

State Policy and Women's Autonomy in Rural China*

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In the 1970s, Western academic debates on gender equality largely saw China's agricultural collectivization as an advance toward women's liberation. Collectivization was a positively valued theme in the developmental paradigm of the time, which almost axiomatically implied benign effects on women. Rural decollectivization in the post-Mao period therefore led many to wonder about its implications for women's status. This study approaches the issue from a different angle and offers a new perspective: that of rural Chinese women. Based on their experiences and perceptions as related by rural women themselves, my research analyzes and weighs women's gains and losses in the two distinctive periods of collectivization and decollectivization.

Keywords: gender and rural development; policy analysis; Chinese studies; Tianjin

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Since the late 1970s, China's development strategy has undergone a historic reorientation, with a dramatic shift from a centrally planned economy toward a market-oriented economy. Rural China has taken the lead in this strategic transition, mainly by dissolving rural communes and returning to family farming.

This change of policy has aroused extensive interest in international academia, although scholars have not reached a consensus about the reform's social and political implications. Those who see the rural

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reform as a simple process of decollectivization tend to perceive it as a retreat for rural women's liberation. Some have voiced concern that rural women may be reconfinned to traditional roles in the household under the control of the family patriarch. Such a scenario implies that their domestic and productive labor is subsumed in household work, and that traditional gender relations will be produced and reproduced within the family.¹

However, this study argues that the post-Mao rural reform has been far from a simple repetition of the past, although certain aspects, such as the organization of agricultural production, may resemble the pre-1949 rural society. Therefore, the implications of the reforms for rural women's status are mixed rather than linear. This is particularly evident when considering a unique intersection (in the Chinese context) of needs and interests cutting across gender asymmetry and an urban-rural dichotomy which has been affected by different policies in the past four decades. I shall demonstrate in this study that the rural reform has been a comprehensive and sophisticated program involving fundamental changes in ideological and institutional realms, economic restructuring at micro- and macro-levels, and reorientation in both domestic and international economic settings. Accordingly, I will analyze its impact on rural women's lives in the context of economic, political, and social changes. Special attention will be paid to a comparison between the collective and the reform periods in terms of their effects on the autonomy of rural women, which reflects, among other things, a changing relationship between rural women and the state.

This study is mainly based on fieldwork carried out in a northern Chinese village named Dongdatun in 1994. The methods used include participant observations and in-depth interviews with rural women² and officials in both the village council and the women's federation.³ The village was a brigade during collectivization and is under the jurisdiction of Lü Zhuangzi Xiang (township), the seat of a former people's commune, in Jixian County, which is about 120 kilometers north of Tianjin City.

¹See, for example, Phyllis Andors, "The Four Modernizations' and Chinese Policy on Women," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 13, no. 2 (1981): 44-56; Marilyn Dalsimer and Laurie Nisonoff, "The Implications of the New Agricultural and One-Child Family Policies for Rural Chinese Women," *Feminist Studies* 13, no. 3 (Fall 1987): 583-607.

²Fifteen village women were interviewed in repeated sessions of three to four hours.

³Interviews with these officials were carried out in either group or individual sessions.

For the past decade or more, Dongdatun has witnessed dramatic economic and societal changes. By 1994, its economy was characterized by a rapid growth of rural industry, a diversification of economic ownership, and a marked development of sidelines. In these respects, Dongdatun can be viewed as reflecting the general trends of rural China in the post-Mao years.

As other variables affect policy delivery, implementation, and impact, including the size of the country, the resulting regional and local variations in ethnicity composition, resource endowment, and developmental level, I have also used supplementary sources in order to obtain a better understanding of the subject under study. These sources include Chinese official documents and statistics, newspaper articles, etc.

Background: Main Themes of the Rural Reform Program

The official decision to make a paradigmatic switch in the late 1970s inaugurated accelerated changes in China's development strategy toward reform and greater openness to the outside world.⁴ The rural reforms that pioneered such changes were initially very limited, but took root during the next five years under pressure from spontaneous developments in rural areas.⁵

The large-scale restructuring of the Chinese economy began in the form of rural decollectivization. The new organization of agricultural production is best known as the "household responsibility system,"⁶ which is widely publicized as the heart of the micro-level institutional changes. Under this system, the collectively farmed and owned land is contracted out to peasant households. In return, the peasants are obliged to sell certain quotas of grain and other farm produce to the state at set prices as part of agricultural tax.⁷

⁴"Communiqué of the Third Plenum of the Chinese Communist Party's Eleventh Central Committee," *People's Daily* (Beijing), December 23, 1978, 1.

⁵See Wang Lixin, *Anhui "dabaogan" shimo: 1961, 1978* (Development of the contracting system in Anhui Province: 1961, 1978—The whole story) (Beijing: Kunlun chubanshe, 1989).

⁶It was officially adopted as a national policy in 1983. See "Some Issues of Rural Economic Policy at the Present," in *Zhongguo nongye nianjian 1983* (Chinese agricultural yearbook 1983) (Beijing: Nongye chubanshe, 1983), 1-5.

⁷Local governments also levy taxes on farm households.

In the years prior to reform, the commune system outlawed or restricted most private economic activities. Decisions were made through central planning and top-down commands regarding the management and orientation of collectivized agricultural production, as well as the disposition of farm produce. The organizational form of the communes represented a high degree of centralized state power. This greatly facilitated the state extraction of agricultural surplus, since it enabled the state to levy heavy agricultural tax on the rural communes through setting unrealistically high production targets, and then forcibly demanding the communes to meet its high procurement quotas.

In contrast, the disintegration of the rural communes has generated a considerable decentralization of state power. The state no longer controls the management and direction of production. It has also been more difficult for the state to arbitrarily impose unrealistically high procurement targets on farmers, as negotiation and bargaining at the local level have replaced upper-level state fiats in determining the quotas of agricultural produce that the farming households must sell to the state.⁸

However, rural decollectivization cannot be viewed in isolation, and it is important to take a look at what has happened in the wider economic and political scenes. Accompanying decollectivization have been other changes that have significantly affected rural people's lives. At the ideological level, the post-Mao reforms have officially abandoned the concept of "class struggle," together with its extension of "class origin."⁹ At the macroeconomic level, several major actions have been taken, including:

1. Readjustment of an artificial "price scissors" structure;¹⁰

⁸See Daniel Kelliher, *Peasant Power in China: The Era of Rural Reform 1979-1989* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992).

⁹Official abuses of the concepts helped create a new category of second-class citizens consisting of the so-called "five sinister elements" (the landlords, the rich farmers, the counterrevolutionaries, the bad elements, and the rightists). Those who were thus stigmatized and their families were not only judged and treated along this set of "ascriptive" criteria, but also, to various degrees, deprived of their rights and suffered from social exclusion. In the late 1970s following the Third Plenum of the CCP's Eleventh Central Committee, the negatively differentiating labels tagged on the branded people and their families were officially removed. This decision has not only cleared up a source of constant tension and oppression in Chinese society, but also signaled the beginning of a different age in which "ascriptive" values are being reoriented toward "achievement" ones.

¹⁰Contrary to the practices in the collective years of setting artificially lowered prices for state procurement of agricultural produce, since 1979 the state has raised its purchasing prices for grains and other farm produce by considerable margins.

2. Relinquishment of the state monopoly of rural and urban markets, which was embodied in the unified state procurement system in the countryside¹¹ and the rationing system in towns and cities.¹² Moreover, by removing restraints and prohibition on rural and urban goods and labor markets, the reform years have seen a burgeoning of these markets since the early 1980s;

3. Switch from curtailing toward encouraging rural economic diversification, especially the development of sidelines, specialized household production,¹³ and rural enterprises; and

4. Relaxation of official control over rural-urban migration.¹⁴

In addition to these macro-measures, the decision to end China's longtime policy of isolation has led China to reenter the world economic system and the international market through expanding foreign trade and attracting overseas investment.

Impact of Policy Shifts on Women's Autonomy

In the Western liberal context, women's autonomy is most often perceived as vis-à-vis men. The identification of women with family and domesticity and the dichotomization between the public and private spheres have, according to the Western discourse, helped secure men

¹¹The establishment of the system in the early 1950s meant that grains and other designated goods could only be legally traded through the state-controlled "supply and marketing cooperatives," which facilitated the formation of the "price scissors" structure by purchasing agricultural goods at state-determined low prices and selling manufactured farm inputs at high prices. In 1985, the government pronounced the abandonment of this thirty-year-old system and its replacement by market mechanisms.

¹²This is a component of the so-called household registration system, which, set up in the 1950s, aimed at maximally reducing consumption and increasing original accumulation for the expansion of heavy industry. Under the system, state wages in the cities were kept at a minimum level, which was achieved through artificially maintaining low prices for consumer goods. This, however, could only be attained by tightened control over rural-urban migration so that the numbers of both the waged laborers and the heavily subsidized goods could be retained at the lowest possible level. Since 1979, the system has been eroded by the gradual opening of rural and urban markets. In 1993, grain rationing was formally abandoned as prices were further decentralized in response to supply and demand in the market. For a detailed analysis of the household registration system, see Flemming Christiansen, "Social Division and Peasant Mobility in Mainland China: The Implications of the *Hu-k'ou* System," *Issues & Studies* 26, no. 4 (April 1990): 23-42.

¹³When a rural household expands its sideline production, which is either self-initiated or contracted, into a larger-scale operation involving the full-time labor of one or more family members, this household can then be defined as a specialized household.

¹⁴For an elaborate discussion of the various factors contributing to this relaxation, see Christiansen, "Social Division and Peasant Mobility in Mainland China," 30-34.

“full citizenship” exclusively, and denied women the conditions for greater autonomy, independence, and power. In China, however, women have tended to see their autonomy as versus both men and the state, which took over much of the power previously held by the family patriarch in controlling women's lives. The state has intervened in both public and private realms through institutional changes and policy processes. To illustrate this point, it is necessary to reexamine and reevaluate the implications of collectivization for women.

Rural Collectivization: A Reappraisal

China's agricultural collectivization in the late 1950s was an integral part of a general development strategy characterized by a focus on heavy industry at the expense of most other sectors, particularly agriculture. Communization helped realize power centralization through transmitting power from some 128 million peasant households to a much smaller number of about 23,630 communes.¹⁵ Backed by other macroeconomic measures such as the “price scissors” structure and the state monopoly of the market, the state was thus able to seize a substantial amount of rural surplus to feed heavy industry within the centrally planned economic framework.

This indicates that agricultural collectivization, among its other problems, was fundamentally in collision with the interests of the Chinese countryside. Rural women, after all, are agricultural producers, rural laborers, and residents. This scenario determined that rural women would share common interests with their rural menfolk as opposed to state-perceived priorities and interests and the privileged urbanites—a conflict in terms of needs and interests cutting across gender and an urban-rural dualism.

One of the well-publicized advantages of agricultural collectivization for women was believed to be the mobilization of women into communized agricultural production. However, this achievement of drawing women out of the confined household was contradicted and even offset by the many restraints placed upon women in the newly-established commune system. One was the remuneration scheme, known as the “work-point” payment system, with its labor-reward scale based mainly on age and sex. The sexual discrimination built

¹⁵ *Zhongguo nongye nianjian 1980* (Chinese agricultural yearbook 1980) (Beijing: Nongye chubanshe, 1980), 5.

into the scheme and its dampening effects on rural women's incentive for work, their income, and welfare were tangibly present in the remarks made by village women in the older age groups:

We earned work-points during the commune years. The highest work-point for a day's work was six points for a woman, and eight points for a man. Even if you did the same job, or could do more and better work than a man, particularly if you are a young woman as I was in those days, you could make no more than six points. So why should we women exert ourselves? (Interview with L, aged 33)¹⁶

Other village women, such as 46-year-old W, pointed out that the value of the work-point was very low as well: "The eight work-points that the man received was worth a bit more than two *jiao*,¹⁷ and the six points that the woman received was worth even less at over one *jiao*." The detrimental effects of rural collectivization on women's interests were sensed at the micro-level by women who recognized this worthlessness of their labor in the communes, and the loose link between their "labor force participation"¹⁸ and their welfare. With a broader understanding of rural collectivization's ultimate purpose and China's patriarchal cultural tradition, one cannot fail to realize that this effect was the result of both the maximum state extraction of rural surplus facilitated by agricultural collectivization and gender discrimination against female laborers.

Another restraint on rural women was the practice in which the collective delivered payment in kind or cash to the heads of peasant households, most often men, rather than to individual household members.¹⁹ As a result, women did not obtain economic independence as they did not have genuine control over their incomes, which were already limited by the commune's inherently discriminatory payment scheme.

These problems could not be redressed by the commune system itself, a fact which was supported by the ineffectiveness of official campaigns like the one propagating "equal pay for equal work" during

¹⁶The real identities of the women interviewees are protected in the text by using anonymous, representative letters for their names.

¹⁷One *jiao* is one-tenth of one *yuan*.

¹⁸The concept of women's "labor force participation" understood here is different from that adopted in the Western context, in that the "participation" in the communized agricultural production was related less to the market and cash generation than to self-provision and subsistence activities.

¹⁹William L. Parish and Martin King Whyte, *Village and Family in Contemporary China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 238.

the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s.²⁰ In effect, these problems were deeply embedded in the closed agrarian society, its mode of production, and related mores and values. Paradoxically, instead of weakening such bases, collectivization retained and reinforced them. It suppressed and impeded rural economic diversification, commercialization, and migration. By keeping the rural economy largely in a stagnant state and at the subsistence level, the policies of the rural communes excluded the possibility of undermining and challenging, from its very foundation, a patriarchal ideology that governed the creation and operation of the yardstick and method of agricultural remuneration.

While the institutional change turned women into "social producers," it did not empower or "liberate" them. Rather, the entire policy package of rural collectivization tightened official control over women's economic and social lives and diminished their autonomy by barring them from alternative employment and by hindering their geographic and social mobility.

Before collectivization, rural women were involved in many sideline productions and off-farm economic activities. The economic rewards for these activities were either greater than those for farming, or provided extra income as a tangible measure of women's economic contribution to the peasant household. However, collectivization discouraged and even illegalized these activities. As village woman L recollected:

During the commune years, I was allowed to do nothing but work in the field with others. . . . The commune did not allow us to engage in sideline production, grow cash crops, or make petty trades. . . . At that time, all these activities were branded as "capitalist tails." . . . In the past, even if you had the idea, you did not dare to realize it. You did not dare to do anything. (Interview with L)

In consequence, women were forced to compete with men in areas in which they were comparatively disadvantaged, such as farm work, which required great physical strength and had an inflexible timetable set by the collectives, and hence was highly inconvenient for women with heavy family responsibilities. Conversely, they were not allowed to realize their comparative advantages in nonfarm activities that

²⁰Most Chinese women felt cynical about such campaigns in pre-reform years because they shared too many of the features of other top-down manipulated mass movements, and instead of being genuinely concerned with women's issues and interests, they were almost unexceptionally used by factions within the power center for purposes that frequently ran counter to women's interests.

demanded less physical strength but more skills, and were also more lucrative and flexible in terms of time.

The rigid population control system of household registration²¹ contributed to further crippling women's income-earning capacity and their geographic and social mobility. The system regulated, and in the main prevented, rural-urban migration by allocating food and daily necessities through rationing, and by restricting residence in urban areas to holders of special permits. One of the longer-term outcomes of rural collectivization was that the gap between towns and the countryside grew disproportionately, resulting in an intensified occupational stratification, with farming lying at the base. Under different circumstances, this situation would have drawn rural people to the cities in their search of more remunerative jobs and higher living standards, but the household registration system deprived rural residents of such means to better their lives. It bound them for life to their land of birth, or in women's case, to their land of marriage, and confined China's problems of underemployment and poverty largely to the already underdeveloped countryside.

However, given their relative freedom based on culturally assigned sexual roles, men could still seize the few opportunities granted to the peasantry to work in the cities, while women could get almost none.²² This, in combination with the government policy of circumscribing the rural nonfarm economy, produced a scenario in which few, if any, nonfarm employment opportunities were available to rural women; thus, their chances to increase income, enhance status, and gain upward social mobility through their own efforts were significantly limited.

Political scapegoating escalated during the two decades of rural collectivization through the official abuse of the "class struggle" concept. Problems resulting from or aggravated by rural collectivization, such as low peasant enthusiasm and slow economic growth, were misdiagnosed and attributed to the alleged subversion by "class enemies."²³ The families and relatives of the branded "class enemies" were subsequently incriminated and ostracized on the basis of the notion of

²¹See note 12 above.

²²In the pre-reform years, for example, I sometimes met a few rural temporary workers in the cities, and almost all of them were men. They were often employed in governmental organizations as, say, cooks, attenders of boiler rooms, and janitors. The janitor in my mother's workplace was a rural man in his fifties. He could be seen in the janitor's room nearly all year round except during the traditional Chinese New Year holidays when he went to join his family in the countryside.

²³See note 9 above.

“class origin” or “blood lineage,” an extension of the “class struggle” theme. Class status was, in this political milieu, indelibly determined by birth, particularly one’s family background on the father’s side. For women, both birth and marriage determined their class status. A general practice of categorizing people on the basis of their “blood lineage” emerged, impinging on the general well-being and limiting the educational and occupational opportunities and career prospects of the people with “undesirable” family background.

The “class struggle” theme provided justifications and opportunities for social prejudice and intolerance and for reinforced conformity informed by tradition. The practice of incriminating families and kinship in patrilineal and patriarchal terms hit the young and women in particular. For the young, their future and destiny were made exclusively dependent on the mere circumstance of birth. For women, the dual contingency of birth and marriage rendered them doubly vulnerable to prejudice, discrimination, and persecution. Adding to their vulnerability were their family responsibilities and role as “shock absorbers” in both their natal and conjugal households when man-made disasters hung over their families.

The emphasis on “class struggle” and “blood lineage” thus severely disadvantaged women. Social prejudice against women grew even though it remained imperceptible, hidden behind Marxist terminology. As a consequence, women’s opportunities and life chances were more restricted compared with men. Village woman interviewee Y, for example, said that she was not allowed to attend secondary school during the commune years not because of her learning ability or academic performance, for she had actually succeeded in passing the required examinations, but because of her grandfather’s class status as a “rich farmer.” In the interview, she expressed her feelings as follows:

When I was at school age, I wished to have the opportunity to go to junior and senior high school, and then to university, so that I could work away from home, in the cities. That would be more desirable than becoming a peasant. But I could not even enter junior high school because of the bad class status of my family. If I could get more schooling, I would have been able to find a better way of living. Since I could not receive more education, all my other ideals were shattered. (Interview with Y, aged 37)

The Alternative Approach

As mentioned earlier, rural reforms since the late 1970s have reversed the practices and policies of the collective years, and brought about a considerable relaxation in almost all aspects of rural life—

economic, social, cultural, and political. At the same time, the reform, with its unprecedented scale and depth, has redefined the state's role and functions, and hence reshaped the relations between the state and rural women.

In academic discourse on gender equality, state socialism tends to be viewed as "protective" of women because under the system, there was a basic social security scheme that entitled women to paid maternity leave, low-cost childcare and medical service, and basic pensions as long as they were employed by the state in cities. However, the price paid by women for such state "protection" has rarely been probed.²⁴ Furthermore, like many other urban-centered schemes, such as subsidized state grain supplies and almost-free housing, the social security system was sustained largely at the expense of rural residents as the state extracted rural surplus in its urban-biased, highly centralized resource allocation processes.

In contrast, the social security program did not cover the countryside, where the majority of China's population had to take full responsibility for their own welfare. As village woman interviewee D remarked, "The brigade did not provide us with an 'iron rice bowl.' It could only be called a 'big pot'." This situation was further exacerbated by longtime low state investment in agriculture and stagnant rural production and livelihood during the commune years, which reduced the ability of the collectives to set up and maintain locally-funded social security schemes for rural residents.²⁵

All this suggests that in pre-reform years, rural women surrendered a great deal in terms of choice, opportunities, and mobility under the state-imposed constraints, but, unlike urban women, they received little in return. It seems that the state's withdrawal of its all-embracing interference, which has probably meant the loss of a certain measure

²⁴Women's right to control their own lives, such as freedom to educational and occupational choices, and even in making private decisions like getting married, initiating divorce, or receiving abortion, were among those they forfeited for such Party-state "protection." The state monopoly in economic, social, and political domains, expressed in the virtual elimination of both alternative employment channels and a free labor market outside the state-unified work recruitment and assignment schemes, enabled Party officials to wield considerable power over women's lives as women were made attached for life to their work units for security and even social identity.

²⁵In Dongdatun, for instance, village women did not receive any of the benefits enjoyed by urban women during the commune years. The locally-financed welfare projects such as a cooperative medical service and a nursery school had to be abandoned after a short period of operation during the Cultural Revolution because of the weakness of the collective economy of the time.

of state "protection" for urban women,²⁶ has given rural women something to gain but little to lose.

One could argue, of course, that the reform, instead of removing or reducing the existing benefits in the cities, should extend the urban social security system to cover the countryside. But examination of the system²⁷ reveals that as a product of the centrally planned economy, it no longer fits into the changed circumstances of an emerging market economy. Responses to this situation have been growing social and political pressures to reform the system in urban areas in order to find solutions to the difficulties faced by women and other groups,²⁸ and to introduce a basic social security program in the countryside.

In my interviews with the village women, they used the term "freedom" to characterize their experience under the responsibility system. This reflects, in my understanding, women's greater autonomy vis-à-vis an essentially patriarchal state power. To my question "What do you think of rural reform, and why?" they all responded with positive assessments of the reform program. Their answers indicated that they based their judgments on comparisons with their direct or indirect commune experiences. As W, a mother of three, said:

Nowadays, women enjoy more freedom and flexibility. Under the commune system, we had to go to work every day in the collective's field for fixed hours. If you were delayed by childcare or housework, your daily work-points would be reduced. For women with small babies, they had to rush home to breast-feed their babies while others were taking a break at the edge of the field. . . . Women had a lot of family responsibilities, and

²⁶China's social security system under central economic planning operated in such a way that most of the welfare programs were solely supported by enterprises rather than jointly financed by the state, employers, and individuals. This created a peculiar situation among state enterprises in which the higher the proportion of female employees it had, the higher the enterprise's operational costs. However, in the non-market economic structure, this did not constitute a problem in enterprise management, which included fulfilling state quotas rather than responding to market demands. Consequently, most of the state enterprises were operating at heavy losses, which were then filled by subsidies from state revenues. The industrial restructuring undertaken since the second half of the 1980s has gradually shifted state enterprises' attention toward efficiency and profits. One of the unwitting consequences of this reform has been the growing reluctance on the part of state enterprises to hire female workers, and disproportionately high female redundancy, as enterprises have tried to reduce operational costs. The issue has triggered heated debate in the Chinese press, women's magazines, and academic circles since the late 1980s. For further discussion on the question, see Chen Shaoxiong, "On the Difficulty of the Employment of Young Women in Towns," *Qingnian yanjiu* (Youth Studies) (Beijing), 1990, no. 1:39-41; and Sun Xin, "Experiencing 'Labor Pains': Women in Zhuzhou City's Industrial Reform," *Zhongguo funü* (Chinese Women) (Beijing), 1992, no. 6:24-26.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Such as those made redundant or unemployed.

some women did not feel well during menstruation. But they could not decide when to do what for themselves, and sometimes menstruating women were assigned work in cold paddy fields. Women in those days always felt exhausted. Things are different now. Since the land was contracted to the households, women have been able to adjust their time and make suitable arrangements according to their physical conditions and the actual needs in their contracted land and at home. (Interview with W, aged 46)

Getting rid of the commune system together with its work-point remuneration scheme has motivated village women in market-related productive work either in the family farm or outside home. They have also regained their freedom in allocating their time and energy in light of their own needs and interests. All this has made it possible for some women to earn more than men, whereas in the past the only possibility for almost all rural women was the institutionally-determined low income relative to men. Furthermore, the decentralization of decisionmaking power with decollectivization has enabled village women to enjoy new autonomy in making decisions on the direction of production, which in turn has significantly enlarged the scope of their economic activities. This is evident from the comment by S:

Nowadays, land is less than before; however, the grains produced are sufficient to feed us. The reason is that the policies of the commune years did not allow you to show your abilities. But now all your ideas can be realized. When you have an idea about how to earn more money, such as doing business and trade, you can set out to realize it. . . . Although I am busier, I feel freer, as I can make decisions on my own now. So I prefer the current system; it is much better than the communes. (Interview with S)

As a result, resources available to women for pursuing more lucrative business opportunities have increased. Rural women's greater financial strength and confidence are reflected in the fact that some village women have signed contracts with village authorities to manage collectively-owned assets such as fish ponds and orchards. Y, a woman contractor, spoke of the greater economic strength of rural women in relation to their new autonomy:

Now women have more ways to earn money. They can engage in trade and commerce outside home, or earn their wages in township and village enterprises. They can also develop domestic sidelines, such as animal breeding and cash crop cultivation. They can grow vegetables and contract orchards. All these were impossible in the past. These economic activities have increased women's income-earning ability. (Interview with Y)

It seems that the abolition of the commune system has been an emancipatory experience for village women. Indeed, women have

embraced the rural reforms through their active participation in the newly emerging non-state market. The development and expansion of this market, in turn, has eroded the planned economy, forcing the state to further deepen reforms and retreat from its monopoly of and restrictions on the market. In this two-way process, women, particularly those with good business sense, have been able to display their talents, make considerable money, and develop their own careers in the marketplace. At the same time, their actions constitute an unprecedented challenge to the traditional definitions of the "appropriate" roles and place of the female sex as mothers, wives, and daughters-in-law inside home. This subtle change in sexual roles and expectations is discernible from the attitudes of 64-year-old Z toward her daughters-in-law. Instead of frowning upon the younger women's unconventional market activities, which involve long-distance travel and dealing with men away from home, Mrs. Z expressed appreciation and pride of the courage and ability of the younger women. Moreover, it was revealed during the interviews that she supported her daughters-in-law by taking over the responsibility of looking after her grandchildren. As Mrs. Z observed:

The reform has provided women with more opportunities to develop their own careers. . . . Some women have started their own business in trade. Recently, a woman from another part of the country came to the village to buy machines. She knew everything about the machine, such as its property and condition. She had three assistants, and she was the boss. My three daughters-in-law are very capable. They have acted as purchasing agents for the family businesses, traveling around to buy vehicle parts from wholesalers in different parts of the country, whereas my sons work at home repairing vehicles and selling the parts. My daughters-in-law are as able as my sons. My youngest daughter-in-law is even more capable than my youngest son. She has contacts with a foreign trade company, and contracted batches of work from it. She has then subcontracted the work to women in the village. . . . They [women] are no longer restricted. (Interview with Z)

Rural women's greater engagement in income-earning activities has brought them higher financial rewards and strengthened their position in their households. This has been reflected in the inclination shown by a few strong-willed women to keep their self-earned money in accounts separate from the parental accounts, or control the family's joint accounts. Women's higher earning ability, coupled with their gaining access to domestic resources, has made them more independent and assertive in resisting possible parental or patriarchal control over their lives, and more confident in fulfilling their aspirations through their own efforts. It has also equipped them with greater bargaining leverage in domestic decisionmaking, where women's own needs and

interests may sometimes come in conflict with those perceived by the family unit or the patriarch.

This point is illustrated by the experience of G, a 22-year-old village woman interviewee. G entered a township-run garment factory as a worker shortly after graduation from junior high school. After working there for a while, she then decided to start a barbershop of her own. In response to a television advertisement, she went to register at a training course in Jixian, the seat of the county government. G said:

The whole idea of doing my own business in hair-dressing was opposed by both my parents, especially my father, and almost all the relatives. My parents refused to pay for the training fee. It was all paid by myself, from the money I earned at the township garment factory. I have liked hair styling and beauty culture since being at school, and wanted to develop along this line. So although I was under family pressure, I was still determined to achieve my goals. (Interview with G)

G believed that the cultural values in rural society were still “stressing men over women,” and this was also true in her natal family, where there were three daughters but no sons. She reckoned that behind the objections of her parents were the typical peasant attitudes of caution and avoidance of risk; however, a more decisive factor in their doubts about their daughter’s ability to succeed in business was their view of a woman’s appropriate role as a docile follower rather than a bold initiator. G refused to accept this; as she observed, “I do not think that women are inferior to men although society still believes so. I admire women entrepreneurs and understand that to be successful, they must have withstood a lot of social and familial pressures.”

Due to her determination, G finally managed to persuade her parents, and succeeded in running her small barbershop for a few years. Besides offering hair-dressing services to the villagers, she also engaged in retailing as she sold shampoos and cosmetics inside the shop, and ice-creams outside. However, she was not content with what she had done, and expected that with improved livelihood, the villagers would have higher requirements for the quality and range of services. At the time of the interview, she was planning to refine her skills and expand her services in the future.

Changing State-Women Relationships

The increased role played by the market in economic and social lives during the rural reforms has prompted a gradual but distinct change in the function of the government at various levels. Its role

as the economic central planner or the instrument for carrying out upper-level administrative fiats has given way to the new but powerful market forces. Rural women's active involvement in the marketplace has further prompted the state to adapt to this market-oriented environment by shifting from suppressing or restricting women's spontaneous market activities to greater tolerance for women's initiatives and ingenuity, as well as delivery of services and coordination in an overall effort to boost the rural economy.

The above has induced changes in state-women relations. An example of this change is a nationwide project undertaken since 1989 which has targeted rural women. The project, named "Double Learning and Double Competition," is organized by the All-China Women's Federation, a para-governmental national network for women, in collaboration with a dozen other government ministries and organizations.²⁹ The themes of the project are: "learn to read and write," "learn skills and technology," "compete for achievements," and "compete for contribution [to society]."

Since the project began, various subprojects have been organized together with local and central authorities, reflecting conditions and needs in the various localities. These include, among other things, centers that combine technological training, production, and scientific experiments;³⁰ the so-called "courtyard economy" project;³¹ and the ten-year "March 8th green project."³² It is worth noting that unlike the Maoist top-down mass mobilization approach, such as the collectivization movement, which produced outcomes contrary to rural women's economic interests, the "Double Learning and Double Competition" project is not an example of political mobilization. It has largely been based on market initiatives by individual women,

²⁹For an analysis of the project from a different angle, see Shirin M. Rai and Zhang Junzuo, "Competing and Learning: Women and the State in Contemporary Rural Mainland China," *Issues & Studies* 30, no. 3 (March 1994): 51-66.

³⁰These centers have been jointly set up by local women's federations, the State Commission of Science and Technology, the State Education Commission, and the China Association for Science and Technology.

³¹This project has encouraged women to initiate appropriate sidelines or to further expand their existing ones through provisions of market information, technology, credit, and services. The term "courtyard economy" has been used because these sideline activities, such as breeding, cultivation, and handicrafts, are traditionally performed in the household courtyard, and most likely by women.

³²This project was initiated jointly by the All-China Women's Federation and the Ministry of Forestry in early 1990, and since then has attracted women nationwide to participate in afforestation and ecological improvement and protection.

such as domestic sidelines, specialized production, and cash crop cultivation. One major contribution of the project has been publicizing and disseminating the success stories of these women to wider female communities across the country so as to create a demonstration effect. In addition, part of the official consideration for organizing the project and providing services and coordination has, in effect, been to develop the rural economy through promoting "commodity production."³³ This has coincided with rural women's eagerness to obtain information, new knowledge, and technology, and make money and compete in the marketplace.

The All-China Women's Federation reports that between 1989 and 1994, some 120 million rural women participated in the "Double Learning and Double Competition" project. More than 20 million of them had overcome illiteracy, and nearly 10 million received general technical training. Over half a million had become qualified agro-technicians.³⁴

It should be noted that these statistics may be prone to inaccuracy, as data are collected at a very broad national level and by an organization other than a professional data-gathering body. Moreover, the project's actual implementation and effectiveness have varied under different local conditions, depending on the sincerity and commitment of local authorities. Cases have been reported of local officials ignoring women's work and diverting funds earmarked for the project. In Dongdatun, for example, several hundred village women participated in a local "March 8th green project" in 1992, reclaiming land on the hills and planting over 2,000 fruit trees. However, funds designated for the project totalling about 10,000 *yuan*, including payments due to the women participants, never reached the village. The fund was suspected to have been misappropriated by the county's financial department, and the shortfall had to be met by the village council from its own resources. In spite of repeated inquiries and demands by the village council, at the time the interviews were made, it was still unknown where the fund had gone, and whether the village would

³³See, for example, Miao Jianping, "On the Rural Economic Situation and Women's Participation in Development," in "*Shuangxue shuangbi*" *jingsai huodong lunwen xuanbian* (Selected essays on the "Double Learning and Double Competition" project), comp. Office for Coordinating the "Double Learning and Double Competition" Project (Beijing: Zhongguo funü chubanshe, 1992), 14-26.

³⁴Zhao Xinbing, "Rural Chinese Women: Getting Rid of Illiteracy and Receiving Technical Training," *People's Daily* (Overseas edition), November 22, 1994, 3.

finally be able to recover it.³⁵

However, such problems should not obscure the basic governmental functional changes as observed above. In Dongdatun, unlike in the collectivization era, women's active participation in rural economic diversification has received encouragement from the village authorities. This in turn has benefitted village women, since diversification has led to a growing number of alternative income-generating opportunities. According to village officials, prior to the reform, few nonfarm economic options existed for the village women; thus, almost all of them had to toil in the fields alongside men. In contrast, the reform has brought about a burgeoning rural industry. In 1994, there were three township-owned garment factories and a county-owned textile factory near the village, where many young village women worked. At the village level, there were a dozen privately- and collectively-owned small-scale enterprises, such as a brickyard and a vegetable processing factory. Most of these enterprises employed women from both native and other villages.³⁶

Rural specialization and crop diversification have also expanded the scope of women's economic activities and increased their incomes. In 1994, the village had, among other things, thirteen specialized households in poultry breeding and pisciculture, and another eleven households in orchard contracting. The village women were actively involved in the management of these economic endeavors. Grain monoculture, which was exclusively enforced in the collective years, has lost its influence during the ongoing rural marketization and commercialization, with diversified farming consisting of grain and a variety of cash crops taking its place. One measure the village authorities have taken to promote crop diversification has been providing women with loans and technology. In 1994, women engaged in growing the so-called "three baby crops"³⁷ received 100, 80, and 50 *yuan* support funds from the village council for each sown *mu* of baby au-

³⁵Information obtained from interviews with village officials.

³⁶This was confirmed by my observations in the village. I found that most of the young women, including unmarried girls and young wives who could get childcare help from their mothers-in-law, were now working outside the farm. This was also reflected in the jobs taken by the women interviewees in the youngest age group. Most of these young women were doing nonfarm jobs, such as teaching, managing small enterprises, etc.

³⁷These referred to baby cucumbers, baby aubergines, and baby chilies. Most of the vegetables were pickled and canned before being sold to foreign trade companies for export.

bergines, cucumbers, and chilies, respectively.

The center for agrosience and technology and the veterinary center at the township level have organized technical training and consulting sessions to meet women's needs for knowledge and skills in pomiculture and livestock and poultry breeding. In addition, the village council was planning to invite a specialist from the Tianjin Academy of Agricultural Sciences to pass on the technique of building plastic greenhouses for cash crops. The village women welcomed such promotive measures, as 22-year-old H commented:

Nowadays, the percentage of women doing nonagricultural jobs has increased. Scientific animal raising has been promoted, and training and instruction has been provided for women engaging in it. The village has organized study trips for those rearing domestic animals, and some of the participants are women. The new scientific methods are much better than the conventional ones, and women's incomes have risen as a result. (Interview with H)

Feminization of Agriculture

The supportive and coordinating role recently adopted by the government has by no means been sufficient and flawless. In effect, many official projects have failed to recognize women's interests as the most important policy goals. This is not a new tendency, but one shared by policymakers in both the pre- and post-reform eras. I shall argue that male perspectives and male-centered motives have tended to influence the way in which policies related to women have been carried out. A precursor for this was the Chinese enlightenment movement, which attacked female foot-binding and parental arranged marriages, and promoted women's education. At the turn of the century, advocates of the constitutional reform and modernization movement (1898) often cited the salvation of the nation, rearing of children, and men's need to find educated wives after they absconded from arranged marriages as the main grounds for promoting women's education. Access to modern education as women's basic rights, on equal terms with men, and as a potential means to seek employment outside the family, and hence challenge a socially and culturally defined patriarchal sexual order, was rarely mentioned.

Similar modes of reasoning have been displayed in many current economic and social programs, including the "Double Learning and Double Competition" project. Huang Qizao, vice chairwoman and first Party secretary of the All-China Women's Federation, writes in an article that the project has been launched primarily to boost rural production and ensure the supply of agricultural produce. Women

are targeted only because in the process of rural labor transfer, more women than men have been left in the agricultural sector; women now account for nearly 50 percent of the total agricultural labor force, and, in some places, even as high as 60 to 70 percent.³⁸

This reflects an intrinsic problem and built-in limitation in the policymaking process that has targeted and affected women. In a patriarchal cultural tradition, the departure point for policymakers is almost invariably either male-centered or gender-blind. As a common result, the government has tended to pay insufficient attention to women's needs and interests, and have been unable to mitigate any side effects of the national developmental strategy on women in a period of transition and rapid change.

Such is the case with the emerging phenomenon of the so-called "feminization of agriculture" in parts of the Chinese countryside, as suggested by the above-mentioned Huang's report. In comparison with men, more women have been kept in low-level, unskilled agricultural work, while men have left the land for cities and more developed regions in search of better opportunities and more rewarding jobs. This is particularly the case in the less-developed northwestern region, where 90 percent of the thirty counties officially categorized as "poor" are located and rural industry is underdeveloped.³⁹

According to a 1990 survey of twenty-three poor counties carried out by the Institute of Demography, Beijing School of Economics, the proportion of women in agricultural employment has grown since the reform, whereas that of men has declined.⁴⁰ Fieldwork conducted by the anthropologist Bao Guisen in a village in central China in 1989 reveals that 71 percent of the women in the village were engaged in full-time agricultural employment compared to 21 percent of the men in the same occupation,⁴¹ indicating a lower level of occupational mobility and diversity for women than for men.

³⁸Huang Qizao, "Advancing the 'Double Learning and Double Competition' Project into a New Stage," *Zhongguo funü*, 1992, no. 3:2-5.

³⁹A "poor" county is classified on the basis of a per capita income of below 200 yuan. For a detailed discussion of the enlarged interregional gaps with the economic reform, see Research Group on the Yearly Analysis of the Chinese Economy, *1992 Zhongguo nongcun jingji fazhan niandu baogao* (Annual report on rural economic development in China, 1992) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1993), 112-36.

⁴⁰Wang Shuxin, "Women under the Poverty Line," *Nüxing yanjiu* (Women's Studies) (Beijing), 1993, no. 2:4-8.

⁴¹Bao Guisen., "The Uncertainties of Women and National Development in China," in *Funü yanjiu zai Zhongguo* (Women's studies in China), ed. Li Xiaojiang and Tan Shen (Zhengzhou: Henan renmin chubanshe, 1991), 254.

The official reaction to this phenomenon has been to highlight the active role that rural women have played in agricultural production and the contributions they have made to rural development, but to play down the fact that it has also revealed women's disadvantaged position in transferring from agricultural to nonagricultural and industrial occupations. There are many reasons for this disadvantage, but the Chinese official press has been more likely to stress the "low quality" of the female labor force (that is, women's lower literacy levels and inferior training and skills) as the principal cause than explain the real roots. The above-mentioned survey report expresses this attitude in a typical way:

The development of the female resources has been far short of meeting the requirements of the economy. . . . The majority of the illiterate and semiliterate in the poverty-stricken region are women. . . . Therefore, in the occupational rivalry, women of low quality cannot contend with men. *Naturally* [emphasis added], men have become dominant in off-farm economic sectors, whereas women have been held back in the traditional agricultural occupation.⁴²

From a women's perspective, however, the existing unfair familial and sexual arrangements that favor men with greater freedom and mobility are the main reasons why women have lagged behind men in current occupational transfers. Heavy family responsibilities, which are still shouldered almost exclusively by women, have deprived many women of the emerging economic opportunities away from home. At the root of women's "lower competitiveness" in the labor market is the social and cultural prejudice against women which has led to, among other things, high rates of female illiteracy and semiliteracy.

It is not difficult to see that the official attribution of rural women's disadvantaged position to their so-called "low quality" in fact blames the victims of sexual prejudice themselves for their social disadvantages and discrimination. In so doing, the authorities have been able to avoid facing up to their responsibility to tackle the root causes of the problem, and create pretexts for not designing more gender-sensitive policies to redress the balance.

Conclusion

This study has analyzed how state policies have affected women's

⁴²Wang, "Women under the Poverty Line," 8.

autonomy in rural China. Applying the perspective of rural women to opposing policy packages in two distinctive periods—the Mao and post-Mao eras—centering around agricultural collectivization and decollectivization has revealed contrasting differences. It has been demonstrated that rural collectivization pursued within a developmental strategy emphasizing heavy industry at the expense of agriculture was fundamentally contrary to the economic interests of rural women.

The massive mobilization of women into communized agricultural production has been one of the thoroughly-discussed merits of rural collectivization in terms of women's emancipation. However, this achievement did not increase women's autonomy much as it was contradicted and overshadowed by the many restraints imposed on women by the communes. In many ways, collectivization limited rather than liberated women with respect to their income-earning ability, alternative employment opportunities, and geographic and social mobility. The effects of the official ideological promotion of sexual equality and women's liberation were significantly undermined, paradoxically, by an official developmental strategy which prevented rural society from moving ahead and thus maintained the very foundation for the age-old patriarchal ideology.

Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, China's developmental approach has been reoriented, starting from rural decollectivization. The rural reform has removed many of the policy-induced restrictions on rural women. Evidence, at least from Dongdatun, indicates that the reform has been welcomed by village women, who have regained a sense of autonomy and greater choice. The role of the government has undergone a basic change as well, resulting in more support for projects initiated by women's organizations.

However, deeply rooted as it is in a traditional, male-centered culture, the government has often failed to define women's needs and interests as the prime policy goals, and hence its efforts have tended to be inadequate. Furthermore, the economic reform has raised new issues in gender equality, such as the phenomenon of so-called "feminized agriculture." These problems and their sources have not been effectively tackled by government actions.

It is suggested that women must take advantage of a more relaxed economic and social milieu to attain their own goals, exert greater pressure on the government to be more responsive to their needs and interests, and fight for a fairer share of the yields resulting from development.