

CHAPTER 8

WOMEN IN CHINESE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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Studies have shown that the trajectory of the evolving woman's social status in general and female labour participation in particular has been largely shaped by patterns of socio-economic development, in which the rate and character of industrialisation has played a central role.(1) Industrialisation is commonly understood as processes of shifting resources from primary to secondary and tertiary industries, involving the transformation of people into wage labour, of families from unit of production into unit of consumption, and from rural dominated into urbanised societies.

Since 1949 China has been on the road to vigorous industrialisation. In nearly half a century, China has experienced two major transitions in terms of development models, one is the transition toward heavy industry-focused industrialisation monitored by central planning, and the second is the transition toward market oriented economy. Because of the long existing gender specific traditions, those socio-economic processes have affected women and men differently. This paper discusses briefly the changing patterns of the work and life of women—especially rural women—in China, by looking at specific characteristic features associated with the two transitions.

Industrialisation under the Central Planning System

The post-1949 state-led industrialisation drive was focused on the development of heavy industry, believed to be the essential material base for China's modernisation. Based on the institutional structure supported by the state-dominated industrial sector, the commune system in agriculture, and the household registration system, the central planning system was able to project effectively the rate and character of industrialisation during this period. One outcome was that while industry expanded rapidly, urbanisation stagnated. In nearly three decades up to 1978, the proportion of rural labour declined from 83.5% to 73.8% in the total labour force, with an average decline of merely 0.5% annually.(2) As the government exercised a tight control over population mobility, the line between cities and the countryside became increasingly crystallised. Because of the significant urban-rural disparity in socio-economic conditions, the work and life of rural women took a shape quite different from their urban peers.

Nominally, rural residents shared a number of features with their urban counterparts. None owned private property. All able-bodied people earned and were expected to earn income only from labour, had access to jobs, education and health care, and were entitled to state protection against gender discrimination. But qualitative differences existed on virtually all these aspects. One essential difference was that, unlike urban residents, the rural population depended on the collectives rather than the state for job, income and welfare. In other words, the well-being of rural residents was determined largely at the level of rural collectives.

If the state-led industrialisation did not succeed in diverting more of the labour force into urban wage workers, collectivisation in the countryside managed to transform the traditional household labour into collective labour. This transformation was significant, in that it created new conditions for socio-economic participation by the rural population, including women.

Women's work in China had been traditionally centred in households. The major role of women was to fulfil domestic duties and to help maintain the household economy. After the collectivisation, the production function of the households was largely taken over by the collectives. One immediate outcome was the sharp increase in women's labour force participation. Already in the early years of collectivisation, in 1957, 70% of the female labour force reportedly took part in agricultural production, rising from between 20% and 40% in 1950.^[3] The high rate of female labour force participation in the collective agriculture eventually became a norm. By the late 1970s, up to 80% of able-bodied rural women worked regularly in agriculture. In some areas the percentage was even higher, reaching the level of men. That so many women joined the labour force outside the household in such a short period of time and worked side by side with men in fulfilling various production tasks was unprecedented.

To be sure, women's labour force participation was encouraged by the government, demanded by collective agriculture, and promoted by communist ideology as an important step toward women's liberation. But, even more importantly, the nation-wide institutional change simply made female force labour participation an economic necessity. In collective agriculture where land and other means of production were collectively owned, labour became the only legitimate source of income. Such a remuneration system forced households to adopt a common strategy, i.e. to mobilise maximum family labour force, including women and out of school children, to earn income by working in the collective economy.

Nevertheless, the fact that women were earning income in a visible form and independently represented a radical departure from the traditional pattern of gender division of labour. Rural women had long been regarded as economically dependent, living on men's support, despite the fact that almost all of them had always fulfilled domestic duties and many of them frequently or occasionally laboured in the fields. Now by working and earning income in the

collective production, women acquired a status as family providers, an important position to be reckoned with in the rural society.

The increasing role of women in the collective production led to their more active participation in social and political activities. The collective production created a channel and arena for women to socialise, to learn new ideas, and to expand life experiences. Women began joining men in assuming management and administrative responsibilities.

Transformation from household labour to collective labour, on the other hand, remained less revolutionary in nature than might have been expected. The fact that rural collectives were built up on the basis of natural village organisations instead of breaking away from them ensured the continuity of the existing institutions, including family and kinship organisations. The existing social fabrics continued to be the scaffold of gender biased traditions, customs, and cultural beliefs, affecting not only the mind and behaviour of individuals, but also the rules and practice of the collectives.

In the collectives, while a high proportion of women took part in production, their role remained secondary and complementary. Women were commonly engaged in less skilled, less managerial and less rewarding work, and, as a norm, they earned less than men. Moreover, although women's labour input was recorded under their own names, the distribution of income was usually in the form of the sum total earnings by the entire family, of which men were practically everywhere the recipients because they were considered the family heads. Under such a situation, even though women participated in social production and earned income, their contribution was yet to be fully recognised.

Changes in family organisation were even slower. Throughout the collective era, rural households functioned as residual economic units, operating private plot and family side-line production rather independently from the collective economy. The household residual economic function continued to define the roles of family members. Women's labour contribution to this sector was usually substantial, but in general remained obscure. Traditional social organisations such as kinship in the countryside became weakened considerably during collectivisation, but the practice of patrimonial marriage and patrilineal inheritance continued to bring women into the male dominated family networks.

Demographic change during this period had limited effect on women's domestic duties. The government family planning program, which began to be implemented in the early 1970s, did not have significant results until years later. Because of the high fertility rate, the size of rural families was relatively large. Larger family size and the lack of social services in the countryside left rural women, particularly married women, no other choice but to carry on traditional duties at home, raising children, caring for the elderly, fulfilling all other family chores. Domestic burden in the countryside was heavier than in urban areas, requiring greater sacrifice of personal development by rural women.

The period of state-led industrialisation can be considered a golden age for urban female workers. In the state sector where most urban women were employed, not only was that female labour force participation high and stable, which enabled women to earn a regular wage income, but also female workers were entitled to generous welfare benefits, social services and labour protection, in addition to a life long job guarantee, provided by the state. The function of urban families differed as well. With most women working for wages, the formation of two wage family structure indeed transformed the urban family into an unit of consumption. While women continued to do most domestic work, the traditional gender division of labour between bread winners and home makers was altered. Women as regular wage earners began to exercise increasing control over family income. Urban family size was smaller, and public services in child care and in other areas were more developed than in the countryside. Moreover, urban education attainment was higher, and the potential for upward mobility at work was brighter. These favourable conditions in the cities allowed urban women to seek a larger and more active role in the society. While it remained true that urban women had yet to obtain gender equality, their economic and social status was the envy and inspiration for women living in the countryside.

Industrialisation under the central planning left a great imprint in the socio-economic position of the Chinese women. While the general improvement was obvious, the large disparity between urban and rural areas brought highly uneven benefits and opportunities for women of different residence. Industrialisation was largely urban centred and, as a result, had limited impact on rural women. For the majority of Chinese women who were left in the countryside, their changing role was largely the product of the transformation of institutional organisations. A reversal was thus possible upon further institutional change. This is what indeed happened in the following period of economic development, i.e. the period of reforms.

Economic Development under Market Orientation

Economic reforms since 1978 marked the second stage of China's post-1949 development, i.e. a transition towards a market oriented economy. Fundamental changes have taken place in the institutional structure of the society. As the corner stones of the central planning system, i.e. the collective farming system in agriculture and the state monopoly in industry, have either collapsed or have been seriously eroded, new conditions have emerged for the evolution of women's roles.

In the countryside, reforms resulted in the dissolution of the collective farming system and the revival of the household as the basic unit of production. The current household production, to be sure, is not identical with that in pre-collectivisation period. One fundamental difference is that women were

given the same rights when the collective land was contracted out among households, which places women on an equal footing with men in property relations. But, on the whole, returning to household production seemed to have represented a step backward, for it brought rural women back to the household where their roles were traditionally defined.

The early years of the reforms witnessed the decline of women's labour force participation. A growing number of able-bodied women began to spend a large amount of time taking care of domestic duties, while engaging in field work occasionally or seasonally. In the mid 1980s, the situation began to reverse when more and more male labour began to be drawn into non-farm work. In the absence of men, women in many areas stepped in to take major responsibility in agriculture. As cash earning opportunities outside agriculture have become more available, rural families are adjusting to the situation by adopting new family strategies. One of the common strategies has been for women to work on the family contracted land in order to secure the family food supply, and for men to work elsewhere to earn cash income.

The emerging pattern of gender division of labour in the countryside has a mixed impact on economic and social status of women. In places where women have become the major force in food production, their decision making power seems to have increased in matters such as investment and crop choice, allocating family resources, managing family affairs including children's education. On the other hand, such a division of labour may contribute to the inferior position of women, because agriculture brings lower returns and has been associated with lower social status compared with non-farm occupations. Moreover, in the case of men working outside the villages, the de facto female-headed households have kept women under pressure from a variety of economic and social-family problems.

In the reform era, industrialisation began to penetrate the countryside, in the form of rapid expansion of rural industries. Rural industries, known as township-village-enterprises (TVEs), have roots in the collective farming system. But it was not until the mid 1980s that rural industries began to see a phenomenal development. By the mid 1990s, the labour force in the TVEs exceeded that in the state sector, indicating that the post-reform development of rural industries has created more wage workers than the state-led industrialisation in the previous period.

Labour demand in the TVEs in the booming coastal areas is especially high. These TVEs, together with foreign funded or joint ventures of export oriented production, attract a large amount of rural labour both from within and outside the regions. Women have joined men in the job seeking journey to these areas. On average, TVEs employed more men than women. Overall, of the total labour force transformed into industrial wage earners, the share of women has been estimated from one quarter to less than one third. Female labour, however, has outnumbered males in specific areas of labour intensive production such as textile, garments, electronics, food processing.

Industrial jobs offer the female labour force certain advantages compared with farm work. One advantage is that wage payments are more stable and usually higher than the earnings in agriculture. By working in industries often in urban areas, and by earning income independently, these women are acquiring a stronger sense of independence with an increasing economic autonomy and self-confidence. Female workers commonly remit a great part of their cash earnings to the families remaining in the countryside, contributing to the material well-being of their families, which in turn has gained them appreciation and respect at home.

Doing wage labour, however, does not automatically lead to the improvement of women's economic and social status. While women in the countryside are playing the established roles which are gender biased but familiar to them, they have yet to adjust to the new roles and to learn how to fight for their rights in an industrial environment. Female labourers from the countryside are usually subjected to the most harsh conditions in factories since, in addition to the usual difficulties all migrant labourers face, women are encountering various forms of gender discrimination. Joint ventures or foreign owned enterprises producing for export have shown especial preference in hiring unmarried young females. Such practices enable the factories to reduce labour costs, by paying lower wages while spending little or nothing on such provisions as child care and maternity benefits. The relatively competitive position of young and unmarried rural women in the labour market is but a sign of their lack of bargaining power, which has been exploited by employers to keep labour cost low. For these women, employers' preference does not secure them jobs. Given the abundant supply of rural labour, factories have little difficulty in hiring and firing young women in accordance with production needs, saving wage costs in times of operating under capacity, at the same time allowing factories to reap the best productive years and time of the young female labour.

In the non-state industrial sector where most job-seeking rural women are able to find employment, social and labour protection are usually either absent or too weak to protect female workers even from physical abuse and from sweatshop conditions.⁽⁴⁾ These new waged female workers, in addition, are facing enormous psychological pressure to survive in the unfamiliar environment. In the absence of the equal treatment by the state, rural women working for wages have not obtained the economic and social status of the urban female labour force in state sector, because they continue to be classified as rural residents, which means that they are not entitled to state provided welfare, social security and a safety net.

In factories, the new female wage workers are concentrated in low skilled and highly labour intensive work. A gender income gap persists. In some TVEs women are reportedly receiving lower pay even when working at the same job as men, a practice partly explained by the influence of the long existing tradition which values and rewards male labour more than female labour.

Despite these disadvantages and difficulties, the existing income disparity and different life style between cities and the countryside continues to draw rural women into non-farm wage work. Young women also began to work as domestic helpers in urban areas, a female profession common in other countries at the early stage of industrialisation but rarely existed in pre-reform China. For many of these women who found non-farm jobs, however, the process of transforming themselves into wage workers remains not only arduous but temporary or incomplete. According to surveys, the majority of women return to their home villages after a few years. At present, those who are settled in the cities by marriage or by long term employment are likely to become permanent wage earners.

Market transition has also led to the increasing diversification in women's work. Women have taken opportunities to establish businesses, often by transforming traditional women's work such as waving, embroidery, sewing, husbandry and other sideline production into business endeavours. The newly emerging women entrepreneur are however reportedly far fewer in numbers than the men, estimated at about a quarter of the total who own and manage small private industrial-commercial businesses in the countryside.

During the reform period, the state family planning program began to have a dramatic impact on demographic transition. The total fertility rate declined from 3.8 in the mid 1970s to the population replacement level of 2.1 since 1989. In the countryside, the fertility rate remains typically higher than the national average, but family size becomes smaller as well. At the same time, consumption of purchased products have increased considerably. The decline of fertility rate, coupled with the movement towards nuclear family, higher population mobility, and the changing pattern of consumption, have a liberating effect on rural women who now have fewer children to take care of, and lighter domestic duties to fulfil.

In general, conditions of the female labour force in the state sector do not fare well compared with those in the central planning system. Reform measures have led to the increasing economic autonomy of the state-owned-enterprises and, as a result, income, welfare and even jobs of the workers have become increasingly dependent on individual enterprises rather than being guaranteed by the state. When loss making enterprises resort to downsizing the labour force, female workers are often the first to go. Cuts in welfare and subsidies in factories have affected women more seriously. The laid-off female workers are having difficulties to find new employment in the face of growing gender discrimination in the emerging job market. As the number of laid-off female workers are disproportionately larger, chances for women to fall into poverty remain higher. For most of female workers in the state sector, however, the old system of cradle-to-grave employment and welfare provision continues to function at the present time, thanks to the reluctance of the government to introduce more radical measures to restructure the state owned enterprises. But workers, especially female workers, are facing

great labour market uncertainty as China's economy continues to evolve to the market orientation. The reform period has had a far-reaching impact on the life and work of Chinese women. The rising living standards have undoubtedly benefitted women as a whole, while a large number of women have taken advantage of the market transition to improve their position. But, as the above discussion suggests, far from all reform consequences are positive for the advancement of women. The growing function of the market has increasingly brought social relations under its logic, and the emerging labour market proves to be far from a gender-neutral place. Those who have obtained wage employment may be considered successful in labour market competition as individuals, but even for them, until they become organised and have a say in determining labour conditions, the prospect of economic autonomy for women collectively remains remote.

It has to be pointed out that in China, rural women seeking wage employment are not propertyless in the sense that they continue to hold the right to farm land in the native villages, which usually remains under the care of the families in their absence and to which they can return. For them, the contract land serves as a security, or a source of livelihood against labour market failure. But the situation may change, as market transition proceeds further.

Despite problems associated with the emerging labour market, given the high pressure of surplus labour and the continuous industrial expansion, transformation into wage labour is a long term phenomenon which holds the future for female labour. The problems and difficulties that women face during this process, however, can and should be mitigated by gender friendly policies and corresponding institutional changes. Cases in rural China exist where women fare better in collective dominated than privately owned rural industries, measured by social participation, employment, income level, and other indicators in comparison with men in the same entities.⁽⁵⁾ For the changing position and status of women, it is not only the process of industrialisation per se but also the patterns of economic development that have been making a difference.

Notes

(1) For some pioneer work, see Ester Boserup, 1970, *Women's Role in Economic Development*, New York: Martin's Press; Louise A.Tilly and Joan W.Scott (1987) *Women Work & Family*, New York: Routledge.

(2) Cai Fang (1990), *Zhongguo de eryuan jingji yu laodongli zhuanyi* (The Dual Economic Structure and Labour Transfer in China), Beijing: Renda chubanshe, p.99.

(3) Gao, Xiaoxian (1994) 'Zhongguo xiandaihua yu nongcun fumu diwei bianqian' (China's modernisation and the changes of status of rural women), in Li Xiaojiang, Zhu

Hong and Dong Xiuyu eds. *Xingbie yu zhongguo* (Gender and China). Beijing: Sanlian, p.112.

(4) Reports of female labour abuse frequently appear in domestic newspapers. See also Anita Chan and Robert A.Senser, "China's Troubled Workers", *Foreign Affairs* 1997, 76, 2, pp.104-117.

(5) The so-called Sunan model of industrialisation in Jiangsu province, for example, is known for its highly developed industries based on collective ownership and management on the one hand, and favourable human development on the other.