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0521599288 - Women's Work in Rural China: Change and Continuity in an Era of Reform -

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Excerpt

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Introduction

IN 1978 the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) embarked upon a new path toward modernisation and development, rejecting much that was central to the previous Maoist political philosophy, and implementing a range of reform policies. Through the course of the 1980s and 1990s these policies have engendered major social, political and economic changes. Not the least of these has been a greater degree of openness, which has allowed for new opportunities for social scientists in China and elsewhere to observe change in Chinese society, and to theorise about how such change occurs. Scholars have, for example, analysed the interactions between different interest groups and how these shape politics and economic change; the relationship between political or ideological reforms and changes in the economy; and the effect of economic reforms on different sectors of society and how these in turn feed back into reforms.¹

A number of valuable studies of gender relations in the post-reform period have been published, drawing our attention to the fact that in a general sense Chinese women have not benefited from the process of reform to the same extent as men, and that in numerous ways the subordination of women has been reinforced and increased since the reforms were introduced.² An issue that remains problematic, however, is that of the *mechanics of change* in gender relations. We have yet to understand, in other words, the exact causal links between economic reform and change in gender relations, the mechanisms and processes through which such change occurs, and, in particular, how changes in gender relations are legitimated and come to be seen as 'natural'.

This book aims to further our understanding of these issues by examining the changes that have occurred in gender relations in rural areas since reforms were introduced. It will concentrate, in particular, on women's work and gender divisions of labour and the complex interrelations between these and other aspects of gender relations.

By 'gender relations' I mean both the social organisation of people into the categories 'man' and 'woman', and the interactions between members of these two different categories. In discussing divisions of labour between 'men' and 'women' I use the term '*gender divisions of labour*' rather than the more

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common '*sexual division of labour*' as a way of emphasising that there is not one division but many, and that these divisions are not a natural or inevitable consequence or reflection of sexual differences.

Much of this work will necessarily be concerned simply with charting the ways in which particular gender divisions of labour have changed since 1978, while others have not. However, my main aim will be to try to understand *how* the perpetuation of some divisions and the changes in others have taken place, and what implications these patterns have had for gender relations.

In particular, I wish to show how the effects of structural reforms on gender divisions of labour have been shaped, firstly by existing social structures and, secondly, by already current values and assumptions about work and about what it means to be male or female in rural China. In addition, I am concerned with changes to social values that have been promoted by the state alongside structural reforms, because these too have contributed to newly emerging divisions of labour and to the acceptance, by and large, of these divisions as legitimate and natural. Finally, I will address the question of the extent to which women have benefited from the reforms by examining the impact of new gender divisions of labour on the nature of work undertaken by women, women's participation in family decision making, political affairs and education, and on values and assumptions about women's identity and their position in society.

Women's work and gender divisions of labour have, in different ways, been issues of major concern in both Chinese Marxist and western feminist, especially socialist feminist, approaches to gender inequalities. Thus, it is hoped that this study, apart from contributing to a western understanding of Chinese society, will contribute to both the discussions of gender relations and the development of strategies to overcome gender inequalities within China, and will generate new reflections on, and insights into, gender relations in other societies.

What I believe will be of particular value in the approach taken here is the integration of an analysis of material causes and effects of gender divisions of labour with an examination of the values and meanings surrounding those divisions. In the course of the book I will develop a model of gender divisions of labour in rural China which sees them as being constructed and operating through a number of conceptual dichotomies which are connected with what is perceived as a dichotomy between 'male' and 'female'. The two dichotomies which I focus on as being of particular importance are between 'outside' ('*wai*') and 'inside' ('*nei*') domains of work and between 'heavy' ('*zhong*') and 'light' ('*qing*') work. I will show that in some instances a dichotomy between 'skilled' or 'technical' ('*jishu*') and 'unskilled' or 'manual' ('*shougong*') work also operates. In each of these the first element is seen as associated with men, and the second with women.

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My contention is *not* that the actual work of women and men in rural China falls strictly into separate categories according to these dichotomies. Rather than the latter can be thought of as sets of values and assumptions, or as stereotypes, shaping the work opportunities and choices of women and men, the ways in which work is recognised, and the ways in which notions of gender identity are maintained. These stereotypes are reproduced at all levels of society, from children's education through to the recruitment policies of rural industry employers and the work patterns of individual women and men.

However, values and stereotypes are not static. Thus, outside/inside, heavy/light and skilled/unskilled dichotomies have a range of meanings and associations in rural China, and, in addition, the relations between them and the actual work women and men do have been changing over time.

Heavy/light is a relatively straightforward dichotomy between 'heavy' work, or work demanding a high degree of physical strength, and 'light' work that is often also tedious, time-consuming and intricate. Concomitant with this is a categorisation of men as physiologically more able to undertake heavy work and of women as being more capable of lighter work and work which involves dexterity and patience. It is important to note, however, that despite the common recourse to differences between male and female physiology as an explanation of this dichotomy, there are major inconsistencies and variations in local definitions of what types of work are 'heavy' and what types of work are 'light'. As I will show in Chapter 7, in relation to agriculture, negotiations and contestation over these definitions have played an important part in the determination of remuneration rates for male and female labour.

In addition, the introduction of new technology has commonly been accompanied by a submergence of the idea that 'heavy' work should be undertaken by men, and 'light' work undertaken by women, and a greater emphasis placed on a dichotomy between 'skilled' and 'unskilled' work. This latter dichotomy, apparent in both agriculture and industry, has served to legitimate and maintain a gender division of labour in which the use of certain types of labour-saving machinery is dominated by men, whilst women are concentrated in more menial, labour-intensive tasks.

The outside/inside dichotomy has a range of meanings which it is important to identify, but which nevertheless overlap and reinforce each other. Taking, for the moment, a relatively ahistorical approach, the following levels of meaning have been attached to the inside/outside dichotomy at different times, with varying degrees of emphasis and in different combinations in rural China during this century.³ Firstly, the dichotomy separates work according to physical location. Thus, in pre-1949 China, according to Confucian ideals, women were responsible for work *inside* the walls of the family house or compound, and their

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movement beyond those walls was restricted, while men's domain was *outside* the house. I will show, however, that since 1978 the 'inside' domain has been extended to include work in the fields, while 'outside' work refers to work involving travel out of the village for extended periods.

Secondly, the outside/inside dichotomy refers to a division between family and non-family. Before the revolution it was assumed that women would interact and work mostly with other family members and that their interactions with outsiders, especially men, would be limited. Women could be involved in family businesses, but activities, such as arranging business deals, involving substantial interaction with non-family people would be undertaken by men. Indeed, any formal representation of the family to the outside world, for example in village politics, was considered the responsibility of the male head of the family. This set of ideas, I argue, is still of major influence in shaping gender divisions of labour today.

A third set of meanings attached to the outside/inside dichotomy is a distinction between 'work' and 'care for the family', or between 'production' and 'reproduction'. These meanings have, I argue, been transposed onto the outside/inside dichotomy as a result of Communist intervention into rural structures and values.

A final set of meanings attached to the outside/inside dichotomy, also as a result of Communist intervention, is a distinction between work undertaken for the collective, and work undertaken for family consumption and cash profit. As a result of reforms introduced since 1978, however, this particular set of meanings has lost its earlier significance.

It is widely recognised that in the first half of the twentieth century women were culturally defined as inferior to men, and in practice also, were subordinated in a number of ways. Gender divisions of labour, shaped by conceptual dichotomies between 'outside' and 'inside', and 'heavy' and 'light' work, played an important part in reproducing this devaluation and subordination. For example, restrictions on women's movement and on their interactions with non-family members made them more vulnerable within the family and in this sense contributed to their lack of power. In addition, the perception that females could not undertake 'heavy' field work contributed to the view that girl babies were less desirable than boys.

Communist intervention in gender relations and the rural economy after 1949 involved challenges to gender divisions of labour and the conceptual dichotomies which framed them. In particular, large numbers of women were drawn into 'outside' production. As will be discussed in Chapter 2, this played an important role in reducing women's vulnerability and powerlessness in the family. At the same time, though, a failure to completely overcome or change

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gender divisions of labour, combined with a reinforcement, and in some cases an alteration, of the conceptual dichotomies informing those divisions, meant that some other aspects of women's subordination were left untouched and some new ones were created. For example, a failure to reduce women's domestic workload to any significant extent resulted in a serious 'double burden' for women. Furthermore, the introduction of a Marxist ideology, combined with the reorganisation of the rural economy into a primary collective sector and a secondary private sector had the effect of both reinforcing a distinction between 'inside' and 'outside' spheres, and of adding new negative connotations to the former, resulting in a further devaluation of women's work in that sector. In the 'outside' sphere of collective production the implementation of the work-point system was often accompanied by local struggles over remuneration in which gender divisions of labour between relatively low paid 'light' or 'unskilled' 'women's work' and more highly paid 'heavy' or 'skilled' 'men's work' were strengthened, or in some cases newly created.

Through the course of this book I argue that, as a result of reforms initiated by the state in 1978, marked changes have occurred in the conceptual dichotomies between outside/inside, heavy/light and skilled/unskilled. Nevertheless, these dichotomies, and the lower value assigned to the 'female' side of the dichotomies, still operate, and indeed in some ways have been strengthened in the process of reform. This has, in turn, contributed to the creation and maintenance of gender divisions of labour through which women's subordination continues to be reproduced.

SCOPE AND METHOD OF RESEARCH

This work is concerned mainly with an analysis of the situation of *rural* women of Han nationality. However, I will also discuss the rural/urban division and the changes that have occurred there, because these have been important factors in shaping divisions of labour and other aspects of social relations in rural China in recent years.

By 'rural' women I mean here those women with rural household registration (*hukou*). This category is primarily comprised of women who live and work in villages and small townships. However, it also includes women whose permanent residence is rural, but who live and work on a temporary basis in a town or city. The household registration system and the impact it has on divisions of labour is discussed in Chapter 7.

Readers looking for an in-depth, localised ethnographic study will be disappointed in this book. Rather than take such an approach, this study aims to delineate and to understand patterns and shifts in gender divisions of labour

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across the whole of China, paying attention, of course, to broad regional variations. To this end, it draws both on interviews with rural Chinese women, officials and social scientists, and on Chinese newspapers, journals and academic reports.

Each of these sources has its limitations. Taken together, however, they provide a wealth of information. In most instances in this study I have been able to base my discussion on information gained not just from one source, but from many. Thus, when discussing phenomena reported in the media I have generally been able to draw on a number of articles, or have confirmed the validity of media reports by reference to my own fieldwork (see below). Similarly, in discussing my fieldwork findings, I have made comparisons with the findings of other scholars, or with reports published in the Chinese media.

The journals *Zhongguo Funü* [*Chinese Women*], *Hunyin yu Jiating* [*Marriage and the Family*], and (since its inception in 1993) *Nongjianü Baishitong* [*Rural Women Knowing All*], the newspapers *Nongmin Ribao* [*Peasants' Daily*] and *Zhongguo Funü Bao* [*Chinese Women's Daily*], and the compilation of media clippings published every two months by the People's University entitled *Funü Zuzhi yu Huodong* [*Women's Organisations and Activities*] have proved to be the most useful documentary sources of short reports and human interest stories relating to women in rural China. Many of the articles report 'success' stories, for example of female entrepreneurs. These cannot be taken as representative of the situation of rural women, but they do give an indication of the parameters shaping the fortunes of women and the degree to which they are able to benefit from reform. Not all reports present a rosy picture. Common also are articles discussing particular problems faced by women. In recent years, reports on crimes against women and the rarity of women involved in formal politics have been particularly numerous. Such reports are often useful in their discussion of the factors contributing to these problems, and how the state or local authorities are addressing them. However, they most commonly provide only very localised statistics, and give little indication of how widespread the problems are.

The internal journal of the Women's Federation, *Funü Gongzuo* [*Woman-Work*], has been a valuable source of discussions on the approach of the Women's Federation to gender relations in rural areas, and of reports on surveys of the situation of rural women, conducted by the Federation. These surveys are mostly small in scale, however, and issues such as sample size and survey methodology are poorly documented in the reports.

Academic monographs and articles published in journals such as *Nongye Jingji Wenti* [*Issues in Agricultural Economics*], *Renkou yu Jingji* [*Population and the Economy*], and *Shehui Kexue* (a condensed version of which is also

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published in English as *Social Sciences in China*), contain more detailed reports and analyses of surveys of various aspects of rural society and, in particular, of the rural economy. Over the last fifteen years numerous very thorough surveys of the rural economy have been conducted, but usually they do not break down statistics according to gender. Few surveys, outside those undertaken by the Women's Federation, focus on gender relations, or on women's position in society. A major exception, one I refer to in this book, is the *Sample Survey on the Status of Women in Contemporary China*, conducted by the Institute of Population Studies, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, in conjunction with the Population Research Institute of the East–West Center, USA, with support from the United Nations Population Fund. The survey was based on data collected in 1991 from questionnaires distributed to married couples in urban and rural areas in five provinces and one municipality.⁴

Except when specifically indicated, all quotations from Chinese have been translated by myself. Transcriptions of Chinese are in pinyin.

Apart from documentary sources, this book draws on fieldwork undertaken between August and December 1989 in Beijing, Shandong and Sichuan, and to a lesser extent on interviews and discussions held in Hangzhou between August and November 1995. In 1989 I conducted a total of 60 interviews with rural women in Huairou County in Beijing Municipality, Ling County in Shandong Province, and Xindu, Jinniu, Wenjiang, Guan and Mianyang Counties, all of which are in the vicinity of Chengdu, in Sichuan Province. In each county, I visited a few different villages. My interviewees were selected beforehand by local officials. My request that I be allowed to talk to women of varying ages and occupations was granted in each county. However, my sample included only married or widowed women, and the number of women running specialised households or private enterprises was disproportionately large.

Interviews were generally conducted in the woman's home. The questions I asked related mainly to family membership, to the family's economic activities, income and expenditure, to divisions of labour in the family and family decision-making processes, and to women's perception of their work and of gender relations. Usually I was accompanied by one or more officials and in some cases the woman's husband or other family members were also present. The presence of these various people provided some useful insights into official–peasant and intrafamily relations, but probably also inhibited the women from speaking freely in some instances, as no doubt my identity as a foreigner also did.

In addition to interviewing individual rural women, in most counties I visited two township enterprises where I interviewed managers, and in some cases women's representatives and small numbers of female workers. These visits gave me an insight into the experiences of women working in township

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enterprises, as well as providing information on the recruitment of workers, occupational segmentation, wages and labour protection policies.

Background information on the situation of rural women, and on state policies affecting women, was obtained in interviews with officials and scholars in Beijing and Chengdu, and with officials at provincial, county and village level.

In 1995 I was based in Hangzhou. There I interviewed some thirty young rural women from various parts of China who had come to the city to work as nannies, factory labourers, shop assistants and waitresses. Their accounts have informed the discussion of rural women's experience of employment in urban areas in Chapter 9.

In all cases, interviews were conducted primarily in Mandarin, with interviewees also sometimes using their local dialect.

In Chapter 1 I discuss the intellectual origins of my approach to unravelling the complexities of gender divisions of labour in post-reform rural China. These origins can be divided primarily between the analyses of western feminists, which are concerned mainly with ideology and culture as the determinants of gender relations on the one hand, and on the other, of the views of Chinese Marxists and western socialist feminists, which focus on the position of men and women within production as a determinant of gender relations. Although I consider none of the theoretical approaches in these works to be fully satisfactory, an examination of the advantages and the limitations of each, combined with a reflection on recent poststructuralist insights has, I believe, enabled me to synthesise a more sophisticated and politically useful theoretical framework for analysing change and continuity in gender relations in contemporary rural China.

The chapter serves two purposes. First of all, it provides an introductory description and critique of the theory underlying the CCP's approach to gender relations, which has, of course, had major consequences for gender divisions of labour in rural China, and the meanings and values associated with them. Second, by making explicit the theoretical traditions out of which my ideas have developed, and the concerns and assumptions which frame the study presented here, this chapter paves the way for others to use, critique, develop or adapt my theoretical approach in their own attempts at advancing our understanding of gender relations.

I provide a historical perspective in Chapter 2 by examining gender relations and state policies on gender relations before 1978. Chapter 3 then sketches out the key features of the reform process initiated by the state in 1978 and signals

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questions and themes relating to the impact of reform on gender relations to be taken up in subsequent chapters.

Chapters 4 and 5 discuss women's position in the family and their participation in education and politics. The aim of these two chapters is to examine the ways in which gender divisions of labour and the conceptual dichotomies informing them are shaped by, and reproduced through, other aspects of gender relations, and how, in turn, these are affected by gender divisions of labour and changes in those divisions.

Chapters 6 to 9 focus on the issue of change and continuity in women's work, gender divisions of labour and conceptual dichotomies relating to work and gender in the post-Mao era. Through an examination of the impact of reform in each of the areas of domestic work, agriculture, the courtyard economy and industry, these chapters seek to understand the relationship between general social and economic change and change in gender divisions of labour, and the implications of such change for rural women and for gender relations in rural China. I conclude by demonstrating in Chapter 10 how the findings of my study support and elucidate the position which I take on the theoretical issues outlined above and in the next chapter.

1

Theorising Gender

IN this chapter I begin by exposing some of the flaws in the Marxist analysis of gender relations as expounded by Friedrich Engels in his work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, first published in 1884. Whilst it may at first seem far removed from our concerns here, a consideration of Engels' work is in fact of central importance to this study because it has been the starting point for both Chinese Marxist and western socialist feminist analyses of gender relations. Understanding the weaknesses in Engels' arguments will thus help us to understand why it is that despite professing a commitment to gender equality, the CCP has far from achieved this goal. In addition, a critique of the arguments of Engels and of those who followed in his footsteps, as it were, will provide a basis from which to develop a more satisfactory theoretical approach to the questions raised in this book.

In *The Origin* . . . Engels undertook a historical materialist analysis in which he linked the emergence of women's subordination with changes in the social relations of production.¹ His work provided both Chinese revolutionaries and feminists in the West with a valuable framework for challenging assumptions that women's subordination to men stems directly from biological differences between the sexes, and hence is natural and, by extension, inevitable and right.

In China, the Marxist approach, based on Engels' arguments, has undeniably been very useful for tackling key areas of women's oppression. Yet the approach has also had severe limitations, in part because of one-sided interpretations or the incomplete implementation of Engels' suggestions, and in part because of limitations inherent in Engels' original formulation, and the unsuitability of the formulation for the Chinese context.

Here I wish to draw attention to just three related aspects of the Marxist approach that I see as particularly limiting theoretically.² These are, first of all, a narrow conception of 'production'; second, a failure to problematise gender divisions of labour; and, third, a failure to theorise adequately the relations between economic processes on the one hand, and social organisation and culture on the other.