



## Inside Work

### The Hidden Exploitation of Rural Women in Modern China

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*Conventional wisdom holds that China's modern development has been powered by urban industry and commerce. The agrarian family economy, combining home handcraft production and domestic work with small-scale agriculture, is commonly seen as a remnant of the past. In this essay, Tamara Jacka proposes a different understanding of the development trajectory of modern China as being underpinned and enabled by exploitation in the agrarian family economy, especially of rural women.*

Picking Tea at Gingko Village, 2016. Photo by the author.

*Men rule outside, women rule inside  
(nan zhu wai, nü zhu nei)  
Ancient Chinese saying*

**I**n conventional wisdom, China's modern development has been powered by urban industry and commerce. The agrarian family economy, combining home handcraft production and domestic work with small-scale agriculture, is commonly seen as a remnant of the past; a separate sphere that lags behind and is dependent on the modern economy, dragging it down rather than contributing to it.

In this essay, I propose a different understanding of modern development in China as being underpinned and enabled by exploitation in the agrarian family economy. My focus is the exploitation of rural women, working in what is understood in China as the ‘inside’ sphere. I use the word ‘exploitation’ here in the Marxist sense, to refer to the unpaid appropriation of labour power, achieved by not compensating workers for the full value of the goods they produce (Zwolinski 2017). I focus on the exploitation of rural women through ‘inside work’ because I believe it to be unjust, and because it provides the necessary foundations for other forms of unjust exploitation. Yet it has received little attention from scholars and activists.

One might think that inside work is the same as what, in the industrialised West, is understood as a private sphere of unpaid domestic or reproductive work, in contrast to a public sphere of paid production. And indeed, when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) assumed power in 1949, it introduced to rural China an ideological gender division of labour very similar to that of the modern West. But before that, the Chinese outside/inside division meant something quite different from the Western public/private division. A growing convergence between the two has been one of the main mechanisms through which the state and capitalists in China have exploited rural women undertaking inside work. A mapping of modern Western conceptions of activities in the private sphere as unproductive and insignificant onto Chinese conceptions of inside work has been particularly important in this regard.

In the rest of this essay, I sketch out the transformations between the late nineteenth and early twenty-first centuries through which this ideological convergence has occurred, and discuss how it has enabled the state and capitalist exploitation of women in inland, rural China. To illustrate key trends, I draw on ethnographic fieldwork in Gingko village, an agrarian community of 1,750 people, located in the foothills of the Dabie mountain range in

southeastern Henan province. Work patterns in Gingko village are typical of relatively poor, Han villages in central China (for details, see Jacka 2017).

## Late Nineteenth Century to Late Twentieth Century

In Europe, modernisation involved a shift from an agrarian family economy to an urban industrial economy, within which emerged an ideological split between families’ place of residence—the ‘private sphere’ of unpaid reproduction and consumption—and industrial workers’ place of work—the ‘public sphere’ of paid production. But early Chinese modernisation was different. It involved considerable commercialisation within the framework of the agrarian peasant family economy and much less industrialisation.

In imperial China, the state-promoted gender division of labour between outside and inside coincided closely with another ideological gender division between farming and textile production, as expressed in the saying ‘men plough, women weave’ (*nan geng, nü zhi*). Officials equated feminine inside work primarily with textile production, especially spinning and weaving. Women’s inside textile production and men’s outside agricultural work were equally valued as fundamental to an economic and political order centred on family self-sufficiency. Both cloth and grain supported subsistence and tax payments, as well as being sold (Bray 2013, 93–120). Equal valuation of women’s and men’s work did not, however, translate into gender equality in the family. In fact, commercialisation in the late imperial period coincided with an increasingly hierarchical neo-Confucian gender ideology, increased stress on women’s seclusion in the inside sphere, and the maintenance of male family heads’ control over the products of women’s labour (Gates 1989; Bray 1997, 252–72).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a perception grew among the political elite that women's home-based textile production was dying out. They believed, as did foreign observers, that such production was collapsing in the face of competition from imported cloth and China's newly emerging cotton mills. As recent studies have shown, though, machine-made yarn did not entirely replace home spinning. Furthermore, while the demand for homespun relative to factory-produced cloth declined, the absolute demand increased as a result of population growth and rising urban living standards (Eyferth 2012, 374). In 1934–36, 24 percent of rural Chinese households were engaged in spinning and weaving. In the central provinces where cotton was grown, home-based weaving was even more common: across Henan, roughly 60 percent of all rural households wove cotton cloth (Peng Zeyi 1957, cited in Eyferth 2012, 374).

That elite perceptions were at odds with this picture may have been due to regional variations, as well as the invisibility of village women working inside their homes. The vision of reformers may also have been clouded by a desire for modernity and a belief, derived from European modernising processes and ideology, that modernisation entailed industrialisation and the demise of village handcrafts.

Reformers appear also to have taken on the Western perception of the private sphere as being one solely of consumption and reproduction. Liang Qichao, for example, complained: 'Out of two hundred million women, every one is a consumer, not one is a producer. Because they cannot support themselves but depend on others for their support, men keep them like dogs and horses' (Liang Qichao 1898, cited in Eyferth 2017, 371). As Jacob Eyferth has pointed out, this statement is extraordinary in the context of late imperial China, as it was underpinned by ideas about gender and work that were very new. It is understandable only if we assume that Liang was imposing a Western ideological model of a modern economy, split between 'producers' in

industry and 'consumers' (and 'reproducers') in the home. Yet at the time, China's industrial sector was tiny, the vast majority of the population belonging to an agrarian family economy in which women as well as men were both consumers *and* producers (Eyferth 2012, 371–72). It was not until the mid-twentieth century that significant industrialisation occurred, and a Western-style public/private split emerged.

With collectivisation in rural China in the 1950s, a division between public production and private reproduction was institutionalised through a divide between paid production for the collective, and a private sphere of unpaid work. A key element of collectivisation was the mobilisation of women into public, collective labour. In Ginko village, as elsewhere in the 1960s and 1970s, able-bodied women all worked full-time in collective production. But they were not recognised as full workers; they most commonly received 60 to 80 percent of a man's payment. This exploitation of women in 'public', 'outside' collective labour—crucial to the state's appropriation of rural resources for the ultimate goal of rapid industrialisation—was compounded by a yet greater exploitation of women in private, inside labour.

Through the Maoist period (1949–78), some attempt was made to alleviate women's burden of domestic duties by running collective dining halls, but these generally only lasted for a few years during the Great Leap Forward (1958–62). The state also discouraged home-based spinning and weaving by providing coupons for the purchase of factory-made cloth, the aim being to maximise state appropriation of both raw cotton and women's labour in collective production, and prevent their diversion to village families. But the coupons were insufficient for families' needs, so women continued to spin and weave their own cloth (Eyferth 2012, 387–89).

Aside from this, the state paid almost no attention to women's work in the inside sphere: it was as if it did not exist. And yet, rural families could not have survived, and the labour power necessary for collective production could

not have been reproduced, were it not for the work of women caring for children and others, cleaning, producing food, and making clothes, bedding, and shoes. During this period, women toiled for almost as many, and in some cases more, hours in such inside family duties as in collective production.

I stress that women's supposedly 'unproductive' inside duties continued to involve textile production, including spinning and weaving, and the sewing of clothes, shoes, and bedding, as well as domestic work. Almost all women in Ginkgo village born before the 1960s spun and wove right through the collective period and, indeed, well into the post-Mao period. Even in the mid-2010s, elderly Ginkgo village women showed me cloth and cloth shoes they had made, and the dismantled parts of wooden spinning wheels and looms, stashed away with other junk less than a decade previously.

Most Ginkgo village women born after the mid-1960s did not spin or weave. Nor did they sew clothes. Some of their mothers sewed clothes by hand, but this generation mostly had clothes made by one of just a handful of local women who owned a sewing machine. However, through the Maoist period and into the post-Mao years, women of all ages sat with needle and thread each night, long after other family members had gone to bed, patching clothes and sewing cloth shoes and bedding (see also Hershatter 2011, 193–95).

It could be argued that the Maoist state's failure to more fully liberate women from their inside work limited its ability to exploit women in collective production. Perhaps if women had not lost so much sleep caring for and clothing their families, they might have had longer lives and more strength for collective work. But the state did not see women's inside work as either a contribution or a cost—it did not see it as 'work' or 'labour' at all (Hershatter 2011, 186). 'Unpaid and invisible as it was, women's textile [and domestic] work underpinned socialist accumulation, as much as it underpinned the reproduction of village life' (Eyferth 2012, 391).

## 1980s to 2010s

With decollectivisation and marketisation in the 1980s, rural women gradually stopped making their families' clothes, shoes, and bedding, and bought them instead. But married women still devoted much time to domestic work, including care-work, as well as agriculture. They were supported in this by a post-Mao regime, which repudiated key features of Maoist development strategy and ideology, including its efforts to recruit women into the public sphere. Henceforth, a 'natural' gender order, restoring women to the inside sphere, was promoted (Jacka 1997, 88–89).

As before, the characterisation of inside work as 'unproductive'—as domestic duties, rather than real work—enabled the gross exploitation of the women responsible for such work. But the ideological emphasis shifted: whereas previously it was pretended that inside work did not exist, in the post-Mao period married women were enjoined to be good mothers. With the one-child policy, being a good mother meant having fewer children, but there was also an emphasis on the need for mothers to nurture 'quality' children, with 'scientific' child-rearing and education (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005, 237–44).

In the countryside between the 1980s and 2000s, responsibility for inside 'mothering' work was increasingly taken by grandmothers. Farming, too, was taken over by middle-aged and elderly women and men. Interestingly, agriculture increasingly came to be perceived not as outside production, but as inside reproduction. These trends were associated with the emergence of large-scale outmigration of villagers seeking waged work in domestic and transnational capitalist enterprises in urban and coastal China's construction, industrial, and service sectors.

In its initial phase, rural outmigration was undertaken primarily by young men. But across inland China by the late 1990s, most adults of both sexes under the age of 50 worked as wage labourers away from home for most of

the year. The majority went out alone, leaving behind wives, mothers, and grandparents. The latter group could generally earn less money in the city than younger workers, so for many it seemed more rational to stay in the village to tend the fields and care for family dependants (Jacka 2017).

In Gingko village in the 1990s and 2000s, women generally migrated in their late teens and then returned to the village to get married and have a child (or two). When the child was just a few months old, he or she was handed to a grandmother, so the mother could continue to earn a wage as a migrant worker. Consequently, women in their sixties and seventies, who had previously raised three to six children but expected an easier life in their old age, now found themselves instead responsible for multiple grandchildren. There was also a sizable number of Gingko village women aged between 30 and 60 who effectively subsidised younger family members' migration by staying in the village to care for children, the frail elderly, the ill, and the disabled.

These village carers also did a great deal of farming work to provide food for their families and earn some cash. However, rice production for the market was unmanageably labour-intensive for middle-aged and elderly women burdened with care-work. Some villagers stopped planting rice and grew less labour-intensive crops; some contracted their paddy fields to others; and some simply abandoned them. But even those women who abandoned most of their land still raised chickens, grew vegetables, peanuts, and canola, and picked tea.

They also worked as underpaid farm labourers. Agricultural businesses often preferred to hire female labourers because, as in the collective period, the assumption was that their work deserved less pay than men's. In Gingko village, female farm labourers were paid 20 percent less than men. These women's work was vital to their families, for it not only supported the women themselves, but also covered (grand)children's costs. Most migrant

workers remitted some money to their rural families, but few could cover the full costs of their children's upkeep.

However, the economic contribution of women's agricultural work was not recognised. From the point of view of Gingko villagers, migrants working outside (the village) were the breadwinners, while agriculture increasingly became associated with women's inside domestic work, and perceived as 'mere' subsistence and reproduction. And while the state viewed migrants' work in outside production as vital to the economy, if it saw women's work in agriculture at all, it was as a 'problem' for food security. Initially, the supposed problem was that women and the elderly were poor farmers: policymakers were not much concerned with the wellbeing of overworked villagers, but they did worry about declines in agricultural production. From the late 2000s, that concern morphed into one about land: elderly villagers had to get off the land, so it could be contracted to capitalist farmers, who would merge villagers' small plots into large tracts, suitable for 'efficient' mechanised crop farming (Ye 2015).

From the mid-2000s, the state also worried about the 'problem' of grandmothers raising children left behind by migrant parents. No appreciation was expressed for the contribution grandmothers made through their care-work. Instead, scholarship, policy documents, and the media were full of concern about left-behind children's supposed problems in school, poor health, accidental drownings in village ponds, and other misfortunes (e.g., Wang 2015). All these problems were blamed on the failure of 'backward' grandmothers to properly care for their charges. Bent as it was on raising the quality of the next generation, the state was particularly concerned that older rural women had little or no schooling. Motivated in part by this concern, the state pulled resources out of village schools and closed down many, forcing rural parents to send their children to urban boarding schools (Murphy 2014, 35).

By the 2010s, rural parents too had become alarmed by media horror stories about left-behind children. They also worried about the poor quality of their children's education in urban boarding schools as well as village schools. For many, the solution was to have young mothers remove caring and schooling duties from grandmothers and boarding schools, become carers themselves, and send their children to urban day-schools. Through the 2010s, it became increasingly common for women, who had resumed migrant waged labour when their babies were small, to return home when their children reached school-age and become *peidu mama* or 'mums accompanying [children] to school'. Together with their children, they moved to a rented apartment in a nearby town or city, so the children could attend a superior urban day-school (Tang, Liang, and Mu 2017). Other former migrant women in better-off families bought an urban apartment and remained there after marriage and childbirth.

In Ginko village, as a consequence of these trends, enrolments in the village primary school declined from one hundred in 2013 to four in 2017. Most village women with school-aged children lived during the week in the nearby town or county city. None of these women had full-time paid jobs, but some picked up part-time, casual work or ran small businesses. Some returned to the village on weekends to tend land and care for the elderly. Others stayed in town, their parents or parents-in-law joining them there for varying lengths of time, to help care for small children or receive care themselves.

Were these women appreciated for the quality care they provided children, the elderly, and others, and the sacrifices they made in giving up their migrant work? No. On the contrary, some media articles reported that *peidu mama* were envied for being able to afford to withdraw from migrant work (Tang, Liang, and Mu 2017), while others stigmatised them as idle, 'loose' women, engaging in gambling and prostitution because they had 'nothing else to do' (Wu 2016).

## A Hidden Engine of Economic Growth

In sum, in the post-Mao period as before, rural Chinese women undertaking inside work have been unrecognised and severely exploited. Between the 1980s and 2000s, middle-aged and older women's unpaid or underpaid inside labour in care-work and agriculture was crucial to the wellbeing of rural families, for it freed younger women and men to migrate in search of waged work. And for the state and capitalists it enabled a double saving: not only could they save on education, the provision of care, and other aspects of social reproduction; in so doing, they could grossly exploit rural migrant workers, paying them wages so low as to have been otherwise unsustainable.

In the 2010s, the state's exploitation and denigration of older rural carers came home to roost: young women increasingly felt compelled to give up their migrant jobs to take over care of their children, so the pool of cheap rural labour available to domestic and transnational capitalist enterprises shrunk. But by then, transnational capitalist enterprises seeing new, even cheaper sources of labour in other countries had already begun moving elsewhere. Faced with this and other concerns, the Chinese state embarked on a new development strategy, oriented more toward domestic consumption. The shift of rural women out of paid production into reproduction was a bonus, not a problem. It both reduced unemployment pressures and created a new group, who boosted consumption and reduced demand on state revenues by providing free care services and subsidising quality education. Yet again, the hidden exploitation of rural women in inside work, marginalised as not real work, was key to state power and capitalist, economic growth. ■

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