position within the formal political system in China? In a way, the results from our study propel us to further scrutinize the root cause underlying the structural gender inequality in formal politics. We need to consider how to convert women's true political potential into a more equal position for women in politics.

Translated by Brian Zhang Guohui and Bo Ærenlund Sørensen.

## Notes

1. Training has been facilitated by both non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and by government agencies. The former includes the Cultural Development Center for Rural Women in Beijing, whose goal it is to promote rural women's development. Funds have been generously awarded by UNESCO, the World Bank representative office in China, the Asia Foundation, the United States Embassy, the Irish Embassy, the Japanese Embassy, the German Embassy, the Ford Foundation, Oxfam Hong Kong, the International Republican Institute, the Organization for Promoting Global Literacy, and the Global Fund for Women. NGOs have used participatory techniques in a large number of projects that aim to empower rural women and raise gender consciousness and women's capacity to participate in the political process. Participating government agencies include the Shaanxi provincial government, which has amended its implementation of the laws protecting the rights of women. Also in Shaanxi, a number of provincial departments and associations have jointly organized the Female Villagers and New Rural Construction Forum. These initiatives have improved rural women's political participation and highly increased the proportion of women in village committees. This is a remarkable achievement. In 2007, among the 353 administrative villages in the 16 townships in Heyang County, 20 women were elected head of a village committee—meaning that 5.71 percentage of the village committees had a female leader—the highest not only in the province, but in the entire country.
2. Some think that setting minimum quotas for the number of female cadres constitutes an act of "political charity" and argue that cadres should be selected solely on the basis of their "ability and political integrity." http://women.sohu.com/55/93/article212189355.shtml.
3. Wenling's Zeguo Township is representative as it has been hosting democratic consultative meetings for over a decade. It is in the southeast of Zhejiang, takes up roughly 63.12 square kilometers, and it is the birthplace of China's first joint-stock cooperative enterprise. Corresponding with the highly developed private economy, Zeguo's democratic consultative meetings have drawn attention at home and abroad since 2005 for their innovative nature. The "experimental" democratic consultative meeting for governmental budget oversight organized by the town government has been of great theoretical and practical significance.
4. The meeting lasted for one day. In the morning, the representatives were randomly divided into a dozen groups and asked to fill out the first questionnaire, whereafter they proceeded to discuss the budget draft and voice their opinions. After a panel discussion, all representatives were gathered to express their opinions in the plenary session. In the afternoon, the representatives again discussed in groups, and then participated in the second plenary meeting to present their proposals and questions related

to the budgets. During the two meetings, government officials and expert groups answered questions. National People's Congress (NPC) deputies and other guests also attended the meeting.

5. No survey was conducted in connection with the meeting in 2007.
6. A new method was adopted in 2006, where the names of all people in the township over the age of 18 were collected. Since there were about 2000 people in a big village and 600 in a small one, every villager could be represented by one four-digit number. The township cadres put ten table-tennis balls numbered 0–9 in each of four glass boxes. Thereupon, as people could see live on TV, one ball was chosen from each box, producing a four-digit number. If the number corresponded to a villager, she or he would become a representative at the consultative meeting. This process was repeated until the required number of representatives was reached.
7. The Zhejiang provincial government enacted the "Implementation of the Law to Protect Women's Rights and Interests" in September 2007. The purpose of the regulation was to improve women's representation in the provincial People's Congress. This regulation stipulates that the percentage of female candidates for the People's Congresses at all levels should be no less than 30 percent. Obviously, the elections mentioned above fell far short of realizing the ambitions of the regulations, while the share of women chosen for the consultative meetings exceeded 30 percent. Source: chinanews.com, http://www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/news/2007/08-30/1014426.shtml. Also see Wenling People's Congress, http://www.wlrd.gov.cn/show.asp?sid=200.
8. Data from the questionnaires were processed by use of SPSS 16.0 (Statistical Product and Service Solutions, previously known ascalled Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, which is a statistical software for social scientists).
9. The representatives awarded each project a score between zero and ten to indicate how important they considered the particular project.
10. In this case, the representatives based their score on the government budget for 2008.
11. The binary opposition between culture and nature first appeared in Plato's *The Republic*.
12. The numbers in the columns for men are found by dividing the number of male representatives who answered the question correctly by the total number of male representatives who answered the question. The numbers for women are computed in similar manner.
13. Interview with Liang Yunbo, the vice-mayor of Zeguo. November 2, 2008.
14. Interview with Liang Yunbo, the vice-mayor of Zeguo. November 14, 2008.
15. The Wilcoxon test is statistical hypothesis test used when comparing two related samples.

16. The smaller the significance value, the more the consultative meeting influenced the subsequent decision-making.
17. The representatives scored the projects on a scale of zero to ten based on how important they found the given project. The data in Table 9.5 shows the mean of each score.
18. The four priorities include: (1) construction of an ecological environment; (2) education; (3) key engineering projects; and (4) public security. Source: Zeguo government office. November 2008.
19. Cass R. Sunstein argues that democratic governments ought to try to influence the preferences of its citizenry (Sunstein 1993).

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# *Index*