

WOMEN AND THE NEW PEASANT HOUSEHOLD ECONOMY IN CHINA

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During the past five years, rural development policies in China have been characterised by a rapid and radical restructuring of the relations of production, the single most important effect of which has been the substitution of the peasant household for the collective as the dominant unit of production. The peasant household economy has consequently become a much more complex and autonomous economic unit engaging in a wide range of productive activities which in turn have placed new and important resources at its disposal and led to increasing differentiation and divisions within it. In order to identify women's new productive roles and to analyse the response of peasant women to this restructuring and relocation of production to the peasant household, this paper briefly outlines the main characteristics of current economic reforms in rural China and their likely implications for the sexual division of labour, the intensity and organisation of women's labour, their control over production and the distribution of rewards.

1. THE RELOCATION OF PRODUCTION TO THE HOUSEHOLD

The process by which the peasant has become the major unit of production is the reverse of that of the 1950s when the means of production including land was gradually collectivised. It is a consequence of the new strategy to modernise and develop the rural economy by altering inter-sectoral relations in favour of agriculture, increasing rural production, improving the management of the rural economy, diversifying agriculture and furnishing incentives to raise productivity thereby increasing peasant incomes. To achieve these ends, the post-Mao

government introduced a number of new and radical rural reforms including the rural responsibility system, the expansion of domestic sidelines or individual household production and the diversification and mechanisation of agriculture.

The original aim of the responsibility system was to initiate a new form of management in the collective sector, reduce the size of the labour group and to provide incentives to promote production, and link reward more directly to performance (1). In more than 90 % of China's collectives, the production team has contracted out parcels of land and production output quotas to each peasant household. The household is thus allocated land on a per capita or per labourer basis for crop cultivation over a fixed period of time, usually 15 years, and draught animals and small and medium-sized equipment. On the land, the household contracts to grow specified crops and to sell a portion of the harvest set according to the expected yield of the land to the collective. The household retains enough cereals for its own subsistence and any surplus over and above this is either sold to the State at a higher price or sold in the private market. The household takes responsibility for all field management from sowing to harvesting and for the costs of production including the hire and exchange of labour and small machines. In addition to the responsibility lands the household continues to be allocated a small private plot on which to grow foods for subsistence and for exchange and fodder or other produce over which it has complete control.

Peasant households in addition to cropping based on contracted lands may also contract to undertake a variety of sideline activities. The present government aims to diversify the agricultural economy by broadening the previous emphasis on cereal production and developing the production of commodities for the internal and external market and to provide employment for surplus labour. As with crop production, the production team has contracted out most collectively-owned animals, poultry, fisheries, orchards and other like activities to individual households who are responsible for production and are paid according to output. More important than the contracting out of collective side-

(1) For a longer discussion of the responsibility system and full policy sources see Elisabeth Croll, *Changing Patterns of Rural Women's employment, Production and Reproduction in China*, ILO, Geneva 1984.

lines, however, is the development of domestic sidelines such as raising animals and handicrafts which are financed and undertaken by the peasant household itself (1). Domestic sidelines not only have the advantage that their labour and capital are chiefly provided by the individual peasant household, but that at little cost to the state or the collective they provide quick returns, rapidly increase supplies of food and small consumer goods for subsistence and for exchange and make available raw materials for industry.

As a result of these recent reforms, production has come to be based on the peasant household, and some 85 to 90 % of them are still mixed economy households although more diversified and complex than before. A typical peasant household will thus produce grains from the land allocated to it the collective for subsistence, for purchase by the State and for the market, or cultivate cash crops for State purchase and local markets ; they will also produce vegetables, pigs, poultry production and handicraft goods for their own use and increasingly for the local and export market.

In a new and important development, peasant households are also being encouraged to look elsewhere than to the land for employment and to develop domestic sidelines to the extent that they come to specialise in some form of commodity production. The introduction of specialised households marks the beginning of a new style of household economy or one that is 'small and specialised' as opposed to the mixed economy households which are still 'small and complete' (2). A peasant household is said to be specialised if the main labour force is working or managing some form of specialised commodity production with the rate of commodity reaching 50 % or more and with its income from commodity reaching 50 % or more of the total household income (3). Specialised households need not contract lands from the production team, and some peasant households are encouraged to disengage themselves from working in the fields. Indeed the government anticipates that as few as 30 % of China's 800 million peasants may be engaged in crop cultivation in

(1) For a full discussion of domestic sidelines and full sources see *Ibid.*

(2) 'Developing Specialised Households is a Major Policy', *Renmin Ribao* 23 Jan. 1984.

(3) 'Anhui Regulations on Specialised Households', *Survey of World Broadcasts*, BBC, 28 April 1984 (FE/7629/B11/7).

the future (1). Since most of the rest are to be encouraged to specialise in commodity production, the characteristics of specialised households are important in setting the trend for the future. In 1984, it was estimated that between 10 to 20 % of China's peasant households were 'specialised' households and unidimensional in their focus (2).

As a result of the new reforms, the relationship of the individual peasant household to the collective has been substantially redefined. The collective remains responsible for distributing land and drawing up the terms of the production contracts with individual households. In this, it is advised by State planners who set the cropping patterns, the overall timetables for production and the expected yields from the land. The collective is also responsible for the purchase of production output quotas at a fixed price, and a portion of this produce is then transferred to the State either in the form of agricultural taxes or as the fixed production quotas set for the collective ; in addition the collective may retain some of the produce for its own accumulation, welfare and administrative funds. The government anticipates that a new partnership between the collective and the peasant household will evolve in which the collective, instead of being the main unit of production as in the past, will encourage and support the peasant household by providing goods and services which will enable the households to better fulfil its role as the main unit of production of crops and sidelines. For example, the collective is encouraged to arrange for the supply of seeds, fertiliser, fodder and animals and provide veterinary and other services to ensure high rates of productivity and quality in production. To provide an additional outlet for products, rural fairs and markets have been re-established where goods, foods, local handicrafts and daily necessities may be exchanged between producer and purchaser at prices negotiated according to local supply and demand. The government anticipates that both mixed economy and specialised household in particular will require a new degree of technology, capital, raw materials, transport, storage and processing facilities and also market information and market guidance. The government established guidelines for

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- (1) 'Development Plans in the Rural Areas', *Xinhua News*, 13 March 1984.
(2) 'Expansion of Rural Production', *Survey of World Broadcasts*, BBC, 1 Feb. 1984. (FE/W1272/A/2).

this new division of labour between the collective and the peasant household when it recently required that the new focus of the collective economy at all levels from the production team to the township or commune levels should be the servicing of the peasant household and more particularly the peasant household specialising in commodity production in order to both facilitate production and more particularly to ease circulation, distribution and consumption. These are all areas where the infrastructure in rural areas has been weak in the past and which are mostly beyond the resources of the individual peasant household.

During the past five years then the peasant household has acquired a new degree of authority and independence of the collective in that, although it is still subject to regulations concerning access to land and other means of production, cultivation plans and compulsory sales of production quotas, it now has more control over its surplus produce over and above State quotas, the planning and management of production and the allocation of its material and labour resources. Indeed the expansion and reorganisation of production at the households level has wide implications for the position of women and in particular for the division of labour, the organisation and intensity of women's labour, their control over production and the distribution of rewards within the peasant household.

2. DIVISIONS OF LABOUR

Perhaps the most important repercussion of the reform and one that has immediately and intimately affected the way in which peasant women structure their daily lives has been the reduction of labour supervision by the collective. Again and again in interviews, peasant women noted with evident relief and pleasure that they now exercise a new degree of control over the arrangements of production and enjoy some flexibility in production. Whereas in the past, production team leaders has allocated production tasks each morning and the workpoints they earned had been directly related to and dependent on their presence in the fields for set times regardless of the actual demands of the labour process, now they labour in the fields when crop production necessitates it and turn their attention to alternative activities at other times. Although management and distribution of labour is now decided at the household level, in practical terms the degree of control which women will exer-

cice over their own labour is likely to be primarily determined by both the range of economic activities undertaken by the peasant household and the sexual division of labour within it.

Where all members of a peasant household continue to operate a mixed economy and combine crop cultivation on their contracted lands alongside the production of domestic sidelines, payment according to output and the diversification and unlimited expansion of domestic sideline production has increasingly brought about a new division of labour in which men undertake field work and women the domestic sideline. Previously, both the men and women of the peasant household would have both had to be present in the fields to earn sufficient work points ; now the new division of labour has come about as a consequence of two concurrent trends : the rise in surplus labour in the countryside and the diversification of the rural economy. The new calculation of remuneration according to output and the more efficient use of labour in the fields have both led to a significant decline in the demand for labour in the fields. According to recent national and local reports, surplus labour has risen by a third or so over the past five years, and it is forecast that in the future the number of persons engaged in agriculture may be reduced by some two thirds thus giving rise to surplus labour of some 22 million persons (1). Much of this surplus labour is likely to be made up of women, whether they were previously the main or auxiliary field workers, and peasant women have thus been encouraged to allocate more of their labour to domestic sidelines.

It has long been one of the characteristics of domestic sideline production that its scale of operation has been almost exclusively determined by an individual households access to women's and especially to older women's labour. Occupations such as cultivating vegetables and tending livestock and producing handicrafts have been traditionally performed by the women of the household. Consequently the expansion of domestic sidelines and diversifying the economy by raising pigs, chickens and other animals, fish farming, the cultivation of vegetables and fruit and the establishment of handicraft industries have all broadened the scope of women's income-generating activities so that the

(1) Ma Ping, 'A Challenging Leader', *Women of China*, April 1983 ; Kang Keqing, 'Problems Facing Women in China', *Survey of World Broadcasts*, 13 Oct. 1980.

pattern whereby women stay at home and are engaged in various side-occupations is increasingly a characteristic of households in which the males are employed in full-time agricultural field work (1). Reports describing the way in which peasant households have taken advantage of the new economic reforms to expand their economies beyond field work frequently reveal that, once it is apparent that the men of the household are able to cultivate the lands by themselves, women turn to animal husbandry, handicrafts, food processing and other income-generating activities (2).

A quite different division of labour has been established in peasant household in regions where there was a wide range of alternative employment opportunities outside of agriculture and the men of the household are frequently employed in non-agricultural enterprises. It was not uncommon before 1978 in these regions for the men of the village to move into rural industries, capital construction projects, mining, fishing and forestry and other like occupations. In such regions, the proportion of women employed in the agricultural labour force or in the fields was consequently much higher and sometimes even as high as 80 % or so. Now these women cultivate the contracted lands in addition to expanding their domestic sidelines and undertaking domestic labour. It is commonly reported that many households in the countryside have become such 'half-side' families, that is, those in which the husbands work in occupations other than agriculture or farm work and either commute from the village on a daily basis or are absent for longer periods (3). The new divisions of labour within the household are important for they have immediate consequences for the degree of control which women exercise over production.

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- (1) Xu Dixin, 'On the agricultural responsibility system', *Nongye Jingji Wenti*, Beijing, 11, 1981, p. 6.
 - (2) Liu Fanrong, 'A Hill Family Goes All Out', *Women of China*, July 1983, p. 2 ; Xiao Ming 'What the Responsibility System Brings', *Women of China*, Nov. 1983.
 - (3) Xiu Ling, 'Once Poor, Yanbei is Prospering', *Women of China*, Jan. 1983, pp. 18-19 ; Xiao Mong, *op. cit.*

3. CONTROL OVER PRODUCTION

The question of whether it is women themselves who will now decide on their own production programmes or the male head of the household as traditionally, will very much depend on gender divisions in the labour force. Where the men of the household are employed in agricultural production, then in all probability it will be the male head of the household who has re-acquired authority and who will decide the organisation of labour, the distribution of tasks within the household and receive remuneration due to it from the collective. In these conditions the traditional relations of authority within the household may well be reproduced in production and affect women's authority and share of the rewards. Where the men of the household are engaged in pursuits other than agricultural field work, then women may well have acquired a new flexibility and a large measure of control over the peasant household economy. As one husband who resided away, ruefully remarked on this return to help with the harvest :

Now that she [his wife] handles everything in and outside of the house, I've been reduced to her farmhand (1).

It is also one of the characteristics of specialised households, particularly those producing pigs, chickens and handicrafts, that their operations are frequently planned and managed by the women of the household. Indeed the 'half-side' families and many specialised households have become, for all practical purposes, virtually female-headed and operated, in that in the absence of the men, the women come to plan, manage and control the various economic activities and do not yet seem to have suffered the discrimination characteristic of female farming systems elsewhere.

4. INTENSITY OF FEMALE LABOUR

If peasant women now enjoy a new flexibility and in some instances a new control in organising their production roles, most also recognise that they work harder than before. Combining the individual management and cultivation of contracted lands and expanding domestic sidelines has increased the demands made upon the labour of peasant women who

(1) *Ibid.*

already prior to 1978 laboured from dawn to dusk to fulfil their productive and reproductive roles. In the past few years many women, particularly those who are the sole agricultural workers and who have younger children, have noted that their lives have become much busier as a result of the economic reforms :

'Though its hard work, we peasant women have been accustomed to work in the fields since we were children. Women continue to undertake field work and household work but we have become even busier in the last two years mainly because of keeping domesticated animals at home on the side' (1).

Generally peasant women recognise that they are working harder as a result of the economic reforms, but they also perceive there to be a direct link between their hard work and higher incomes, and it is not uncommon for their earnings to be higher than those of the men of the household and for them to now be the major contributors to the household budget.

5. DISTRIBUTION OF REWARDS

One of the main aims of the rural economic reforms has been to improve peasant livelihood generally by altering the relations between accumulation and consumption in favour of consumption and raising standards of living. Indeed in the first five years a combination of the new policies and a succession of favourable climatic factors have caused the largest overall rise in peasant incomes since the 1950s (2). Peasant households have particularly benefited from reductions in agricultural taxes, rises in agricultural prices and lowered produce quotas all of which have increased peasant household incomes even in the poorer areas. However the question of how far peasant women will benefit from the new prosperity in much of the Chinese countryside is a far more complex question and is dependent on the income and livelihood of the individual household of which she is a member, the size and visibility of her inputs and the relationships of exchange within the peasant household itself.

(1) Xiu Ling, *op. cit.*

(2) See Sample Surveys of Peasant Household Incomes and Expenditures, *Beijing Review*, 24 October 1983, pp. 22-3 ; Lee Travers, 'Post-1978 Rural Economic Policy and Peasant Income in China', *China Quarterly* Vol. 98, June 1984, pp. 241-260.

The welfare of the individual peasant woman will more than ever depend on the labour and material resources of the individual peasant household of which she is a member. If there has been an overall rise in average household income, there has also been increasing differentials between peasant households over the past five years. Not only do differentials between regions according to natural endowments of location, proximity to markets and transport points remain, but there are increasing differentials within regions. The post-Mao government itself has always recognised that the degree to which individual households will benefit from the new economic reforms will vary. In 1982 it anticipated that in the next few years 30 to 40 % of peasant households would become rich, 40 to 50 % would achieve considerable improvements while 15 to 20 % of peasant households with little or no labour power, no technical qualifications and no planning or business acumen would still encounter difficulties in meeting basic needs (1). In a similar vein, the government has forecast that within any one collective, it is likely that on average the richer households will earn two to three times the income of poorer households, and although even greater differentials are probable in some localities, these are seen to be an inevitable consequence of the greater household control of production. At the present time, the government seems prepared to tolerate the rising differentials in the interests of promoting riches for some. Now that the collective plays a much reduced role in deciding incomes and there are increasing differentials between households, the welfare of poorer peasant women will very much depend on the degree that the collective will be able to arrange for equal access to inputs by poorer households and for the welfare and support of households without adequate labour power.

Within the household the distribution of rewards will very much depend on the size and visibility of women's labour inputs and her consequent bargaining power. The calculation of remuneration according to output, in principle, means that women may well receive more equal pay and make a more equal contribution to the household budget than in the past. Previously where both men and women laboured in the fields, the average number of work points allocated to women by the production team

(1) *New China News Analysis* 9 March 1982.

whether they were calculated according to either female labour capacity or the type of agricultural task performed was consistently two to three points lower than those accorded to men. Now that remuneration is made on the basis of fulfilling output quotas and rewards are distributed irrespective of the sex of the producer, women's share of the earnings may be more equal. However where both men and women undertake field work, there is the danger that women's individual contributions, although more equal, may be less visible than in the past for any payment due to the household is now calculated on the basis of total output regardless of the number and identity of family members whose labour contributed to its production. In the past these individual contributions were separately noted at the end-of-harvest-reckoning even if the actual income might still have been handed to the household head in one envelope. In the new system, it may be more difficult for the women themselves and their family members to identify their share of the inputs and bargain over the distribution of rewards.

The question of how far women's separate contribution from domestic sidelines will be recognised by other members of the peasant household, will very much depend on the scale of the domestic sidelines and how far they are defined and represented as 'work' or formal income-generating activities and thus deserving of appropriate recognition. In the past, they were frequently seen to be indistinguishable from domestic labour and therefore not generating of income. However the definition and status of domestic sidelines may become less of a problem as domestic sidelines are expanded and women allocate the major portion of their labour to them and contract sideline production quotas with the collective. Thus it has emerged that in some production teams, a skilled women's annual income from sideline activities such as animals and handicrafts can far exceed that of an able-bodied male. These women alone can earn hundreds of yuan from contracted sidelines and frequently their specialised occupations are so successful that not only does the wife's income unmistakably outweigh that of her husband, but he has even been known to apply for permission to join her enterprise.

The new system of remuneration will not affect the recognition of women's contribution where they constitute the sole workers of the household employed in the fields and indeed they are now likely to contribute a higher proportion of the household budget than other members. Previously field workers had been disadvantaged in terms of income and

other benefits compared to those employed in rural industry, the army and other occupations which put them on a fixed wage outside of agriculture. Now because of higher prices paid for agricultural produce and the opportunities for combining field work with other income-generating activities, field workers have been placed in a better income-generating position than those on fixed wages outside of agriculture and they have come to be the major earners. Thus the new division of labour whereby women either take responsibility for domestic sidelines and commodity production or for field work and domestic sidelines need not necessarily be to her detriment for it is likely to have increased her contribution to the household budget.

However the question of whether women's increasing share in the inputs has affected her bargaining position that is recognised and is reflected in the distribution of rewards and in consumption patterns is a much more difficult one. Traditional age and gender hierarchies have survived in the countryside, data on intra-familial distribution of income, food and other rewards is scarce and the relations of exchange within the household do not seem to be a matter for education or for official concern. Again the bargaining power of the women is likely to be directly affected by the division of labour within the household, their age and position in the household and the presence or absence of the males in farming not to mention personality and other factors.

6. FUTURE TRENDS

At the present time, it is apparent that the multifarious repercussions of current policies practically both benefit and penalise women. Just as the acquisition of a measure of control over the labour process and the increased value placed on women's income-generating activities may contribute to women's authority, economic independence and welfare, so equally they may lead to an intensification of female labour, circumscribe her legal rights to equality and reduce her independence in production and reproduction. Quite how the advantages and disadvantages for women of this present strategy of rural development will balance out in the long-term will very much depend on the future relationship between the collective and the peasant household and the gender divisions and hierarchies within the peasant household itself. So far the emphasis has been on the productive roles of the peasant house-

hold and its acquisition of control over the means of production, over planning, investment and material and labour resource allocation and its participation in the wider economy through exchange. There is evidence to suggest that the peasant household itself perceives its own position to have been both practically and symbolically strengthened by the new reforms (1), but it is also evident that individuals are increasingly dependent on the performance of the peasant household economy to provide for their basic needs and well-being. If a significant group of peasant households are not in a position to take advantage of the new economic reforms to participate in the general rise in peasant incomes and livelihood, then there will be increasing differentiation between peasant women. In the long run, it is the degree to which the collective can ensure equal access to resources by all peasant households and guarantee the welfare of the disadvantaged households which will determine the overall position of peasant women generally and in particular female-operated farming households.

Within the peasant household it is largely the division of labour which will determine the position of women within it, their visibility in production and their share in and control of their earnings. At the present time what is striking about the new policies is that it is assumed that the household and therefore women will benefit, and that in all the literature on the devolution of responsibility to the peasant household, there is little or no attention given to the distribution of productive tasks and labour or rewards within the household itself. Without such attention, the danger is that just as in the process of collectivisation when patriarchal relations survived a radical restructuring of the relations of production, so in households where there is little or no division of labour such patriarchal relations may be strengthened by the relocation of production to the peasant household.

(1) John Gittings, 'From Blossoms to Bricks', *China Now*, Summer 1984 ; 'Rural Population Policy', *Survey of World Broadcasts*, BBC, 18 Feb. 1982 (FE/%/L&/B11/4) ; Population and Education in Family Planning Work, *Renmin Ribao* (Editorial) 29 Sept. 1981.

ABSTRACT

During the past five years, rural development policies in China have been characterised by a rapid and radical restructuring of the relations of production, the single most important effect of which has been the substitution of the peasant household for the collective as the dominant unit of production. This major change has affected the sources of food supply and the mechanisms of the state, collective and market that determine what foodstuffs are produced by, allocated to and purchased by individual households. In turn the restructuring of women's productive roles has affected the intensity and organisation of women's agricultural field labour, their control over production and the distribution of rewards.

RÉSUMÉ

Au cours des cinq dernières années les politiques chinoises de développement rural ont été caractérisées par une restructuration rapide et profonde des rapports de production. La conséquence la plus notable en aura été le passage de la collectivité au ménage agricole en tant qu'unité de production dominante. Ce changement important a eu une incidence sur les sources d'approvisionnements alimentaires ainsi que les mécanismes étatiques de la collectivité, et du marché, qui déterminent les denrées alimentaires que les ménages produisent, reçoivent ou achètent individuellement. Par la même occasion la restructuration des rôles producteurs des femmes a modifié l'intensité et l'organisation du travail féminin agricole, ainsi que leur maîtrise sur la production et la répartition des gratifications.