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Policy Shifts and their Effects on Childcare in a Rural Chinese Context

Based on the field research in a central Chinese village, this article examines the effects of policy shifts on childcare in different social, political and economic contexts in rural China. The collective production (1950–1978) sets strict constraints on rural people for compulsory participation in agricultural activities. The economic reforms (post-1978) have brought about dramatic changes in rural areas, but women still shoulder triple burden of farm work, housework, and care work when men migrate out for paid work. The article argues that women act actively in face with the changing society, and that declines in birthrates in rural China are due to economic reforms and family planning policy (1979).

Brief introduction to Chinese rural society

Over the past 50 years, dramatic changes have taken place since the revolution of 1949 changed China into a socialist state. In rural areas, the first land reform of the early 1950s collectivized privately-owned land systems. The state advocated for women's participation in collective production with such political slogans as "Times are different, men and women are equal." "What men can do, women can do too." This period witnessed women exhorted to "hold up half the sky" in terms of agricultural activities. The economic reforms (post-1978) have, however, changed the collective production system to the household responsibility system. Household once again becomes a basic unit of production. This gives rural people relative autonomy to arrange agricultural activities, which, in turn, results in men migrating to urban centres for paid work in cities and women doing farm work, housework, and care work. This is known as the "feminization of agriculture" in rural China (Croll, 1983; Wolf, 1985).

Substantial research has been done on women in China, including the

works by Li Xiaojiang (1994, 1999), Elizabeth J. Croll (1978, 1983), Margery Wolf (1985), and Ellen R. Judd (1994, 2002). However, little or no research examines the impacts of the interrelatedness of state policies and social norms on childcare in rural China. Based on the data collected in a central-China village, this article examines the effects of policy shifts on childcare during the periods of the collective production (1950-1978) and the household responsibility production (post-1978) to explore how rural women balanced farm work, housework, and care work in different social, political, and economic contexts. This article argues that women quickly adapted to the triple burden of work, and made adjustments necessary for the changing society, thus actively contributing to the continuation, transformation, and reproduction of rural family life and to changes in rural ideology on family life.

Study on childcare in a central Chinese village

The study on childcare in rural China is part of my research on the effects of policy shifts and marital relations in a rural Chinese context. Qualitative methods were used to study how individuals experienced and interacted with their social world, and the meaning it had for them (Merriam, 2002). A stratified sample was used to choose couples as participants in order to hear women's voices as well as men's. This sampling helped to avoid adopting the viewpoint of one only gender, but presented the situation as if it encompassed all of social reality (Eichler, 1986). With the variety of the ages of participants ranging from 24 to 92, I expected to have a longterm view on the changes in people's attitudes to particular events; thus, comparison and contrast would be made accordingly. A semi-structured questionnaire was developed for the village research, which gave participants relatively more space to express themselves in depth. It also was also designed to probe villagers' everyday lives through their lived experience and stories, which, in turn, would reflect changes in childcare in a village context.

Childcare and the collective production (1950-1978)

Freidrich Engels (1975) claims that, "The emancipation of woman will only be possible when women can take part in production on a large, social scale, and domestic work no longer claims anything but an insignificant amount of her time" (221). Socialist China took Engels's approach to encourage women to participate in social activities. Women's labour became indispensable in agricultural activities. They were regarded as "holding-up half the sky" in the collective production. At the national level, women's production participation increased from 20 to 40 percent in the early 1950s to 70 percent of adult women in 1957 (Gao, 1994: 81).

At the village level, every collective production team had its rules and regulations for its members to observe. Based on the team rules and regulations, men and single women had 28 working days a month. They worked three times a day: the early morning, morning, and afternoon.¹ Married women

had 24 working days a month, and twice a day without doing farm work in the early morning. During those times, they were supposed to take care of their young children and cook breakfast. But, care work and housework were not paid work; women did not gain work points for childcare and housework. Work value was assessed in work points, with ten work points a day for men and eight work points a day for women. Production teams allocated grain to every household partly based on work points and partly on the number of family members. Consequently, more work points meant more grain for rural families. Collective production activities were uniformly arranged. There was also a fine for those who could not fulfill the working-day requirement. With one day less, one would have a day's work points subtracted from those he or she earned. One had to ask for leave if he/she was ill or wanted to visit relatives or friends. The inflexibility of work hours and work arrangements made it difficult for young mothers to balance childcare and collective farm work, particularly those who did not have help from parents-in-law or other relatives. Due to the strict rules and regulations of the collective team, villagers felt tied to the agricultural production. They never had holidays or free weekends. Their only holidays or days off were rainy and snowy days when outdoor work was not possible.

With childcare as women's work, and participation in collective production was an obligation for every team member, what were young mothers' lives like if they needed to tend infants or toddlers and do farm work at the same time? Ming, a 71-year-old woman, remembers how her family of seven members (she and her husband and their five children), lived in a straw house consisting of three rooms. Her family also shared the house with her mother-in-law and young brother-in-law, who was a teenager then. Her family lived in one of the three rooms, her mother-in-law and brother-in-law in another. The sitting room was shared between them. They also shared a kitchen, a small straw hut in the yard. Ming was not on good terms with her mother-in-law, so the latter refused to offer help with childcare. Talking about childcare during the collective production period, Ming reiterated that young children are lucky now; they would not be locked in the house. Their mothers did not have to earn work points.

My two daughters were [born] one year apart. When the second daughter was born, the first daughter was still breastfed. I did not stop [breastfeeding] her because we did not have nutritious food for a one-year-old child. So, the two were breastfed together. My mother-in-law would not help take care of either of them. She went to live with her daughter who worked in the city....

When I went to work in the field, I had to lock the infant in the house and bring the elder one with me on fine days. During the work break, I would run back home to feed the younger one. Sometimes, she would cry herself hoarse; sometimes she would fall from the bed and [I'd find her] ly-

ing on the ground. I even found her asleep near the door when I came back from work to feed her. It must be that she fell to the ground and crawled there. At night the two slept with me, one on each side. You know there was always bed-wetting when they were young. I used to sleep in the wet bed. (Ming)

In the locality, mothers almost always sleep with their babies instead of sleeping in separate beds. Ming slept with the two little girls at night, and as she mentioned, there was always bed-wetting. She also said, “I did not mind hard times. I did not mind whether he [her husband] helped or not. He worked hard for the family.” Ming added that her husband was very fond of children and would “help” her when he had time.

To balance housework, care work, and the collective work, mothers would ask their older children to take care of the younger ones or to help with cooking. It was common in rural villages to see older siblings caring of younger ones. Older sisters, in particular, would be given the responsibility to help with childcare. Sansao, a 76-year-old woman had seven children. She would ask her first two children, both girls, to cook breakfast and to take care of the younger siblings.

My daughters were able to do it at the age of seven or eight. Now I'll tell you how hard my life was then. When my second daughter was seven or eight years old, she cooked breakfast for the family² while her elder sister attended the younger siblings. After coming back from the early morning work, I went to the kitchen to see how breakfast was cooked. I smelled some bad smell there. I asked my daughter what it was. She said she didn't know. Seeing the lid of the cooking pot on the ground, I picked it up and saw there was something on it. I thought it must be some food, but it turned out to be child excrement. You see I wanted to earn work points and it put my life into such a mess. I could not blame a child of eight years old for it. Life was really hard in those days. (Sansao)

When rural parents placed their priority on earning work points, they also asked their male children to help with either cooking or child care, as was the case with Yilan, whose first two children were sons. Yilan remembers that she went to work three times a day and asked her 14-year-old son to cook breakfast and her 12-year-old son to take care of the younger siblings.

I had to ask them to do this because my husband and I wanted to earn more work points. In fact, my husband looked after the cattle of the production team. He was busier since he had to feed the cattle after work when people went home. I had no way but to ask my children help. You know, boys were naughty. When my first son did not want to do cooking, he would ask his younger brother to do it. It would be okay if the younger one obeyed him.

Otherwise, they would quarrel, or even fight with each other. They would cry and blame each other when I was back from the early morning work. Of course, I had to cook breakfast. (Yilan)

Mothers took the responsibility for sick children, because fathers could earn more work points. Usually, mothers would carry their children to the brigade clinic to see a doctor. Lan, a 70-year-old woman, stated:

I still remember I had to carry my sick daughter on my back to the clinic. I could not ride the bicycle and we did not have one. I carried her on my back all the way there. He [her husband] had to earn work points, and I could not wait for him to come back. You know I had six children. It was my responsibility to attend to a sick child. (Lan)

Village women's stories evoked my memories of my own childhood. I remembered that my mother would bring me to the work site on fine days and ask me to play with other children of a similar age when their mothers were also working. I also remembered that some mothers would simply leave their children playing in the village when they went to work. Children that misbehaved, once left alone with their peers, would climb trees looking for young birds in their nests, or fight with each other for children's reasons. Sometimes this caused conflicts between their parents. In some families, therefore, older brothers or sisters were forced to quit school in order to help with childcare. This was the case with Kelan, a woman in her 40s. She was the first of five children in the family. Her father was a worker in the nearby factory; her mother was in poor health. Kelan did not remember when she began to take care of her younger siblings, but she did remember that she carried her younger sister to school on fine days and let her play outside the classroom. However, she had to drop out when she was in the third year of the primary school.

Regarding the farm work, housework, and care work that women did in the collective time, Yewen, a rural elderly man, said: "Women worked the hardest and suffered the most."

Childcare and the household responsibility production (post-1978)

Gale Summerfield (1994) observes in his research on rural China that married women remain in agricultural work, which is now centered on family farming. As men migrate for urban work, the share of women in the agricultural workforce has grown (119). My data point to similar findings; male migration results in the phenomenon of "the feminization of agriculture" in the locality. A village leader said that nearly every adult man in the village did out-migrating work, leaving farm work, housework, and care work to women.

With men migrating to cities for work, the farm work, as well as the housework and care work became women's responsibility. Kelan, a 48-year-

old rural woman, related her life story in the early years after the economic reforms. She said that in the mid-1980s, her large, extended family of three generations was divided in two: her father-in-law lived with her family and her mother-in-law lived with her brother-in-law's family.³ Her straw-roofed house was too old to protect the family from summer rains. On rainy days, she had to use umbrellas inside the house to protect objects and furniture from dripping rainwater coming through the roof. Usually, heavy rains kept her awake at night and made her fear that the shabby house would collapse. With a bitter smile, Kelan said she had to also lay her infant son under an umbrella on rainy nights. To earn money to build a new house, her husband migrated for work, leaving all the family responsibilities to her: farm work, housework, and care work. She was also responsible for raising two heads of cattle to sell in the market, which added to her work load. In summer, she would gather green grass to feed the cattle. When she went to work, if the weather was fine, she would bring her son along.

I had to bring my son with me to the field on fine days. When he wanted to sleep, I spread a coat on the ground, laid him on it, and covered him with another coat I brought with me. After I gathered green grass for our cattle, I would carry my son and a heavy basket of green grass alternatively back home. I had to wash the green grass clean in the nearby pond and cut it into smaller pieces before putting it into the feeding trough. (Kelan)

When asked if her husband could quit his out-migration work to help with the farming, Kelan responded with a sigh: "We needed to earn money to build this house [referring to the house in which they lived]. Also, my father-in-law was not in good health. We had to save some money." Kelan added that a couple of years after the family division her father-in-law had a stroke and lost the ability to take care of himself. She took care of the him, helping him take medicine, changing his clothes, and doing his laundry by hand. There were no washing machines in the village in the 1980s. This heavy triple burden reduced Kelan to skin and bones, she said. When she went to visit her own mother, her mother cried to see her bony, thin daughter.

Daughters-in-law in extended families get much more help with household work than their peers in nuclear families. Their parents-in-law do more of the farming and other household work such as cooking and cleaning up after each meal. When infants become toddlers or school children, grandmothers and grandfathers will take care of them to enable the young mothers to do paid work. This is the case with Ying. During the early 1980s, she had out-migrating work together with her husband during the day and came home after a day's work to arrange everything for her children.

He [her husband] drove the tractor for transportation. I accompanied him to help loading and unloading goods. I left my children with their grand-

father. I returned home every day to do the housework and care work, such as making steamed bread or cooking some dishes for the next day. I also did laundry after coming back from a day's work, since my father-in-law was not able to do this well. I did not have a mother-in-law. (Ying)

As is noted in the village research, women make adjustments to meet their family's needs whenever it is necessary. Young mothers will likely provide substantial care for their infants even if they have parents-in-law to help as rural people do not hire babysitters or nannies. Rural people put a lot of emphasis on care work, including care for other family members such as care for the sick and elderly parents. To them, care work is an indispensable part of family life. As one participant claims, "Without this [care work], you may not work for money, not work for grain. You may not have interests in work. Without people, what is the use of money? Without people, nothing becomes important." Villagers regard out-migration as work for cash income, farming as work for food, and housework and care work as their own work. They take care of the housework and care work for their own families. Children are the future generation, and the future of their parents.

Based on the late 1980s and early 1990s survey data on families and households, Laura Sanchez and Elisabeth Thomson (1997) examined the effect of the transition to parenthood on the division of labour among U.S. couples. They claimed, "Motherhood increases wives' housework hours and reduces employment hours. Wives' traditional gender attitudes reduce their employment, but not their housework" (747). Childcare is sometimes enjoyable, but it is also tiring and is a significant responsibility. Xing said her husband would rather do cooking than caring of their 5 years old son. She said her son was mischievous and restless. She had to keep an eye on him every minute he was awake otherwise he might run away without her knowing when he left. This is similar to Jan Windebank's (2001) research findings on dual-earner couples in Britain and France. She notes, "[T]he care of young children is a 24-hour-a-day job. Parents must either be permanently available themselves for pre-school children and outside school hours for the over fives/sixes, or must find someone else to replace them" (281). Margrit Eichler (1997), from her research on families, policies, and gender equality in Canada, forcefully argues, "[W]omen all over the world do most of the unpaid housework and caring work, while at the same time doing a substantial portion of the paid work" (60).

As Judd (1994) puts it, today it is common for grandmothers to provide alternative childcare. Feinian Chen (2003) claims that there is no evidence to support such a norm in historical China. Childcare was strictly the mother's responsibility, not the grandmother's. The duty of a daughter-in-law was to serve her mother-in-law and alleviate her burden, rather than the other way around (560). However, Sulamith Heins Potter and Jack M. Potter (1990), noting the social obligations and mutual responsibilities of Chinese households, observe that membership in a particular household does not imply that social

obligations are limited to members of the household. Grandmothers continue to take care of their sons' children, so that their daughters-in-laws can work, whether they are members of the same household or not (216).

Comparing the collective production system with the household responsibility production, the former was uniformly arranged and strict in timetable while the latter was more flexible. More often I discovered that women took advantage of the flexibility of doing farm work and arranged their schedule according to family needs, such as doing field work after sending their children to school, bringing their toddlers to the field in the morning when it was not too hot, or cutting green grass as forage in the late afternoon. Rural women regarded the flexibility in performing agricultural activities as *ziyou*, meaning freedom. Conducting research in rural China, Judd (1990) found that, "A keynote in women's discourse and strategies in rural China is the concept of freedom. Rural women themselves speak of this in direct and practical terms in relation to choices they do or do not have available to them ... free from previous constraints, women will be able to exercise initiative, demonstrate ability, and achieve success more readily" (59).

Changing notions of fertility

China initiated its family planning policy in 1979. It was managed as a top-down process. The first few years of its implementation met with hard resistance, as Deborah Davis and Stevan Harrell (1993) contend. "The state, by implementing the planned-birth campaign, initially put itself at cross-purposes with just those cultural rules that shaped the pre-revolutionary Chinese family. It later had to compromise and loosen the restrictions, at least in the rural areas. In 1989, any rural couple whose first child was a daughter was extended the option of having an additional child" (Cooney and Li cited in Deutsch, 2006: 367). My data show that the one-child families in the village where I conducted research started to appear in the early 1990s, though birth rates in the village were on the decline for some time, as shown in the following table.

Birth Rates in the Village by the Year of Marriage/Per Couple	
Years	Number of children
1950-1959	6.3
1960-1969	3.3
1970-1979	3
1980-1989	2
1990-2005	1.5

China's family planning policy, however, is not the only factor that led to declining birth rates. What other factors contributed to the decline in the birth rates in rural China? Here are the stories of two couples that only had one child that might provide some answers. One couple married in 1990; they have a 13-year-old son. The other couple were married in 1993 and they have a 12-year-old daughter. Linyan, mother of the 13-year-old, came from a southern province and belonged to an ethnic minority. Linyan said that the woman leader in charge of birth control in the village told her that she might have a second child, but she and her husband decided not to. Being the first of nine children in the family, Linyan was responsible for a great deal of care work when she was still very young. Also, in her in-law's family, there were conflicts when her parents-in-law were alive because of old-age support among the married brothers and between her and her mother-in-law. She said, "What is the use of having more children? One is enough if we can provide a good education." The couple took pride in their only son who did well in school. The second couple, Anjia and Guochao, had a similar story. It was Guochao, in his mid-30s, who said that he thought girls and boys were the same. He said he was the youngest of six children in the family. He saw the quarrelling between his mother and sisters-in-law. Family poverty forced him to quit school for out-migrating work at the age of 13:

Just think, a boy of 13 went to work in a construction site, and worked with adults and as an adult. We decided to have one child, so we could have more time and energy to earn money for our own old-age support and for our daughter's education. Suppose I have one mian bao, [Chinese for western bread], my daughter may have the whole thing. If I had two children, they would have to divide it. The same is true of the financial support needed for my daughter's education. (Guochao)

Guochao continued, "Talking about old-age support, sons and daughters are the same. Just think how my own brothers treated our parents." There were also some other young mothers with only one child who intended to continue out-migrating work as they did before marriage, though it was difficult for them to say whether or not they intended to have second children when their first ones were only several months old. It is true that few women disputed that women's lives were better now than in the past when women had more children. Karen Hardee, Zhenming Xie, and Baochang Gu (2004) claim that China's one-child policy, however, placed women—particularly those in rural areas—in a situation where they were pressured by the government's child-bearing requirements on the one side and by society's preference for sons on the other. There is no doubt that "women's status is higher now.... Women of [the young] age all have [paid] jobs" (73). It could be concluded that the reduced fertility rate enabled young mothers who were in their 20s and 30s to find urban opportunities for paid work to improve their standard of living,

which, in turn, led to a rise in women's status in the family.

The village data showed that the younger cohort of men and women received relatively more education than their elder generation, with some exceptions such as Guochao who had to drop out of school for out-migration work. Young people had more opportunities to work in cities, so they were influenced by state propaganda on birth control from a young age. They had different perspectives on having children than did their parents. Also, rural parents, as parents elsewhere, wanted to provide their children with the best education possible. In terms of the decline in fertility rates, Yunxiang Yan (2003), referring to the demographic factor, claims that young parents in the 1990s, born in the early 1970s, grew up in a social environment where birth control was emphasized as a fundamental strategy for national development. This is in sharp contrast with the social norms of their elders who grew up with the traditional ideology (209). These changing notions of fertility lie both in the state family-planning policy as a restraining factor and in the young people's changing notions of having children.

Conclusion

The shift of state policies from the collective production to the household responsibility production has had significant impact on childcare in Chinese rural contexts. Under collective production, women had to place priority on the collective production, which made it hard for them to balance farm work and childcare. When men migrated out for urban jobs after the economic reforms, women endured a triple burden of farm work, housework, and care work. In rural China, as is elsewhere in the world, housework and care work are forever women's responsibility and constitute unpaid work.

Regarding the notion of having children, the economic reforms and family-planning program have changed the traditional concept that many children bring much happiness. Rural people, particularly young people from their own life experience and that of their parents, come to realize that many children might not bring about happiness to the parents or to the children. They prefer to focus their parental love on giving the one child they have more attention and care, and on providing them with good education.

¹Villagers divide a day's work into three sections, i.e., the early morning work from sunrise to breakfast at around eight or nine o'clock; the morning work from after breakfast until lunch at noon, and the afternoon work from after lunch until sunset. In the summer, afternoon work starts after villagers take a short nap. This working pattern is also known as *ri chu er zuo, ri lo er xi*, meaning "start work at sunrise and rest at sunset."

²In rural villages, breakfast used to be porridge and bread, together with pickled vegetables if they had some in the household. They did not have any other kinds of cooked dishes. Otherwise, children could not manage to do the cooking.

³This is one of the ways for the old-age support in rural areas, i.e., elderly parents might live in the same house, but have meals separately from their sons' families.

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