Economic Reform and its Impact on Women in Rural China

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Economic Reform and its Impact on Women in Rural China

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science

By

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B.A., Beijing Second Foreign Language Institute, 1991

1997
Wright State University
I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY HAIPING LUO ENTITLED ECONOMIC REFORM AND ITS IMPACT ON WOMEN IN RURAL CHINA BY ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF SCIENCE.

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Director M.S. in Social and Applied Economics
# Table of Contents

Chapter 1. Introduction 1
   1.1 The Objectives, Significance and Methodology of the Study 2
   1.2 The Organization of the Study 3

Chapter 2. Economic Systems in Comparative Perspective 4
   2.1 Socialist Planned Economy 4
   2.2 Capitalist Economy 5
   2.3 China in Transition 6

Chapter 3. The Household Responsibility System and Rural Development 9
   3.1 Agricultural Situation before the Reform 9
   3.2 The Beginning of Rural Reform 9
   3.3 Land Tenure System and the Distribution of the Produce 10
   3.4 The Achievement of Rural Reform 13

Chapter 4. Gender Division of Rural Labor 16
   4.1 A Background Review of the Family and Women before 1949 16
   4.2 The Impact of Modernization on Women from 1950s to Late 1970s 18
      A. New Policies toward Women 18
      B. Rural Women and Production 20
      C. Problems in Modernization 22
   4.3 Changes in the Role of Rural Women under the Household Responsibility System after Late 1970s 23
      A. Women in Specialized Household Economy 24
      B. Markets and Rural Women 26
Chapter 5. Non-state Rural Industry

5.1 New Employment Opportunities Have Increased the Demand for Young Women’s labor
5.2 Women Have Achieved More Economic Independence and Self-confidence
5.3 Problems Associated with the Rural Industrialization

Chapter 6. Measurement of Women’s Economic Status in the Family

6.1 Distribution of Household Income
6.2 Changes in the Structure of Household
6.3 Women’s Saving Behavior
6.4 Decision-making Power
6.5 Women’s Control Over Time
6.6 Negative Aspects

Chapter 7. Conclusion
Chapter 1
Introduction

China’s rural reform is composed of two parts - changing the old agricultural system and gradually establishing the market mechanism. The agricultural reform is characterized by the adoption of the household responsibility system. The goal of the rural reform is first to achieve effective allocation of labor and land, and second to realize equity and efficiency in rural earnings distribution.

The old agricultural system over-emphasized equality but ignored efficiency. It aimed to keep full employment and a standard wage. This gave rise to an income distribution characterized by the principle “everybody has a share in eating from the same big communal pot”, which means that food, income, housing, etc. are evenly distributed to everyone no matter how much one contributed and how well one performed. In fact, rewarding all workers equally regardless of their performance was unbearably inequitable, and eventually dampened peasants’ enthusiasm and motivation to acquire skill and education needed in a technologically progressive society.

The market-oriented reform is to create conditions for the goal of achieving economic efficiency and social equity. These conditions include an incentive system, which can stimulate better performance from all individuals participating in agriculture; fast and flexible response to market demand; and the enforcement of personal responsibility.
1.1 The objectives, significance and methodology of the study

This paper, from a retrospective and prospective view, explores the socioeconomic changes that have taken place in China since 1978. The rural reform, on one hand, has provided great employment opportunities to rural women, on the other hand, it has brought new challenges to rural women, such as wage discrimination, less job security and the infringement of their rights in the family. People’s evaluation of women’s status varies. Some argue that women have gained great achievement in the improvement of their status. Others think that women’s position and status have declined. This paper describes rural economic development and the impact of economic reform on rural women with emphasis on their roles in economic development, the patterns of the changes, and the problems associated with these changes.

The present study attempts to examine the factors and conditions that influence women’s economic status in three time periods: before the founding of the People’s Republic of China, during socialist construction and after the economic reform. Through comparison, the study attempts to clarify the conditions under which policies to improve the status of women could be successful.

As the study is focused on the economic status of rural women, other aspects such as social and political rights, although important, are not given in depth illustration. The paper uses female labor force participation, occupation and employment status, and women’s power of control over financial and material resources as basic indicators of women’s economic status.
This paper concludes that women's traditional power declines after the reform due to their age and reproductive role. Women's position in household resource allocation depends on their economic power that may come from their independent income. Traditional ideology about women's roles still has a strong influence on women's behavior and their economic positions. The economic status of the household and the overall degree of development in the village in which they reside also have influenced women's economic status.

1.2 The organization of the study

Chapter 2 discusses fundamental differences between traditional socialist planned economic systems and capitalist market economic systems, and what China has done to transform its planned economy to a market-oriented commodity economy. Chapter 3 gives a detailed illustration of the household responsibility system and the opportunities and challenges it has brought to rural economic development. Chapter 4 provides a background review on rural women's status from the perspective of the gender division of labor. Chapter 5 focuses on the development of collective-owned township enterprises. The problems of occupational segregation and gender wage discrimination are also analyzed. Chapter 6 deals with the economic well-being of rural households, the distribution of income, intrahousehold resource allocation, and their relevance to rural women's economic status.
Chapter 2

Economic Systems in Comparative Perspective

2.1 Socialist planned economy

A socialist planned economy is a political economy under which the overall direction and programs of development are determined by the Communist Party leadership, and carried out through all levels of its bureaucracy.

A socialist economic system has two features. The first is the public ownership of land and means of production. In China’s socialist economy, there are two forms of public ownership - state-ownership and collective-ownership. In state-owned enterprises, the state owns the means of production on behalf of all working people. In collectively-owned enterprises, the means of production and products are owned collectively by the working people in the enterprises. The difference between the two is that collective-owned enterprises are responsible for their own profits and losses while the state-owned enterprises are not.

The second feature of the socialist economic system is government’s involvement in planning and guiding production and distribution. The central government controls the national economy through one economic plan which sets production goals and targets, allocates equipment, raw materials and personnel to state owned enterprises, all in the form of administrative orders. The operation of the enterprises and the distribution of the products should also follow the policies and guidelines set by the government. Production is not based on the consumers’ demands. There is always a steady and unchangeable price that is unresponsive to market changes and fluctuations.
2.2 Capitalist Economy

In contrast, the main characteristic of capitalist market economies is private ownership of the means of production. Private businesses play a dominant role in the national economy. There may be only a small number of state-owned production units. Economic power is in the hands of owners. The purpose of production is to make profits.

Production under a capitalist system is unplanned and uncertain. The fact that allocation decisions are made by individuals or firms on the basis of price signals emanating from the interaction of supply and demand. Relative scarcities reflected in prices also inform producers of profits and costs. Price fluctuations affect production choices of firms. When prices of the goods produced by the firms are rising, pressure for more profits stimulate the firms to expand production. They will hire more workers and invest more money. When the prices go down, which means decreased profitability, production will shrink, capital and labor will be released. "The efficiency of market capitalism is its allocation of goods and resources through the law of supply and demand" (Rosser and Rosser, 1995).

Competition is an important market mechanism. Under the pressure of competition, firms have to conduct technological renovations and continually improve the variety and quality of products to meet customers needs. Competition tends to eliminate inefficient, high-cost suppliers.

However, there are occasions of market imperfection and failures. Monopoly power is a source of inefficiency. The monopolist will produce less and charge a higher price than would the competitive firm. Externalities represent another source of inefficiency. Therefore,
for the economy to operate efficiently, capitalist market economies frequently have government intervention. The government can influence resource allocation and income distribution through its budgetary expenditures or through a wide range of fiscal, monetary and other policies (Rosser and Rosser, 1995).

2.3 China in Transition

In the late 1970s China committed itself to a market-oriented reform. However, at that time, there was no overall reform blueprint or plan. Deng Xiaoping, the designer of the reform, adopted a pragmatic attitude of "crossing the river by touching stones" toward reform proposals and experiments - a practical approach focusing on the Chinese economic condition, social-cultural characteristics, and experimentation. As the Chinese central government recognized the failure of its planned economy, it encouraged the development of the private economy and highly valued its "supplementary" role. The economy has been restructured resulting in a mixed economic system. Various forms of ownership co-exist at the same time, which include state-owned, collectively-owned, individually run, private, jointly-run and foreign enterprises. At the same time, in order to reform state-owned enterprises, the central government has tried out new institutional arrangements. The elements of the market such as price competition, economic incentives and reward for performance have been combined with a modified system of planning. Figure 1 shows the percentages of industrial production output from each type of enterprise.
By 1992, state owned enterprise industrial production accounted for less than 50% of GDP. Although the strictly private sector has expanded, the biggest increase in absolute terms has been in the collective sector, especially the rural township enterprises sector (Rosser and Rosser, 1995).

The private sector is greatly influenced by market forces and has been growing rapidly in recent years. But many institutional guarantees of private property under communist rule are incomplete and restrictive rules on economic activities need to be relaxed. All of these hindered the further development of the private business.

The collective sector, which is less controlled by the central plan in their products than the state sector, has to respond to market trends to some extent, and its growth is remarkable. But collective enterprises have no competitive advantage vis-à-vis private firms in terms of production cost, and they enjoy no guaranteed rescue as state enterprises do when in trouble.
The state sector is least susceptible to market discipline. The central government has been making efforts to renovate the state enterprises and to stop the stagnation, however, these measures have produced little effect. The reason is that reforms in one area do not synchronize with reforms in other areas, which may come from the misunderstanding toward the policy by local government, regional economic difference or different management style, etc., which always result in distortion and negative consequences. The interconnectedness of all aspects of industry require reforms not only in the management system and the labor system but most important, in the whole socialist economic system.
Chapter 3

The Household Responsibility System

And Rural Development

3.1 Agricultural situation before the reform

After 1949, the agricultural policies in China were to increase and expand agricultural production. They were integrated within a broader socio-economic development program. Many policies were aimed at gradually collectivizing the means of production and establishing collectives as units of production, distribution and consumption. Rural people’s communes played the role of government administration and were responsible for organizing all production and services. The commune authority was the main unit of ownership and distribution, with controls over the labor and material resources.

3.2 The beginning of rural reform.

The Third Plenum of the Eleventh Party Central Committee in 1978 introduced the agricultural reform with household responsibility system as its core. Production teams which had been the basic unit under the communes, were replaced by family farms. The commune system was abolished. Its political, social and economic functions were taken over by the township government. Village committees became the management body of the production team. The peasants were organized in village groups which formed the basic administrative units in rural regions. This policy was designed to promote agricultural production by eliminating the egalitarian income distribution of collectives and establishing a closer link
between peasants' work performance and remuneration. The distribution of collective land tenure to peasants’ families enabled peasants to use existing resources more efficiently. Moreover, peasants were given autonomy in the management of production and the benefits derived from the produce (Zhu Ling and Jiang Zhongyi, 1993).

3.3 Land tenure system and the distribution of the produce.

Land allocation has become a major issue in resource allocation in the post-reform village community. The communities guarantee food supply for their members by regulating land tenure in response to changes in the size of farmers’ families and to labor migration.

According to government regulation, peasants have only usufruct rights. The duration of such rights was stipulated to be 15 years. During that period of time, the right could be inherited by a farmers’ descendants and be transferred to others with the approval of the village committee. Land market is strictly prohibited. Under the new distribution, each household in a given village community received a few plots of land. The land area is allotted based on household size. The individual plots were each classified by soil fertility, location and availability of irrigation and also were equally divided between the households. Although land is still state-owned, it is a community resource that is held within the community. With the emergence of communal property rights, village communities have responsibility for community-based resource management. In most cases, it provides heavy machinery, improved seeds, chemical fertilizers and other services such as information and training on new scientific techniques to the peasants.
Because the state compulsory purchase system remains in operation, state purchase orders are divided into quotas at different administrative levels and each farm receives a quota for a specified amount and type of product. The distribution of produce is organized as follows: the contracting household pays agricultural tax and sells the required quota of produce to the State at a set price. The village community retains a share of earnings from product sales for its own use and for common services (welfare funds). The remaining portions is owned by the peasant household for personal use or sale (Kelkar, 1990).

Since Chinese family farms are small-scale and are still run in traditional ways, they continue to use traditional tools and instruments and the technology is rudimentary. Thus, a farm’s output tends to be very small. Food needed for the subsistence of farmers’ families plus the delivery of the grain quota force peasants to use over 70 per cent of their land for growing grain. Consequently, only the remaining small portion can be employed for cash crop production (This refers to the portion sold at ‘open markets’ or fairs where prices can be negotiated with the buyers).

In 1985, rural reform entered the second stage. Since then, the State monopoly on the purchase of grain and cotton was replaced by a system of purchase through contracts. Now, under the guidance of the State plan, peasants arrange their production according to market demands. The structure of farming has changed accordingly; in 1985, for example, the amount of farm land planted with grain was reduced, thus causing a fall in grain output, while production of cash crops increased (see Table 1)(Kelkar, 1990).
**Table 1**

Trends in the Composition of Crop Area and Gross Value of Agricultural Output Excluding Village Industry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crop Area Total (million mu)</th>
<th>Crop Area Grain</th>
<th>Crops</th>
<th>Gross Value of Agricultural Output</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Crops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>2118.8</td>
<td>87.7</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>2251.6</td>
<td>80.3</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>2163.3</td>
<td>78.3</td>
<td>13.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000 (projected)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Note: Fifteen mu = 1 hectare.

Following the gradual reorganization of the relations of production, the priorities in rural development shifted to technological reforms. Government policies included developing and introducing new agricultural techniques, the mechanization of farm tools, irrigation, electrification, fertilization and new seed strains. Capital goods and other inputs were increased. The area of land given over to agricultural production was expanded through reclamation, conservation and multiple cropping. By applying fertilizers, improving farm implements and reducing crop loss by controlling plant and animal pests, the productivity of land was increased.

Party and government planners have repeatedly emphasized that common prosperity for all the laboring people is the goal of a rural responsibility system. Differences in income
result mainly from differences in physical strength, technical know-how, diligence, management ability and natural or man-made calamities. Some ‘hardworking’ and ‘skilled’ people are allowed to get rich first and are well rewarded for their efforts.

3.4 The achievement of rural reform.

Towards the end of 1984, the household responsibility system was adopted by 98.3 percent of the country’s production teams. From 1979 to 1984, China’s agriculture experienced an astonishing growth. For example, the national value of comparable agricultural output increased on average 9.4% per year during 1979 to 1984, nearly three times as fast as the 3.2% annual average for the preceding twenty-six-year period. Grain output growth was more than twice as fast as the 2.4% annual growth rate in the period 1953-78. Total cotton output rose from 2.167 million tons (2.27 kg/capita) to 6.258 million tons (6.1 kg/capita) (Chinese Statistical Bureau cited in Niu & Calkins, 1986). The responsibility system and related policies enlivened Chinese villages, improved the peasants’ standard of living, and strengthened rural people’s motivation and enthusiasm. Because of this huge motivational impact, the production responsibility system became the main engine for agricultural production. Figures for agricultural output are shown in Table 2.

Meanwhile, the responsibility system boosted diversification of production in rural areas. Peasants use part of their time for working their contracted land and part in raising sheep, pigs, bees, chickens, snakes, ducks and fish; growing flowers, mushrooms and vegetables; processing grains; planting trees; and taking up carpentry, tailoring and
transportation. Households engaged primarily in these specialized activities are called ‘specialized households’. They fall into two categories: I) contracting

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year and Comment</th>
<th>Production (million tons)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-1949 peak</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957 Last year of the First Five Year Plan</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958 Great Leap Forward, communization</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959 Second year of Second Five Year Plan</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960 Middle year of Second Five Year Plan</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966 Cultural Revolution Third Five Year Plan</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970 Last year of Third five Year Plan</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975 Last year of Fourth five Year Plan</td>
<td>284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978 Beginning of economic reforms</td>
<td>304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984 Penultimate year of Sixth five Year Plan</td>
<td>407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985 Last year of Sixth Five Year Plan</td>
<td>379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989 Penultimate year of Seventh five Year Plan</td>
<td>407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990 Last year of Seventh five Year Plan</td>
<td>425</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harvest, but the average per capita consumption of 370 kg was 30 kg lower than 1984</td>
<td>425</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000 target</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Note: Grain production is one issue; average per capita grain consumption is another matter. Overall since 1949, there have been marked improvements in distribution, apart from famine in the early 1960s. There was discontent amongst the peasants in 1989 and 1990 when the government was forced to issue IOUs to pay for state grain quotas.
households where the means of production remain part of the collective economy; and II) self-managing households where the means of production are owned by the households themselves, and in most cases have no relationship with the collective economy. Specialized households may or may not enter into a contract with the collective to work a plot of land or undertake a service activity. Labor productivity and the marketable surplus of specialized households are higher than those of ordinary households (Kelkar, 1990).

In general, the household responsibility system and related policies have enlivened Chinese villages by giving diversified family-based income, rapid increase in total agricultural product, expanded consumer choice, and specialized households and rural industry.
Chapter 4

Gender Division of Rural Labor

The economic reform in China created new areas of work and profoundly changed the nature of others. It changed the work patterns of women and men and altered the existing gender division of labor and the values associated with it.

In China as in the West, a universal subordination of women exists in terms of an identification of women with a private or domestic sphere and men with a public sphere. A common explanation for this phenomenon is that given their childbearing role, women in all societies are inevitably tied to a restricted domestic sphere, while men are free to operate in a wider public domain (Watson, 1992).

In China, a set of gender norms not only governs the work opportunities and choices of women and men, but also determines the ways their work is recognized. These norms influence all levels of society, from children’s education to employers’ recruitment policies. The institutions and the relationship between men and women and their access to and control of material resources, are all shaped by these gender norms.

4.1 A background review of the family and women before 1949

In the first half of the twentieth century, in the traditional Chinese family, women had low status. The traditional ideology of “men superior and women inferior” dominated people’s thought and action. In ancient China, families could be classified into large and small ones. The characteristics of both families were patriarchy and patrilocality. The small family was
the basic and most intimate unit of kinship, which included husband, wife and children. The large family referred to its connection with broader kinship networks. Small families gained their strength, stability and importance from larger networks of the clan, in which aged males had more authority and decision making power. In large families, the size and solidarity of the family or the household were major causes and effects of wealth. The kinship system was organized around male authority. The most visible example of women’s subordination to man and family was the practice of foot binding. It was a physical manifestation of the restrictions placed on women’s lives. Women lacked all rights of property ownership and management and had no independent decision-making authority in matters affecting the family and clan. Structurally, women existed as outsiders within the male-defined family system, no matter how central their actual role in propagating and maintaining the male family. After marriage, women had to leave their natal families. From then on, they were not only geographically separated from their community, natal kin, but also lost all of the social relationships they had developed during the first fifteen to twenty years of their lives.

The status and power of women in the Chinese family varied with different phases of their lives. Within the male-defined family, women gained some status and respect through bearing children, particularly when they gave birth to sons. After the marriage of her son, a woman gained some formal authority in the family as a mother-in-law by virtue of generational age among women. The birth of children also allowed a woman to overcome her emotional isolation by developing ties of affection and loyalty with her offspring.

At this time, there was not much difference in women’s status in rural areas and urban areas. Rural women also lived in the midst of traditional society characterized by a patriarchal
structure and culture. Rural households spent most of their time and labor on the cultivation of food grains for their own consumption.

Men are primarily outside the home, women are primarily inside the home best described the characteristic of the gender division of labor. Women were involved in domestic work such as the processing of goods for household consumption, the maintenance of the household and its members, the care of the elderly and the rearing of children. In addition, activities such as the production of handicrafts, small-scale animal husbandry and farm labor for other households were undertaken by women to supplement the household’s diet and/or cash income. Their work was often arduous and was as vital to the household economy as the men’s work in the fields.

4.2 The impact of modernization on women from 1950s to late 1970s

A. New policies toward women.

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the central government launched a number of policies and programs to promote gender equality and to protect women and children.

First, the government legally stipulated the equality of women as full citizens in the Constitution. Marriage law was issued in 1950, denouncing patriarchal authority in the household and granting both sexes equal rights to file for divorce. In offering women institutionalized access to legal sanctions and an alternative power base, these laws allowed them the first opportunity to defy the authority of the household head and directly contest his
patriarchal authority by altering patterns of inheritance and control over children in favor of women and prohibiting the exchange of women as commodities. (Tsai, 1996)

For political consolidation, the government's strategy focused on economic reconstruction and rural development. Integrating women into economic development was the most prominent element of the strategy. Because of the increased demand for labor, the full participation of women became important. From another angle, women's employment was viewed as a prerequisite for emancipation from bourgeois structures as embodied in the patriarchal family.

Finally, the China Women's Federation was established to mobilize women for economic development and social reform.

Although it was possible to alter the material basis of women's lives, customs and habits reflecting the traditional subordination of women still had influence. Therefore, the struggle between new and old ideologies over the question of marriage and family was an important matter. The government tried very hard to establish a new ideology incorporating new definitions of women to replace the traditional Confucian ideology advocating male supremacy and female subordination and dependence. Meanwhile, the government supported a number of educational and consciousness-raising programs to identify and criticize the remaining influence of the outmoded code of ethics, proverbs and folklore. Traditional ethical codes such as "women should not concern themselves with public affairs because disorder and disarray would follow" were criticized. The government also encouraged women to meet in small groups, break the tradition of silence or the "swallowing of their bitterness" and give up the idea of depending on men.
B. Rural women and production

The cooperative movement (1952-1956) and the communization movement (1956-1958), which gradually established a basis for rural women's economic identity, had a greater effect on rural women's status than any other event in Chinese history. Government policy, at that time, not only assumed that the involvement of women in production was necessary for rural development, but also emphasized that involvement in production was of the utmost importance to the women themselves as a precondition for improvement in their own position in society. It assumed that entry into the wage labor force would enable women, on the basis of their improved material conditions, to acquire a new confidence, power and authority within the public and domestic spheres of society. The central and local governments reorganized production, demanded the expansion of the labor force to include women, and encouraged women to take part in production.

The cooperative movement and communization movement constituted a unique chapter in the history of women's liberation in China. As all land and almost all the means of production were owned by the communes, peasants were employed to work in production teams in return for a share of the total output of the team. The role of the household as a unit of production was greatly reduced. Peasants could only use time outside commune work hours and the labor of household members not engaged in commune work to develop sidelines such as gathering wild plants, cultivating vegetables and fruit trees on their private plot or in their courtyard, rearing small numbers of domestic livestock and making handicrafts on a small scale. During the Great Leap Forward, domestic sidelines were discouraged and rural markets were
closed, thus women’s work in the private sphere was reduced to the lowest level. With the ideological goal to “leap forward into communism,” the people’s communes became infused with a militaristic discipline in organization, production, and daily life. All kinds of socializing housework appeared. For instance, public cafeterias spread throughout rural areas. In addition, child care centers, sewing collectives, laundries, hair salons, shoemaking shops, knitting shops, and so on were everywhere. For the first time, women could forgo household chores and take part in the field work as men did. For the generations of women who had been tied to the kitchen, this was an extraordinary transformation (Gao, 1994).

Women now received individual recognition of work performed within the collective. After rural communes were established, wages in kind and cash had been reckoned on an individual basis. Women got paid for their field work. Their direct involvement in collective production and getting away from domestic work changed their role as dependents, and narrowed the difference between men and women. They brought home income, and thus became providers rather than recipients. The policy was equal pay for equal work, and a few women were remunerated on the same basis as the male laborers within the collective.

In general, rural women’s achievement of an economic identity influenced their social status in three ways. First, it changed the traditional division between the two sexes. Women participated in collective production as independent laborers, so their independent status as persons gradually became socially recognized. This increased their importance within the household. Second, collective labor broadened women’s views and enlarged their scope of interaction, furthering the dissemination and acceptance of new ideas and knowledge. Third, the government encouraged and trained a group of women as model workers and activists,
some of whom were promoted to administrative departments at all levels. They became models of the transformation in rural women’s status and had an exemplary effect in rural areas (Gao, 1994).

C. Problems with modernization

A comprehensive look at the changes in Chinese villages from the 1950s to the 1970s reveals that social and political reform produced great achievements, but there also emerged many problems. First, although the number of women participating in commune work increased enormously, and communal services lessened individual women’s burden of domestic work, women continued to bear the entire responsibility for their households’ domestic work. This resulted in a double burden for many women. Second, not all women were equally remunerated. Labor in the collective sector was rewarded according to the system of work points or labor days. Work points were awarded differentially to agricultural tasks. Women perpetually received a lower number of work points than men. Since there was no explicit mechanism for assigning wages, women’s contribution became blurred and less visible (Judd, 1994). One factor that affected the allocation of work points to women was that male peasants claimed that women did not bear the main brunt of agricultural work and men still did the heavier and more basic work in the collectives. Secondly, men thought that women did not deserve equal payment for the tasks they performed, for they did not work as long as men. Because women had household tasks and responsibilities, they were unable to give the same number of work-days as men. Finally, the tradition of men’s positions as heads of households meant that they must be the main breadwinners or contributors to the household budget. They
were reluctant to allow women, and especially their daughters, whose earnings would be lost
to the household on marriage, to be the main contributors to the budget. Traditional gender
ideology together with wage discrimination affected the morale of women in the collectives,
and led to the withdrawal of women from collective labor.

4.3 Changes in the role of rural women under the household responsibility system after
late 1970s.

Since the adoption of the household responsibility system in the late 1970s, changes in
the overall situation of rural women increased their status beyond that of any earlier period.
The combination of the responsibility systems and measures aimed at encouraging a
diversification of production enabled peasant households to make their own decisions about
what areas of production to engage in, according to their particular abilities and the market.

The gender division of labor in production was less rigid under the household
responsibility systems, although a sharply differentiated division of labor remained in terms of
housekeeping and childbearing. Rural women enjoy more choices. They had more flexibility
working both in the fields and at home. They can arrange jobs according to their age, physical
ability, special skills, and other conditions. Women were still responsible for most of the child
care, cooking, and washing, but women's traditional role as mothers in addition to other
productive roles became easier and was more highly valued. As the number of women
participating in production increased, more and more work and household chores are shared
by family members. As women play an increasingly important role in production, their status
in society and at home has been steadily enhanced.
A. Women in specialized household economy

During the early years of the reform, most of the households in rural China were engaged in both agricultural production for communes and domestic sidelines. Gradually, some of them found that the ‘sidelines’ were more profitable, so these peasants concentrated on turning them into their major line of production. These households became specialized households whose income was derived from just one form of production. Table 3 shows the changes in the source of family income.

The improved productivity stimulated by the rural responsibility system led to a large amount of ‘surplus labor’ in agriculture in many areas. Because of women’s traditional role in agricultural sideline production, a fairly large proportion of specialized households activities were conducted by women. This became the significant income-earning resources. Most sideline production took place at home - raising pigs, chicken, geese, ducks, and goats, growing vegetables, gathering eggs. People considered these kinds of work were fit for

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Farm Family Income Per Capita</th>
<th>1978</th>
<th>1983</th>
<th>1984</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average per capita income (Yuan)</td>
<td>133.6</td>
<td>309.8</td>
<td>355.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of income by source</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distributed by collective (%)</td>
<td>66.3</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperative enterprises (%)</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family enterprises (%)</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>80.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other (%)</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

women because women were thought to be nurturing. Also sideline work could be done either by young women or by older women. Many households thus found it profitable to have women undertake sidelines and men undertake field work. The sale of those sideline products brought the family quick money, and women’s contribution became clearer in the family. Women’s status in the family increased.

Through various media, government propagated the success of those women who had earned large incomes from sideline works for emulation. For example, in 1979, an article in the official journal of the Women’s Federation entitled “Mrs. Xie Fu and her long haired rabbits” described the success of a sixty-one year old woman. Her income from selling fur from rabbits she looked after amounted to 530 Chinese Yuan in 1978. At that time, this income could buy four months worth of grain for her eleven family members plus the family’s groceries and pay for the children’s education. Other articles praised ventures like this for helping the state’s export trade, providing manure, increasing collective and individual income and helping to advance the diversification of the economy (Watson, 1992).

Women’s active involvement in sideline work not only benefits the family and society, but also improves their status and welfare. Some women running specialized households achieve positions of considerable status in their village by employing other people, by teaching others their skills or helping them to set up their own businesses and by joining the party or receiving ‘labor model’ status. With the prosperity of the specialized household economy, there was a decline in overall school attendance rates and a corresponding increase in the inequality between male and female attendance rates. Because the responsibility system is based on strengthening the link between reward and effort, it thus enhances the value of family.
labor, including the productive activities of female children. A household faced with the choice between extra help to increase family income and sending a child to school seemed to care more about immediate monetary benefits. Among children withdrawn for this reason, girls far outnumber boys. Since girls leave the family after marriage, they constitute a loss to their parents as a source of income. Consequently, many believe that educating girls is a waste of time—as long as they are around, they should work to increase the family’s income. Another reason given for the decline in school attendance rates is that there has been a decline in collective funding for education and, as a result, school fees have increased. For some households this has become prohibitively expensive.

B. Markets and rural women

The market provided many rural women with alternatives in life that were not possible under Mao or the emperors. Household responsibility was directly responsible for women’s participation in market activities. Women got involved with the outside world through market exchanges. The markets have become less and less localized. This is quite different from the commune, under which even localized marketing had been very much controlled by the commune staff.

In creating and expanding rural markets, women played an important role. Due to the new form of gender division of labor under household responsibility systems, rural men spent more time in the field, while women devoted more time to sideline work and turned their sideline products into commodities. Throughout the 1980s, local markets grew rapidly like “bamboo shoots after a spring rain”, and rural women occupied a conspicuous place in all
kinds of markets such as fruit, vegetable, and meat. In many local and intermediate markets, there were often more women than men. Selling does not require a lot of strength and thus was considered more suitable for women. Moreover, women were thought to be good at human relationship such as selling and dealing. Rural men tended to be responsible for transporting goods to the markets.

Household responsibility gave rise to farmer-based markets across China, which provided the means to go beyond the confines of the family and village. More and more rural women are becoming merchants (Zhou, 1996). Some even conduct long-distance trade. In recent years, tens of thousands of Chinese rural women have become either directly or indirectly engaged in international trade. Markets add more responsibilities and opportunities for rural women, leading them into a more complex and modern world.

Market activities in China help women evade not only state oppression but also the traditional patriarchy. Before 1949 and under the collectives, no rural women could earn more than men within the same village. However, the scale of income earning for rural women is no longer constrained by the institutional gender inequality. Some women make more than men within the same village, although on the whole rural women still make less than men (Zhou, 1996).

Although household responsibility systems gave women exposure to a wider variety of choices, there are still many limitations that exclude them from some critical economic activities like non-local sales and purchases. Much of the work requires travel and contact with buyers and suppliers elsewhere. However, there is a strong norm in China that this travel and work should be done only by men (Zhou, 1996). Social norms that discourage traveling alone,
individual social contact with unrelated men, and the drinking, all involved in doing business, work to keep women out of this “public” sphere of work.
Chapter 5

Non-state rural industry

The boom of collective-owned township industrial enterprises was one of the significant changes in rural economic development after the reform. Its growth provided employment, stimulated the production of industrial crops, contributed to capital formation, and generated tax revenues. By 1991, China had 18 million such enterprises, and they employed around 93 million workers, and produced some $204 billion in output, accounting for one-third of the country's industrial value, and earning 20 percent of foreign exchange (China Daily, May 5, 1991 and January 9, 1992).

These enterprises are usually established by township and village governments. They operate neither like fully bureaucratic state enterprises, nor like fully market-oriented private firms. Unlike state-owned firms, they depend on the market for most of their material inputs and for the sale of their products. In order to survive, these enterprises have to be sensitive to market trends because they operate in a relatively sharp competitive market environment. They must quickly adapt themselves to changing market opportunities with greater flexibility by developing new products and changing product lines quickly. The characteristics of these township enterprises are innovative flexibility, harder budget constraints, costs which are more reflective of scarcity and much heavier reliance on worker incentives. The government encouraged the development of these township enterprises by sending scientists, technicians and experts to the rural region through various supporting plans and activities.
The growth of rural industry and services provides a solution for surplus labor from agriculture. In the process of rural industrialization women played an active role. Women’s contribution to rural industrial development was great. According to the official statistics, by 1989, 40 million rural women, one-fifth of the female labor force in the countryside, were employed by rural factories. By 1993, there were 50 million female workers in rural industry, 42 percent of the entire rural industrial labor force. From 1980 to 1994, the growth rate for female nonagricultural employment was 52 percent; the corresponding growth rate for males was 42 percent (Zhou, 1996).

5.1 New employment opportunities have increased the demand for young women’s labor

Household responsibility has promoted the expansion of non-state rural industry. Given the limit on the availability of arable land, the need for agricultural labor has been greatly reduced. Moreover, the increasingly high agricultural productivity makes it possible for both men and women to leave the land and seek other employment opportunities. Once the family submitted the quota of grain and paid their dues, they could do pretty much what they wanted. Thus in the late 1980s men formed the majority of rural workers in urban industry or in other non-agricultural work such as transport or construction work. A substantial proportion of rural women, especially young and the unmarried women, became workers in local township industries or migrated to find employment elsewhere.

The growth of income from rising agricultural output, stimulated by the household responsibility system, fueled the expansion of non-state rural industry. New employment opportunities have increased the demand for young women’s labor. The reason is that young
unmarried women are healthy and hardworking, and are mobile and comparatively free of domestic demands. They seek the best income they can generate for a few years before marriage, after which their futures will become tied to marital homes and marital communities. From the employer’s point of view, young unmarried women are willing to accept lower wages than men, and they place no long-term demands on their employers. Therefore, young unmarried women formed the core of the female work force in the township enterprises. Their work mostly concentrated on light industries and assembly lines making toys, shoes, clothes, etc.

5.2 Women have achieved more economic independence and self-confidence

Although women received lower wages in rural industry than urban women in the city, most of them improved their livelihood. Compared with the earnings on the farm they could earn much more in rural factories. During the busy season, farm work can be much more laborious than work in the factories. To these rural women, they think at least they could learn some skills in rural factories. Some rural factories like weaving and knitting allowed women to bring their work home. Thus women could also take care of children and handle other family chores. These new career opportunities were near at hand and their flexibility allowed women to combine the responsibilities of job and family.

Today, rural women, especially the young, have made the best use of rural industrial development to express their independence. The rapid industrialization has weakened institutionalized gender discrimination. As most field work was arduous and men performed the heavier and more basic work, women’s physical weakness in the agricultural setting often
gave rise to gender discrimination in both the gender division of labor and material distribution within the family. Alternatively, most rural factories concentrated on light industry. Physical strength is a less important factor among co-workers in factories than that in field work. This work environment encourages many rural women to develop greater self-confidence and has given them a sense of pride in their labor. Compared with their brothers working in the field, these young women could also earn income for the family. Since daughters have the ability to contribute to the family as much as sons, the attitude toward preferring sons to daughters has begun to change. In addition to sending the money home, these young women may also save some for their marriage. No matter what they do with their hard-earned money, the new wage work has fundamentally changed the way of life for rural women and thereby enhanced their status at home.

With industrialization and the development of a commodity economy, people gain privilege because of their skills, not because of their sex. Business women, female entrepreneurs, and other successful women who have emerged during reform have used their celebrated accomplishments to change attitudes toward women. Women's sense of self-worth has become stronger than ever before. For example, more and more women believe that when choosing a marriage partner young people should “make their own decision, and ask for their parents’ agreement”. Also, they believe that through work they can achieve some sense of accomplishment (Gao, 1994). The awakening of women’s self-consciousness has been an intrinsic driving force in the changes in women’s status.
5.3 Problems associated with the rural industrialization

Behind the prosperity of rural industrialization, problems can not be overlooked. The massive flow of female workers to rural industry increased the pool of labor. However, women’s desire to become industrial workers combined with the low level of development kept their wages very low. Since women often hold low skilled positions, technological advances have been associated with loss of jobs for them.

Township industries are vulnerable to market fluctuations. These unpredictable factors in the future might hinder the growth of the rural industries and disadvantage women. When there is an economic slump, women are the first to be laid off. In addition, most of the township enterprises do not provide housing, medical benefits, family benefits, retirement benefits or maternity leave.

Even in a market-oriented rural economy, the mechanisms of patriarchy still penetrates rural industry. Rural industry is almost wholly managed by men. Roles involving business or technical knowledge are almost wholly reserved for men, and the capital accumulated is under the management of public bodies controlled by men. Though women are better off than before, their opportunities still can not keep pace with that of men’s.
Chapter 6

Measurements of Women's Economic Status in the Family

The process of rural reform provided many rural women more job opportunities and above all, a greater degree of independence. Women's participation in various sectors has influenced gender relations both in the family and in society.

6.1 Distribution of household income

The household responsibility system has expanded the household's entitlements through an increase in the value of net output produced at the household level. As reflected in Table 4, with the shift of the major source of household income from the collective to production within the household, the importance of the collective sector has decreased, whereas the significance of household production has increased.

As household production required the joint effort of men and women, the contribution of all the members, including that of the women, was visible, clearly calculated and listed. Today, rural women engage in a wide variety of activities which include farming, sideline activities, and rural industries. The value of the output created through such activities is greater than before. "How much money do you make a month?" has become a standard greeting in the countryside nowadays. There is little doubt that the clear knowledge of woman's economic contribution enhances her social status at home. Women have become increasingly autonomous in the factory as well as at home, more so than ever before (Zhou, 1996).
### Table 4

**Household income of peasants**

**Net income per capita by source**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average net income per capita (<em>Rmb</em>)</td>
<td>133.57</td>
<td>270.11</td>
<td>309.77</td>
<td>355.33</td>
<td>397.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(%)</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income from collective</td>
<td>88.53</td>
<td>58.09</td>
<td>36.06</td>
<td>35.33</td>
<td>33.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(%)</td>
<td>66.3%</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income from rural new economic union</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>3.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(%)</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net income from household production</td>
<td>35.79</td>
<td>187.55</td>
<td>244.66</td>
<td>285.44</td>
<td>322.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(%)</td>
<td>26.8%</td>
<td>69.4%</td>
<td>79.0%</td>
<td>80.3%</td>
<td>81.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other nonborrowing incomes</td>
<td>9.25</td>
<td>24.47</td>
<td>28.17</td>
<td>31.71</td>
<td>38.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(%)</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### 6.2 Changes in the structure of household

The responsibility system returned the task of production to the household, thus affected the structure of the household, creating a trend toward family unity. The commodity economy and the processes of industrialization and urbanization have led to a decline in family size. Large households were broken down into small family households. This trend toward nuclear families has eroded the base of the traditional patriarchal system. The relationship between husband and wife has become primary. Household production is the result of the joint effort of men and women. Women’s status in the family has risen accordingly. More and more husbands recognize women’s competence and authority in the home, discuss important issues with their wives, and help with household chores.
Within the factory setting, women’s roles as mothers, wives, and daughters seem to be less important, although these roles may continue to affect their daily life. The new social role of rural women as co-workers also altered the general hierarchical structure in Chinese society. In traditional Chinese society, women often did not command the use of their own labor, the family decided for them where they should work and on what terms. The primary decisions as to whether women are allowed to work outside the home frequently rests in the hands of dominant male members of the family or older women, e.g. mothers-in-law. This customary power has been changed after the reform. As these young workers received fixed wages, they have realized financial independence and become more autonomous. Their role in the family has been strengthened (Zhou, 1996).

6.3 Women’s saving behavior

Before the reform, it was not common for women to have an independent savings in most rural areas. Traditionally women tended to keep part of their dowry as their own property. The Chinese colloquial term for that is Si Fan Qian – meaning: save private money. This habit of having some private money, considered an old undesirable tradition related to bride price, has been largely eliminated since the liberation. After the reform, this habit of saving their own money started to return as women had more access to cash income. Women whose husbands worked in non-agricultural activities were more likely to have their own savings. It is probable that when the husbands worked in non-agricultural sectors, part of their income was less likely to be pooled together with the rest of household income than the case for those who worked in agriculture (Aslandbeigui and Summerfield, 1989). The ability to
establish their own savings indicated that women had an independent source of income and had the power to control it.

6.4 Decision-making power

As the reform has transformed rural families into nuclear families, the decision-making power between the husband and wife also changed accordingly. In comparison to the traditional way that determines women’s position in the family, which was the number of children, especially sons, now it is the extent of women’s activities in agricultural and non-agricultural work that becomes important factors. Women who were more active in agricultural work will have more say in the household decision-making. Women’s sideline earnings and non-earned income also enhanced their decision-making power.

Another factor that enhanced women’s decision power is that as more and more husbands pursued wage-earning jobs outside the household, women will not only be responsible for agricultural work but also family management. Under such circumstances, women gained more power in household resource allocation and management decisions. Table 5 shows major decision-making within rural families.

The figures indicate that most of the family decisions are shared by both husband and wife. Especially in children’s education, mothers and fathers shared almost equal decision making power. The husband has more say in the acquisition of means of production and housebuilding. In children’s mate selection, wedding preparations, birth, accounting, and management, women have more power than men. This has never happened before in Chinese history. All of these indicate the increase in women’s personal autonomy.


Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Husband</th>
<th>Wife</th>
<th>Both</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buying animals</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buying tools</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housebuilding</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buying durable goods</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money gift sending</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When to send children to school</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whether to continue children’s education</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s mate selection</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare for sons’ wedding</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare for daughters’ wedding</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accounting and management</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth decision</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


6.5 Women’s control over time

Household responsibility also increased women’s economic status in terms of control over time. Rural women did not have to work on the big collective land reclamation and water conservancy projects in winter. For most women, that was a big relief. They have more leisure time than before. This can be seen from the fact that rural women increased Zou Qinqi rapidly after the reform. In rural China, the phrase Zou Qinqi means going to visit relatives. Since women marry out of the family and village, Zou Qinqi refers to visiting relatives from the female side of the family. Married women increased their visits to their parents’ villages after reform. This special leisure time activity help the spread of technology and new knowledge. Since married women more than men have close extravillage ties, they became an important
source of information on new seeds and new products. As a result, innovation and new technology spread very quickly. Women have a major role in the diffusion of new productive means (Zhou, 1996).

6.6 Negative aspects

Some problems also emerged in the institutional setting for earning income. Because the source of income affects control over that income within the family, the return to the household as the center of production in rural areas diminishes the control a woman exercises over her earnings compared to those from work outside the family system. The amount contributed by the woman within the household is less visible than outside earnings and more subject to arbitrary evaluation. The problem is similar to the difficulty in determining individual contributions in collective agriculture because the effort exerted by various family members is open to differing estimates.

As many male peasants seek fortune in cities in the fields such as construction and transportation, some of them achieved great success and were able to earn more money than others as a result of special skills or hardwork. Men’s life style changed, their clothing and eating habits have also changed beyond all recognition. Following all these changes, some peasants wanted to change their wives as well. During the time male peasants worked in the cities, their wives were tied by the work in the field. These women were isolated, idle and lost contact with society. Their work as agricultural laborers was normally primitive and heavy. They seemed to age very quickly under such heavy burdens. Furthermore, due to poor education, they quite often found it difficult to understand changes in society. So, even the
wealthy material life resulting from reforms has not changed them much. They seem to be satisfied with their life as it is, and the isolation of their home life keeps them ignorant about the new and exciting world outside. They are distanced from their men who have left the land and become involved in city activities. So marriage crisis seems to be unavoidable.
Chapter 7
Conclusion

China is being transformed in both the countryside and the cities. Despite the formal claim of socialism, markets and the private sector now play an increasingly important role in people's lives. Central planning, the symbol of the socialist state, controlled only a little over 10 percent of all industrial production by 1992. It has been the rapid economic growth from the non-state sector that has enabled China to maintain double-digit growth for more than fifteen years.

The market mechanism, rural industrial development, and household responsibility provided new opportunities for rural women and gave them a more significant economic role in the family. For the first time in Chinese history, alternative employment outside the home became an ideal pattern for many and even most women. The numbers of rural women in nonagricultural occupations have increased. Women are not only workers but also managers of firms, although their percentage is still low in comparison to men. Moreover, women use markets to acquire independent sources of income and new networks of social relations away from the family.

Rural women did not seek to make a revolution in women's position, but they have achieved one nevertheless. Most changes in women's social status and empowerment in the past fifteen years have come as a result of the wide range of social and economic changes within the countryside. Nevertheless, more Chinese women changed their social and economic
positions and gained some degree of individual freedom greater than during any previous period.

However, China still has a long way to go to achieve gender equality. Economic reform and rural development has had a strong impact on a wide scale on women’s employment, family life, as well as on their views and concepts. But China is still in the primary state of socialism. The low level of productivity and the commodity economy in rural areas and the remaining forces of some traditional ideologies still have a strong influence and hinder the growth of the rural economy and the improvement of the people’s material and cultural life. Rural women, despite their gains, are still defined mainly by their role as daughters and mothers. Not every woman is able to grasp the opportunities provided by markets, rural industrial development, and migration (Zhou, 1996).

In addition, China covers a vast territory, the specific policies and the introduction of market mechanisms vary, as a result, regions have developed unevenly. Eastern coastal districts have developed faster than western mountain districts. In backward areas, many women still live the tradition. As illustrated in this paper, in most circumstances, men occupy higher administrative levels and more skilled jobs, and women lower ones. Women workers in township enterprises are concentrated in labor-intensive, low-skill jobs. These industries also have poor working conditions and low wages. Many township enterprises do not implement standards of equal pay for equal work.

Today, modernization provides a competitive arena that is relatively fair. In order to change their status, women must rely on the improvement of their skills, knowledge, and ability. Higher level of education and training can enable women to be more effective in their
attempts to find better jobs and increase their income, and to achieve a position with more power in decision-making and control over resources.
References:


