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## A longitudinal study of married women's probability of being housewives in reforming urban China

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**A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF MARRIED WOMEN'S PROBABILITY OF  
BEING HOUSEWIVES IN REFORMING URBAN CHINA**

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Sociology

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study examines married women's employment status and the factors associated with their being full-time housewives between 1989 and 2004 in urban China. I argue that the transition from a command economy to a market-oriented economy since the early 1980s has had negative impacts on married women's labor force participation. Using six waves of the Chinese Health and Nutrition Survey (1989, 1991, 1993, 1997, 2000, and 2004), I find that the percentages of full-time housewives in urban China tripled in just 15 years, and the largest amount of growth occurred in the most recent period. Regression analyses confirm that married women are more likely to be full-time housewives in 2004 than in other years. The results also show that whether married women become housewives or stay in the labor market depends on three micro-level factors –human capital, husbands' income, and the presence of pre-school children. Married women with lower educational attainment, who were not previously employed, and those with pre-school children are more likely to be housewives. In addition, it appears that some married women are full-time housewives because they can afford this kind of lifestyle, such as those with higher income husbands. These results suggest a polarization process in urban China, that some married women are forced to leave the labor market because of their lack of human capital or/and their child care responsibilities, while others in more affluent households may choose the lifestyle of being housewives.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

My interest in studying housewives in “postsocialist” China<sup>1</sup> began after I came to study in the United States and, for the first time, had direct contact with female students from Mainland China. I found that cultural differences – specifically those related to gender roles – between Mainland China and my country, Taiwan, were quite intriguing. In general, female students from China seemed to me to be more independent, more career-oriented, and less bound by beliefs or behaviors associated with traditionally feminine roles than are Taiwanese students. For example, most of the female students from Taiwan are single – it is extraordinary to find one who is married and temporarily separated from her husband in order to pursue a graduate degree. On the other hand, there are quite a few married female students from Mainland China who are here without their husbands. Moreover, while many married women in Taiwan do the majority of the household work, it is not unusual for married women from Mainland China to say that their husbands actively participate in household work. While the thought of being a full-time housewife after marriage is sometimes entertained among Taiwanese students, it seems to be almost unthinkable for female students from Mainland China, where full-time housewives are often devalued and considered to be unproductive and dependent.

Although these Chinese students are far better educated and more wealthy than the majority of the people in their homeland, their attitudes and behaviors seem consistent with the country’s underlying communist ideology of gender equality that was prominent during Mao’s era between 1949 and the late 1970s. This ideology can be best summed up with Mao Zedong’s famous slogan during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, “Women hold up half the sky,” a viewpoint that was prevalent in communist China. The Chinese communist regime regarded

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “postsocialist China” to describe the period of economic reforms in urban China that began in the early 1980s. A detailed discussion about this era is provided in Chapter Two.

women's labor as an integral part of the state's development strategy, not only because women's labor force participation was considered a key element to Chinese women's liberation from the centuries-old patriarchal feudal system, but also because a reserved labor force could be mobilized during the labor shortage periods such as the Great Leap Forward during the late 1950s (Andors 1983). During Mao's era, numerous efforts were made to achieve universal employment for women. One result was that urban China had one of the highest female labor force participation rates in the world, and full-time housewives were a rare phenomenon in Chinese cities before the 1990s (Bauer et al 1992).

However, the economic reforms that began in the early 1980s have caused major socioeconomic changes in China and these changes have generated concerns about gender inequality. Many have worried that, as the emerging labor markets become a major force shaping gender stratification, women are losing out in the postsocialist reform era (Honig & Hershatter 1988; Zuo 2003). Thus, a consequence of the ongoing transition from a central command to a market-oriented economy may be that gender relations in China are becoming more similar to those in other East Asian societies, where it is more common for married women to be full-time housewives.

Before I continue to discuss how economic reforms may have led to the emergence of housewives in postsocialist China, it is necessary to point out that the focus of this study is limited to housewives in urban China, for the following reasons. First, one of the fundamental characteristics of the Chinese economy since the establishment of the Chinese Communist regime in 1949 was the formal separation of the agriculture-centered rural and the manufacturing-centered urban economies and labor forces (Betcherman 2004; Fleisher & Yang 2003). This separation was effectively maintained through the strict "Hukou" system (a

household registration system that distinguishes rural and urban households) until the 1990s. The distinct difference in characteristics of urban and rural areas explains why the majority of the studies on the impact of economic reforms in postsocialist China focus on only one of them at a time. Second, in the context of my study of housewives, the agricultural nature of rural China also makes it less appropriate, since agricultural jobs are often seasonal and in general have more flexible work schedules than non-agricultural jobs (Chen 2005); and they are more compatible with married women's family responsibilities. Third, because agricultural workers often receive non-wage compensation and/or engage in household-based agricultural production, it is also difficult to calculate their individual/household income, which is an important variable in this study. Finally, because much of the economic progress in postsocialist China is concentrated in cities where the rapidly rising personal income may make being housewives an affordable choice for married women, urban China is more suitable to examine whether married women have become more likely to be full-time housewives under the influence of the economic reforms.

### **Female Labor Force Participation in Communist China**

I now return to the issue of how economic reforms may have affected married women's labor force participation in urban China. As mentioned previously, under Mao's regime, urban China had one of the highest female labor force participation rates in the world. This nearly universal female labor force participation was achieved within two decades following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Prior to the Chinese communist regime, less than 30% of women were employed in Nanjing, the capital of the Republic of China before 1949. In contrast, over 70% of women married between 1950 and 1965 were in the labor force and the number grew to over 90% among women married between 1966 and 1976, the period of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (Pan et. al 1987). This high level of female labor force

participation continued until well into the late 1980s. For example, in 1987 – four years after the initial implementation of the urban economic reforms – 90% of urban women aged 20 to 44 were in the labor force (Bauer et al.1992).

Prior to the economic reforms, regardless of gender, every able-bodied citizen was expected to work in order to contribute to the state economy. Jobs were almost exclusively assigned by the state. In most urban households, therefore, husbands and wives were both working full-time. Due to the Chinese government’s “equal pay” policy, they also earned comparable wages. Within the context of universal employment, low wages further encouraged wives to remain employed because husbands’ wages alone could not support a typical urban family. The few full-time housewives in pre-reform urban China likely had very little education. According to data from the 1987 One Percent Population Survey, while 39% of women in the labor force had primary school education or less, for non-working women the percentage was 70% (Bauer et al. 1992).

In comparison to the nearly universal employment among married women in communist China, as of 1990, the female labor force participation rates in Japan for women aged 20 to 25, 25 to 34, and 35 to 44 were 75.1%, 56.6%, and 66.3%, respectively (Statistics Bureau of Japan 2005). In 1992, the labor force participation of married women in South Korea was 47% (Chun & Oh 2002) while the labor force participation of married women aged 20 to 50 in Taiwan was 45.3% (Vere & Wong 2002). These numbers suggest that, when compared with other East Asian societies, full-time housewives were remarkably scarce in urban China before the 1990s.

### **Reforms and Married Women’s Labor Force Participation: Pushes and Pulls**

The ongoing economic reforms in urban China since the 1980s, however, may have negative impacts on married women’s labor force participation, even to the point of encouraging



some of them to become full-time housewives. First of all, since jobs were no longer allocated by the state, whether a person engages in wage work or not has become more a matter of personal/household choice in postsocialist China. China has been one of the fastest growing economies in the world since the 1990s with an average annual GDP growth rate between 1990 and 2003 of 8.5% (United Nations Development Programme 2004). The annual disposable income of urban households also grew from 3,257 yuan in 1990 to 8,472 yuan in 2003<sup>2</sup> (National Bureau of Statistics of China). This rapid economic development has created a class of wealthy households that could be supported by a single wage-earner. Within this setting, married women might find it more attractive to stay home, rather than to juggle between work and family.

In addition, although working women faced the work/family conflict long before the economic reforms, the tension between the roles of workers and wives/mothers is likely to have become greater in the reform era. On the one hand, the new market-oriented economy generates attractive economic opportunities in the private sector that were not available in the old central command economy. This encourages individuals to invest more in the workplace in anticipation of higher returns. On the other hand, the new labor markets, especially those in the private sector, are also more competitive and less secure, and hence require workers' greater commitment to work. Further, the decline of the state and the collective sectors means that more women are now employed in the private sector where public child care assistance is less widely available. Therefore, the tradeoff between work and family should be a more serious issue for working women in the reform era.

Married women's labor force participation in postsocialist China is also influenced by other characteristics of the new labor markets. The steady withdrawal of governmental intervention and policies on gender equality, for example, may have created labor markets with more

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<sup>2</sup> Yuan of year 2003 was used to adjust for inflation during the period.

obstacles to female employees, especially to those who are working in private enterprises that are less regulated by the government than the state enterprises. Unlike the United States and many other countries with policies such as affirmative action to protect women and minorities, there is almost no legislation and law enforcement regarding gender equality in the workplace in China (Cai & Wu 2006). Thus, with ample supplies of inexpensive young female labor in China, firms can limit the hiring of married women based on the belief that married women are less committed to work and, thus, avoid the provision of maternity leave and other associated benefits. A New York Times' report (2005) confirms that factories in China often practice gender discrimination publicly by setting age limits in hiring and by prohibiting female workers from getting married.

It has also been shown that women in urban China face higher risks of unemployment and layoff than do their male counterparts in the reform era (Cai & Wu 2006). For instance, between 1994 and 2000, state-owned enterprises began the reform and the reconstruction processes necessary to compete with private enterprises in the market economy. The result was that a large number of women working in state-owned enterprises were laid off. As economic development replaces gender equality as the top priority of the Chinese government and the market instead of the government becomes the main mechanism for the allocation of resources, married women in urban China, for a variety of reasons, may be increasingly likely to withdraw from the labor market and return home.

On the other hand, there are also reasons to expect that the dual-income household will continue to be the mainstream in the reform era. First of all, couples may both have to be employed in order to minimize the risk of unemployment in a more dynamic, unstable economic environment. For instance, some couples suggest that an ideal arrangement among couples in

urban China is to have one person working in a state-owned enterprise while the other works in the private sector. This is because jobs in the state sector are still considered to be what is called the “iron rice bowl” (positions with guaranteed job security, income, and benefits) while jobs in the private sector in the new economy promise more economic returns with a better outlook but less job security and fringe benefits. In addition, although the annual disposable income of urban households is rising rapidly, so is the cost of living. Therefore, married women of the typical middle class family in urban China may not have the luxury to quit their jobs.

We also have to take into account that, since employment has been an essential identifying trait for Chinese women in the past several decades, it may be psychologically difficult for many married women to suddenly abandon their labor force involvement and become full-time housewives. It is not uncommon for Chinese people to have a negative view about the role of housewives. Thus, women may find it difficult to label themselves housewives even if they are not currently employed.

Finally, married women’s labor force participation could also be influenced by the implementation of the One-child policy in 1979 that largely restricts the maximum number of children every couple can have to one with few exceptions in urban areas. As a result, instead of taking care of two or more children as women in many other countries do, the majority of women in urban China married after the late 1970s have only one child (Fong 2004). This should partially reduce the heavy burden of child care and allow more married women to be employed continuously after childbirth.

### **The Plan of This Dissertation**

The discussion thus far suggests that the drastic socioeconomic changes generated by the economic reforms beginning in the early 1980s and set in full force since the mid-1990s could

negatively impact married women's labor force participation in urban China, although there also are other factors that would foster their continuous employment in the reform era. The purpose of this study is to explore whether there is indeed a significant increase in the number of full-time housewives in postsocialist urban China, a subject that has not been studied previously, and to examine how various factors may affect married women's probability of being housewives.

To understand how gender stratification in China may have evolved during the reform period, most of the previous studies have focused on women's positions in the labor market, such as the types and the quality of jobs they hold (Matthews & Nee 2000; Michelson & Parish 2000) and the gender gap in earnings (Shu & Bian 2003). This exclusive focus on individuals' labor force outcomes, however, neglects the other side of the story – the small but growing population of women who are withdrawing from the labor market since the 1990s. To have a better assessment of the changes in gender inequality in postsocialist China, this study will examine the emergence of full-time housewives in urban China, which would not only fill in the gaps left by the majority of the gender stratification literature, but also contribute to our understanding about married women and their families in urban China.

Due to the use of the data collected from different periods of the economic reform, previous studies have often yielded mixed results when examining the impact of these reforms on gender inequality. In general, data gathered from the earlier reform period would reveal less gender inequality than those from a later period when the reforms were in full force. One significant advantage of this study, thus, is the use of six waves of the China Health and Nutrition Survey (1989, 1991, 1993, 1997, 2000, and 2004) that cover different periods of reform. This should address the problem of inconsistent results from past studies on gender inequality in postsocialist China (Entwisle et al. 1995). Utilizing longitudinal data spanning from 1989 to 2004, this study

should provide us with a better picture of married women's changing roles in the urban Chinese household in the era of economic reform.

The remaining chapters are organized as follows: Chapter Two provides a more detailed discussion of the socioeconomic and cultural environments in urban China during the reform period. Building on this background knowledge, Chapter Three discusses the major theoretical perspectives on women's labor force participation and develops a model and hypotheses for the study. Chapter Four provides information on the data set used in this study – the China Health and Nutrition Survey – and the research methods employed. The results of the analyses are presented in Chapter Five, which consists of two sections: the first presents results from cross-sectional analyses while the second reports results from the multivariate longitudinal analyses. Finally, Chapter Six discusses the theoretical significance of the results and concludes with the implications and limitations of this study.

## **CHAPTER 2: MARRIED WOMEN'S WORK AND FAMILY ROLES IN URBAN CHINA**

Before I review the major theoretical perspectives on married women's labor force participation, it is essential to discuss the unique socioeconomic and cultural environments of urban China following the recent economic reforms. This will help us understand married women's shift between work and family within the social/cultural context of urban China. This chapter starts with an historical overview of Chinese women's labor force participation up until the beginning of the economic reforms, followed by a discussion of the economic reforms and how the shift toward market economy and the reemergence of more patriarchal gender norms may affect married women's employment in urban China.

### **Chinese Women's Labor Force Participation**

This section begins with women's employment in pre-1949 China. Although the emphasis of this dissertation is on the impact of urban China's transition from a socialist economic system to a market-oriented system on labor force participation of married women, a quick summary of women's participation in wage work in pre-1949 China is useful to highlight the differences between pre-1949 and post-1949 periods and the contrast between the socialist perspective on gender equality and long-standing patriarchal gender norms.

One of the central features of the traditional Chinese family is women's subordination to men. As illustrated in the concept of the "three obediences," a young unmarried woman must be obedient to the wishes of her father; when married, to her husband; and in widowhood, to her son. Taught to be dependent, passive, and obedient, the ideal role for women in traditional Chinese society was restricted to the domestic arena. Despite this, before the 1949 communist revolution, young unmarried women from the lower classes, most often the peasantry, had participated in wage work outside the home, mostly due to the subsistence need of their families under harsh

economic conditions (Andors 1983). Unfortunately, no national statistics on female labor force participation in the pre-1949 era are available. The extent of women's participation in work also varied widely by region. For instance, in the early 1930s, close to two-thirds of the factory workers in Shanghai were women, but women only represented 10 percent of cotton mill workforce in Tianjin (Hershatter 2007).

During this period, working in the factory was generally considered dangerous for respectable women. This anxiety comes from people's worry about the sexual vulnerability of young women and the potential harassment of women in public social contacts. Both of these fears were amplified by working in the factory. This is probably the reason why female factory workers were likely to be perceived as deficient in virtue by the wider community in the pre-1949 era (Hershatter 2007).

The communist revolution in 1949 brought significant changes in Chinese women's labor force participation rates. Since women's labor was regarded as an integral part of the state's economic development strategy, women were mobilized to participate in paid work. The ideological campaign and mobilization reached its highest point during the period of the Great Leap Forward (1958 – 1960) and the Cultural Revolution (1966 –1976) (Andors 1983). During the Great Leap Forward, the demands for economic development required the mobilization of both rural and urban women to participate in production, replacing male workers who were moving to jobs requiring higher skills and more training in heavy industry. During the Cultural Revolution, women ventured into a broader range of production, from iron and steel to machine tools (Andors 1983). The extent of women's participation in heavy industry is best summed up by Mao Zedong's statement that "anything a man can do a woman can also do." (Hershatter 2007) According to Whyte and Parish (1984), by the 1970s, work had become an essential

identity for Chinese women. They took employment so much for granted that few could understand the question of why they would want to work. Thus, paid employment became a standard feature of urban women's lives during Mao's era.

### **Economic Reforms in Urban China**

Mao's death in 1976 ended the socioeconomic turmoil of the Cultural Revolution. In order to revitalize the economy and to accelerate the modernization process in agriculture, industry, science and technology, and national defense, his successor, Deng Xiaoping, announced a new development strategy called the "four modernizations" in December 1978. This new strategy marks the beginning of the reform era. The first wave of economic reforms targeted the agricultural sector of rural China. Reforms in the urban areas did not begin until 1983, the year the scholars generally consider as the beginning of the urban economic reforms. Because my focus is on housewives in urban China, I will only discuss economic reforms that impacted urban areas.

Unlike the sudden collapse of many former Eastern European communist regimes and their more chaotic transitions toward a market economy, economic reforms in China can be divided into series of stages that targeted different parts of the old socialist economic system. According to Cai and Wu (2006), there are roughly three periods of reforms; a first stage is from 1978 to 1986, a second from mid 1986 to 1994, and a third from 1994 to the present. During the first stage (1978 – 1986), the communist economic system largely remained intact and the only systematic change implemented in urban areas was to allow the existence of individual-run businesses. In 1983, a new labor contract system, which replaces the life-long job security provided under the socialist economy, was introduced to cover new workers in state and collective enterprises (Ghose 2005; Fleisher & Yang 2003). In addition, state and collective



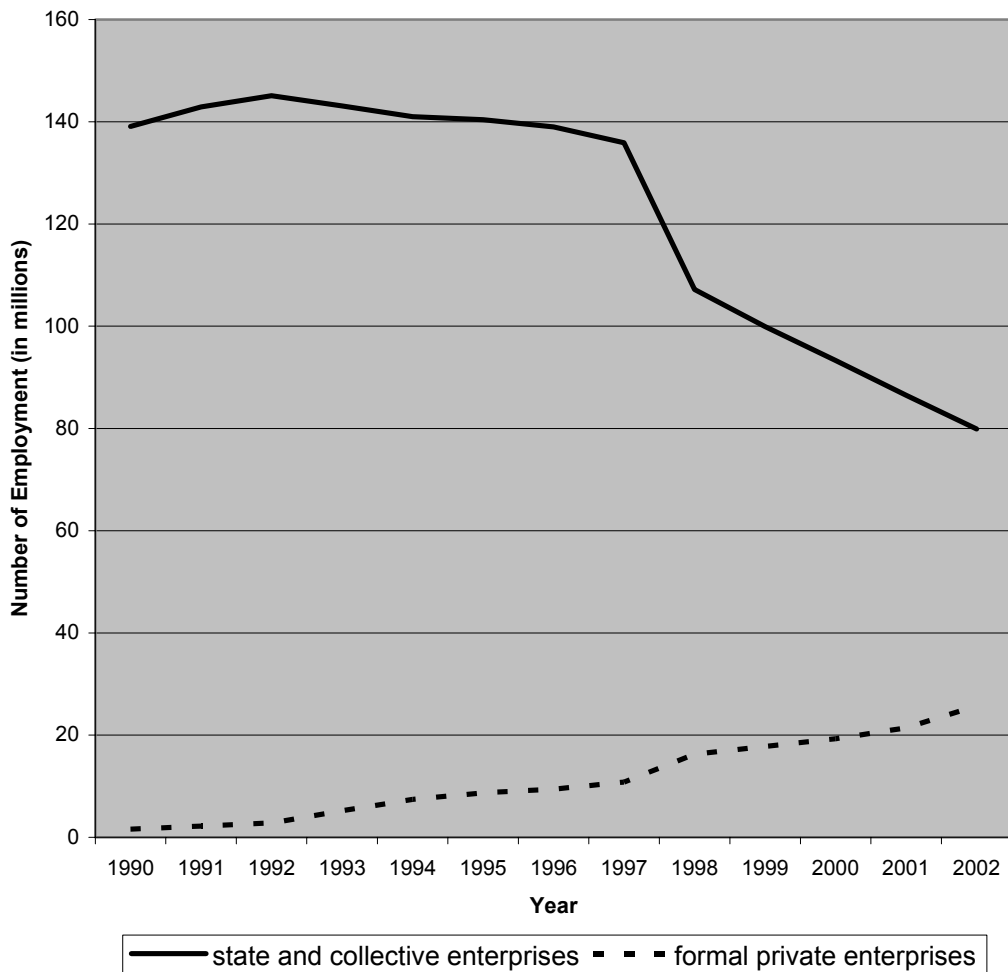
enterprises were given limited rights to directly recruit workers and to adjust wages by introducing bonus and piece-rate systems (Ghose 2005)<sup>3</sup>.

However, economic reform in urban areas did not truly begin until the second period (1986 – 1994). It was not until then that the viewpoint that a Chinese socialist economy was a “planned commodity economy,” a phrase that refers to a dual economic system in which planned allocation and distribution are supplemented by market exchanges, was officially recognized. Foreign investments were allowed and various types of enterprises such as Sino-foreign joint ventures, Sino-foreign cooperative ventures, and wholly foreign-funded ventures began to enter China. Nevertheless, these privately-owned enterprises were still considered as a “supplement” to publicly-owned enterprises. For example, by 1994, close to 80 percent of urban workers were still employed in state and collective enterprises (National Bureau of Statistics, China Statistical Year Book 2004).

The economic reforms were in full force after 1994 when the notion of a “socialist market economy” was adopted and major features of the market economy such as the labor market mechanism started taking shape. It was during this third period (1994 – present) that state-owned enterprises underwent major reforms and the rapid growth of the privately-owned businesses became critical to China’s economy. The distribution of employment in state and collective enterprises and in emerging private enterprises between 1990 and 2002 is shown in Figure 1. The restructuring of state enterprises was the top priority of the Chinese government during this period and this change had major impacts on urban labor markets well into the first few years of

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<sup>3</sup> The urban enterprise structure in pre-reform communist China was composed of two main sectors, the state and the collective. In general, state enterprises are larger in size and administrated directly by the central government, provinces, or cities; while collective enterprises are smaller in scale, often owned by cities, towns, or villages. The production of state enterprises in theory must closely coordinate with the national economic plan. State enterprises generally have more resources and their loss is covered by the state budget. As a result, state enterprises employees often enjoy higher wages and more fringe benefits (such as health insurance, disability pay, paid maternity leave, and subsidized child care for preschool children) than the workers employed in the collective sector do.



**Figure 1. Trend in Urban Employment by Type of Enterprises.**

**Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China.**

this century. To stop the financial losses of state-owned enterprises, the government began by substantially reducing the amount of subsidies to these enterprises and initiated the process called “seizing the large and relinquishing the small.” A large number of small-sized and medium-sized enterprises were transformed into joint-stock companies, merged with other enterprises, and some were even allowed to go bankrupt. In 1994, a new Labor Law was passed allowing enterprises to lay off workers, and a large-scale labor retrenchment program started in 1997 in order to decrease the amount of surplus labor. Between 1995 and 2002, the employment

of state-owned enterprises fell from the peak of 109.6 million to 69.2 million (Du & Dong 2007). During the same period, more than 20 million positions in collective enterprises were eliminated. The elimination of surplus labor in public firms created a sizable group of “Xiagang” (laid-off) workers, most of whom are older, less educated, and/or women (Ghose 2005; Giles et al 2005). Urban unemployment has since become a major issue and it is estimated that the unemployment rate reached 14% in selected major cities in 2002 (Giles et al 2005).

In sum, the transition from the previous centrally-planned economy to a market-oriented economy in urban China since 1983 is characterized by the emergence of a labor market that was virtually nonexistent in the pre-reform era when all jobs were allocated by the state through administrative fiat (Whyte & Parish 1984; Walder 1986; Bian 1994). Furthermore, efficiency and profit-seeking increasingly became the standard of business operations, especially for private firms that were wiped out entirely in the pre-reform period but that now are becoming vital to China’s economy as the economic reforms proceed. As a result, the Chinese people have gained the freedom of “choosing” jobs and the fast growing economy creates attractive employment opportunities with higher economic rewards, especially favoring those with more human capital, according to the market transition theory (Nee & Cao 2004). On the other hand, since jobs are no longer assigned and guaranteed in this new market-oriented economic system, workers are also more likely to lose jobs and enjoy less security and welfare benefits than they did in the pre-reform period.

### **The Impacts of Reforms on Married Women’s Employment**

This new labor market may have both positive and negative impacts on married women’s labor force involvement. On the one hand, the booming economy, particularly the growth of the service sector and export-oriented industries, triggers a high demand for female labor, making a

drastic reduction in their labor force participation unlikely. In addition, because human capital – an important factor determining married women’s labor force participation that I will discuss in the next chapter – becomes increasingly crucial in determining individuals’ labor force outcomes, so long as gender equality in education remains in urban areas (Tang & Parish 2000), women in urban China should enjoy similar opportunities and rewards as their male counterparts.

On the other hand, a more pessimistic view stresses the negative effects of the steady withdrawal of government policies and regulations concerning gender equality in the labor market. Examples of the discriminatory labor market in the reform era can be found in both rural and urban areas. While young women in the countryside are generally thought to have better chances of being employed in factories because of the high demand for inexpensive female labor in export-oriented industries, studies have found evidence of an increasing “feminization of agriculture” in rural China, showing that men are often more likely than women to move from agricultural to wage jobs (Entwisle et al. 1995). In urban China, due to the lack of active government intervention, employers may erect obstacles to female employment, such as offering fewer promotions and maternal benefits. Discrimination against women is often associated with the perception that women are less productive because of their household and childrearing responsibilities or that women’s proper role is in the domestic domain (Parish & Busse 2000; Hershatter 2007). According to Summerfield (1994), managers often hire male applicants over equally qualified women and many of them cite costs of maternity and child care benefits as the main reason for preferring men. In addition, it has been found that women employed in the state sector are at much greater risk of being fired or laid off than men (Summerfield 1994; Ghose 2005; Giles et al 2005; Cao & Hu 2007). Women were also more likely to be identified as surplus labor partly because they were not considered as the providers of the households. The

first wave of reducing surplus labor by sending women home at partial wages began in the late 1980s, though the policy was reversed soon after the Tiananmen Incident. The second wave started since the mid-1990s when the ever-growing loss of state-owned enterprises forced the government to adopt a more aggressive action to lay off redundant workers. Studies have shown that although women comprised less than 40 percent of the urban workforce, they accounted for more than 60 percent of laid-off urban workers (Bian et al 2000; Hershatter 2007).

In addition to the influence of the new labor market, married women's employment and the division of labor among couples in urban China is also shaped by changes in gender norms, specifically those concerning the appropriate roles of husbands and wives. In the pre-reform era, women were not only expected to be good wives but also hard workers. During the Cultural Revolution, the political ideology of masculine women, which emphasized men as the norm in revolutionary models and women were capable of achieving these models, was expressed through Mao Zedong's famous slogans such as "Women hold up half the sky" and "Whatever men comrades can do, women comrades can do (Andors 1983). To promote gender similarities, during Mao's era (1949-1976), the cadre suit was the norm in urban dress regardless of gender. Women were mobilized to participate in socialist construction through paid employment and being a housewife was not a glorified revolutionary role (Hershatter 2007). Due to the low wage policy which was originally designed to combat income inequality, wives' employment became necessary for the subsistence needs of the family. Their employment also brought additional social services and welfare benefits which were largely controlled by individuals' work units (*danwei*).

While the ideological changes since the economic reforms have rarely been examined systematically, some scholars have expressed the concern of a possible revival of traditional

gender norms and their impact on women's overall status (Chen 2005). Their worries are based on the fact that, despite the communist party's efforts to promote the status of women, various studies have revealed that under the surface of Chinese women's greater economic independence, China remains a deeply patriarchal society (Walstedt 1978; Andors 1983; Stacey 1983; Whyte & Parish 1984; Wolf 1985). Feudal thinking that regards women as inferior to men and the concentration of women working in less-skilled, lower paying, and collective jobs are a few examples of the persistent gender inequality. However, the most fundamental problem feminist scholars observed in the pre-reform China is the state's lack of attention to women's domestic burden. Housekeeping and childrearing remained women's responsibilities despite their paid employment. Women workers were asked to reconcile their domestic roles in the family with their productive roles in the industrial workforce. The political rhetoric changed slightly during the Cultural Revolution to "men comrades should offer to share a portion of the household chores from the standpoint of equality, to enable women comrades to participate properly in social revolution and social construction" (Andors 1983). However, this attempt to challenge the traditional division of household labor failed in reality and a new approach developed after the Cultural Revolution emphasizing doing household chores as women's "supporting" role in order to facilitate men's responsibility for production outside the home. Several studies have also mentioned that "virtuous wife and good mother," the ideal female roles in traditional Chinese society, have enjoyed a resurgence since the economic reforms (Wolf 1985; Honig & Hershatter 1988; Hershatter 2007).

Married women in urban China are also shouldering more family responsibilities than they were in the pre-reform period. While the availability of household appliances in recent years may have somewhat reduced the burden of household work, the rising standard for cleanliness

and appearance through the mass media may have required wives, who are traditionally regarded as responsible for household work, to spend more time on chores (Cowan 1983; Robinson 1985; Parish & Busse 2000). Thus, the spread of these time-saving appliances does not necessarily alleviate wives' domestic burden.

In addition, a series of welfare reforms shifting care-giving responsibility from the government to communities, enterprises, and the family indicate that the Chinese government considers the family as the primary caregiver of the elderly and children (Leung & Wong 2002; Xu & Joens 2004). Married women thus face more family and work conflicts if they have young children or elderly parents at home. It is estimated that, during the 1990s, only one in every four children in urban China lived in a community with some type of child care center (Kilburn & Datar 2002). As a result, working mothers in China often receive assistance from retired parents to care for their children. However, this common child care arrangement might be affected by the success of the one-child policy in urban China. The one-child policy implemented since 1979 is an invasive and strict system of material rewards and punishments aimed at individuals and families to limit the number of children in a family. While the coercive nature of the policy received more resistance in the 1980s and from rural households, by the 1990s most urban parents no longer had the desire for high fertility. Today, the vast majority of urban Chinese youth born after 1979 are the only child in their households (Fong 2004). Because Chinese parents often consider their children as high-yield investment that could guarantee their well being in old age, parents are willing to invest whatever they have in their only child regardless of the child's gender, as vividly narrated in Vanessa Fong's ethnographic study, "Only Hope" (2004). Parents are willing to provide their children with First World lifestyle, in hope of their children's success in the future. For instance, a mother told Fong she realized that if her daughter

is successful, she'll follow her to the good life, and this is why her life now revolves around her daughter. It is possible that the new generation of Chinese mothers would feel a necessity to invest more time and energy to care for their only child in the family, which would contribute to the increasing likelihood of their withdrawal from the labor market.

The discussion in this chapter shows that despite the fact that Chinese women have obtained greater economic independence in the past several decades, the Chinese government's exclusive focus on employment marginalizes other issues crucial to women's labor force involvement, such as the unequal division of household work and the potential conflict between employment and family responsibilities. Therefore, Chinese wives still shoulder the majority of household work, though their husbands in general participate more than those in other East Asian societies (Parish & Farrer 2000). Since the onset of urban economic reforms in the early 1980s, the shift toward a market economy and persistent patriarchal gender norms have created discriminatory labor markets against married women's labor force participation. Thus, it is expected that more and more married women in urban China would leave the workforce and become full-time housewives should it be possible to do so.



## **CHAPTER 3: THEORIES ON MARRIED WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT STATUS**

This chapter focuses on several major theoretical perspectives on married women's labor force participation. It begins with a brief summary of the changing pattern of the household division of labor around the world during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as more and more married women entered the labor force in the United States and in several East Asian societies. Then, three models of the household division of labor are introduced and major theoretical perspectives explaining the variations in the household division of labor are discussed. The chapter concludes with research hypotheses based on the conceptual frameworks discussed in Chapters Two and Three.

### **Trend in Married Women's Labor Force Participation**

The housewife, defined as a wife who manages her household full-time while her husband earns the family income, is a result of the separation of wage work and household work in modern industrial societies. Unlike pre-industrial societies where production, consumption, and reproduction all centered around the household, in modern societies the production mainly takes place outside the household (Wells 1998; Thistle 2000). In the United States, for example, husbands were the primary breadwinners and wives were responsible for housekeeping, at least before the 1970s. In contrast, women of the lower class in the United States were often in the labor market out of economic necessity. The shift from home to employment primarily occurred among middle and upper class women after the 1960s. Since then, female labor force participation rates have climbed steadily with the biggest increase occurring in the 1970s. This increase in female labor force participation is largely attributed to married women's entry into the labor force. While the labor force participation rates for single women rose 7.6 percentage points between 1955 and 1999, the rates for married women grew by over 30 points during the

same period. In 2000, over 60% of married women in the United States were in the labor force (Current Population Reports, Census Bureau), although this proportion has dropped slightly since 2001.

A similar upward trend of female labor force participation occurred in many East Asian countries, with some minor cross-country variations. For instance, the export-oriented industrialization in South Korea and Taiwan since the 1960s has contributed to increases in women's participation in the labor force. By 1992, labor force participation rates of married women in both countries were around 45%. However, these two societies exhibit two distinct patterns when we specifically examine their female labor force participation rates by age. Compared to married women in Taiwan, married women in South Korea tend to withdraw from the labor market when their children are young and then return to work after they grow up (Brinton, Lee, & Parish 1995). Between 1981 and 1991, for example, labor force participation rates of married women in the prime childbearing ages of 25 to 34 years old in Taiwan rose from 40% to almost 60%, while the rates in South Korea increased from 20% to less than 35%. With female labor force participation rates at around 50% after World War II, married women's employment in Japan also exhibits a similar M-shaped pattern as that found in South Korea (Brinton 2001). Despite these variations, women in these East Asian societies are increasingly engaged in paid work outside the home even after marriage and childbirth.

In mainland China, however, the story is completely different. The communist policy during Mao's era (1949 to 1976) that every able bodied adult needs to contribute to the state's economy rendered full-time housewives so rare that, even as late as 1987, only about 10% of urban women aged 25 to 44 were not in the labor market (Bauer et al. 1992). However, since the early 1980s, the economic reforms have gradually altered this universal employment system.

Since then, Chinese people have gained greater freedom to make their own employment decisions. For Chinese women, whether working outside the home or not now has become a matter of “choice.” The emergence of full-time housewives in postsocialist China contradicts the increasingly large numbers of married women entering the labor force in other societies and thus deserves further examination.

### **Types of the Household Division of Labor**

Because married women’s labor force participation is often not determined solely by individual choice, it needs to be analyzed within the context of the household division of labor, which refers to how husbands and wives arrange breadwinning and housekeeping responsibilities – the two major elements in families’ survival and well-being. The various household divisions of labor can be roughly classified as three types: egalitarian, traditional, and neo-traditional divisions of labor. The egalitarian division is characterized by husbands’ and wives’ equally sharing breadwinning and housekeeping work. However, this type of division is uncommon in the real world. Most often, couples’ share of responsibilities fall between what are labeled the “traditional” and the “neo-traditional” divisions. In both of these, husbands are involved in less household work than their spouses. The difference between the two types lies in wives’ share of breadwinning. In the traditional division of labor, husbands are the breadwinners for the family while wives stay home and are responsible for all household work. This kind of division is most compatible with the traditional Chinese culture and is commonly found in many East Asian societies.

In contrast, wives in the neo-traditional division of labor, unlike those in the traditional type, are engaged in paid work and often have full-time employment. However, these wives also shoulder the so-called “double burden” because their wage work often does not lead to their

husbands' greater involvement in household work, thus making this type of the household division of labor more compatible with the traditional Chinese culture than the egalitarian type. The neo-traditional type can be regarded as a modified version of the traditional type and is commonly found in households where husbands' income alone may not be sufficient to sustain the economic needs of the family, such as in the majority of the families in pre-reform urban China.

These three types of household divisions of labor are for conceptual purposes only, since the variations in the division of labor are often continuous, from housekeeping wives and breadwinning husbands to housekeeping husbands and breadwinning wives. Some unconventional divisions, such as husbands doing more household work while wives spending more time in labor market work, do exist. Nevertheless, we will not address these divisions here because they are rather uncommon and few theoretical reasons would lead us to expect that an increasing number of couples would resort to these types of arrangements in postsocialist China. Rather, the question is whether, since the 1990s, there is a visible shift from the neo-traditional division of labor to a more traditional division of labor among couples in urban China as characterized by the increase in the number of full-time housewives. I already discussed the impact of recent socioeconomic changes on how Chinese couples arrange their breadwinning and housekeeping responsibilities in Chapter Two. Now I turn the attention to several theoretical perspectives on the household division of labor.

### **Perspectives on Married Women's Labor Force Participation**

In this section of the chapter, I review several major theoretical perspectives on the household division of labor and married women's labor force participation. They are the human capital perspective which is a variation of rational choice theory, the gender role ideology theory

which is mainly developed from role theory, “household characteristics” perspective which includes the number of children and the economic conditions of the household, and finally “labor market conditions” perspective. Note that these perspectives are not mutually exclusive and, in fact, in some cases even complement each other. In addition, since the focus of this study is on the emergence of full-time housewives in postsocialist China, I also pay special attention to how each perspective can be applied to married women’s labor force participation during the reform era there.

### Rational Choice Theory and Human Capital

Originating in psychology and later popularized by modern economics, rational choice theory assumes utility-maximizing actors whose actions are based on a rational calculation of benefits and costs. Becker’s *New Home Economics* (1991) applies this perspective to the household and views the family as a rational actor that attempts to maximize the total household utility. Household decisions are made through rational cost/benefit calculations that compare household members’ efficiency in accomplishing various tasks, such as those related to employment and to household labor.

Becker argues that, by default, husbands and wives derive the same utility from the labor market. However, because women possess absolute advantages over men in childrearing, the most efficient household division of labor is for wives to specialize in household work while husbands specialize in labor market activities. This initial division of labor stabilizes over time because investments in one area decrease individuals’ capabilities in other area. Eventually, then, men become more efficient in the market sphere and women in the domestic sphere. Such specialization allows the family as a whole to best utilize its available resources and to maximize the combined rewards from labor market and household production.

Following this logic of maximizing total household utility, the rising labor force participation of married women around the world is theorized to be closely related to the decreasing opportunity cost of working outside the home and the increasing opportunity cost of not engaging in wage work. The opportunity costs of labor force participation have diminished over time because declining fertility rates and improving household technology have reduced the burden of housework and childrearing for married women. On the other hand, because education is an investment to increase earnings potential, the rising educational level of women has increased the opportunity cost of not participating in the labor force.

Among the historical changes that are often linked to the increase in married women's labor force participation in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, rising female educational attainment is one of the most popular explanations. This positive relationship between educational level and female labor force participation is further rationalized by two arguments: the relative employment opportunity argument and the aspiration argument (Nam 1991). The relative employment opportunity argument points out that education equips women with educational qualifications and skills needed for employment. As a result, more women should enter the labor force as their educational level increases. The aspiration argument states that educational attainment often increases people's income aspirations and expectations. Thus, educated women should participate in the labor market more actively because of their higher income aspirations.

The effects of education on married women's employment have been tested extensively and the results are quite consistent. It has been found that human capital is positively associated with married women's labor force participation as well as their mobility across geographic regions (e.g., Sharda & Nangle 1981; Desai & Waite 1991; Bielby & Bielby 1992; Drobnic,

Blossfeld, & Rohwer 1999). Women with greater human capital skills are also more likely to remain in the labor market both during pregnancy and after childbirth, presumably due to their anticipated higher opportunity costs associated with labor force withdrawal (Desai & Waite 1991).

It is expected that formal education would have similar influences on married women's labor force participation in postsocialist China because some studies have suggested that the shift from command economy to market economy favors human capital and entrepreneurship (Nee 1989; 1996). Women with fewer human capital skills would no longer enjoy the guaranteed employment due to the diminishing redistributive power of the Chinese government in the reform era. On the other hand, those with more human capital skills are more likely to benefit from highly competitive new labor markets in which education becomes an important credential.

Though fairly popular, the human capital perspective does have its limitations, most notably, its lack of consideration of the role of gender, which is the focus of the next perspective I discuss.

### Role Theory and Gender Norms

Feminists have long criticized neoclassical economists' ahistorical and gender-neutral view of the household division of labor and women's labor force participation because the cost-benefit analysis of whether women engage in wage work or not does not address the issue of patriarchy – the gender-creating processes which favor men over women (Wells 1998). Becker's argument that initially women and men have the same utility in the labor market but women also hold absolute advantage over men in childrearing does not explain why our society is patriarchal and why masculinity is valued over femininity. By taking into account the gender-creating process, role theory emphasizes the influence of cultural norms on the household division of labor. This

perspective suggests that the division of labor in the family is influenced by socially-defined roles of husbands and wives that assign wives' priority to the family and husbands' to work (Cosser & Rokoff 1971; White & Klein 2000). Thus, gender ideology is another crucial influence on married women's labor force participation. At the individual level, it is argued that individuals with traditional gender ideologies would favor a traditionally-defined gender division of labor. As a result, married women with traditional gender ideologies are more likely to prefer to be housewives. On the other hand, women with egalitarian gender role attitudes should be more likely to prefer continuous employment (Desai & Waite 1991; Yi & Chien 2002).

Gender role ideology also operates at the societal level (Coleman 1991). For example, traditional gender ideology works as one of the "discount factors" reducing the beneficial effect of economic resources that women may gain through employment on their status in the household (Blumberg 1984). Moreover, it creates obstacles against women's involvement in the labor market, such as employers' discrimination based on the assumption that women's commitment to family may disrupt their work performance and cause higher turnover rates (Lee & Hirata 2001). For example, the patriarchal traditions and values in East Asian societies such as South Korea and Taiwan are often considered major factors contributing to the higher percentages of housewives in these societies than in Western industrialized societies.

In pre-reform China, the adverse effect of traditional gender ideology on women's labor force participation was less apparent due to the universal employment policy. Chinese women were as able to work outside the home as were their male comrades. However, despite the communist party's effort toward promoting gender equality, women remained disadvantaged in the workplace compared to their male counterparts (Chen 2004; Du & Dong 2007). For instance, in urban areas, female factory workers were consistently paid less and received fewer benefits



(Summerfield 1994). According to Parish and Busse (2000), national city-based surveys show that women earned about 80 percent as much as men in 1988, although the gender income gap is relatively small when compared to that in other East and South Asian countries where women earn 51 to 75 percent as much as men. This income gap in urban China was largely the result of the persistent occupational segregation by gender, as women were often assigned to clerical and low-level administrative occupation. Women were also over-represented in collective enterprises that offered lower wages and fewer benefits than did state firms. Whyte & Parish's calculations using labor force statistics in 1977 show that women represented 45% of the workforce in state enterprises but 59% in collective enterprises (Whyte & Parish 1984). Similar gender inequality in the workplace happened in the countryside as well, where the commune system in which people worked collectively and all produce was pooled and shared was in place since the 1950s. Within this system, work points, which range from one to ten, were assigned to different farming tasks to replace monetary value. Despite the fact that men and women worked alongside each other, it has been documented that women systematically earn fewer work points than men despite of the same level of participation in collective farming (Wolf 1985; Bossen 2002).

The government's campaign against the traditional gender ideology and patriarchal families during Mao's era also encountered strong resistance, especially in rural areas (Walstedt 1978; Stacey 1983; Whyte & Parish 1984). Statistics from the Chinese Health and Family Life Survey conducted in 2000 show that 61% of both female and male respondents completely agreed or agreed that wives' priority should be on family and husbands on career. In The Unfinished Liberation of Chinese Women 1949-1980 (Andors 1983) and Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China (Wolf 1985), the authors argue that, under the surface of Chinese women's greater economic independence, the long-standing gender-based stratification

was not transformed into true gender equality as socialism promised. In recent history, with hiring decisions resting in the hands of autonomous employers rather than the state, women's statuses in the workplace are likely to be increasingly vulnerable to discriminatory labor market practices (Lee 1995). Moreover, a possible revival of traditional patriarchal norms from the pre-1949 era could further confine married women to their domestic roles (Summerfield 1994; Parish and Busse 2000). Since I already discussed both the issues of discriminatory labor markets and traditional norms in postsocialist China in the previous chapter, I now move to the next theoretical perspective explaining married women's labor force participation.

### Characteristics of the Household

Many studies have shown that, in addition to individual-level characteristics such as human capital and gender role ideology, married women's labor force participation is strongly influenced by the conditions of the family, mainly the effects of young children and household financial resources (Read & Cohen 2007). Historically, the high birth rates around the world were a major factor that confined women to the domestic sphere. In contrast, decreasing birth rates and the availability of modern household appliances in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have made it easier for women today to enter the labor force. Nevertheless, married women's labor force participation is still largely affected by motherhood. The compatibility between work and family remains a salient factor in determining their labor force involvement, especially for those women with young children (Cohen & Bianchi 1999, Yi & Chien 2002). In many East Asian countries, married women's employment is often interrupted by the presence of children in the household, causing an M-shaped female labor force participation pattern. More specifically, in these countries, female labor force participation rates gradually rise after the age of graduation from school and peak right before marriage and childbearing which usually occur at ages 25 to 30.

The labor force participation rates then drop sharply and then rebound after children enter school. Female labor force participation rates then turn downward again with the approach of retirement.

This M-shaped female labor force participation pattern may soon be surfacing in postsocialist China. With the Chinese government's attention focused on economic development rather than gender equality, the lack of family-friendly policies, such as maternity leave, sick leave, flexible work schedule and the scarcity of child care facilities, make attending both work and family simultaneously more difficult for married women in the highly competitive economic environment of urban China. So long as married women and their spouses consider taking care of the family the primary responsibility of the wife, it is not surprising to find that more women, especially those with younger children, withdraw from the labor force to become housewives, since engaging in wage work is no longer an obligation in the reform era.

The "economic necessity" perspective is another school of thought which emphasizes the influence of household characteristics on married women's labor force participation. More specifically, this perspective argues that the financial needs of families often serve as a strong motivation for women to seek employment. This perspective has its roots in Marxist theories that stress that, in periphery developing countries, wage workers are facing increasing economic pressures because they are paid less than their reproduction costs. Other family members thus have to engage in paid work in order for the family to survive, regardless of whether they hold traditional gender role attitudes or not. In other words, this perspective views women's labor force participation as a strategy of working- and middle-class families to supplement inadequate family income, and the economic pressures would counteract such things as gender role attitudes. Thus, the lower the husbands' income, the more likely their wives are to be employed and vice versa.

Studies have documented that the economic need of families is indeed a strong incentive for married women to participate in the labor force (Read & Cohen 2007; Yi & Chien 2002). For example, the large number of married women entering the workforce since the 1970s in the United States is often viewed as a survival strategy of the average middle class family that needs two incomes to cope with the ever-rising cost of living and the decreasing average wage (Wells 1998). In postsocialist China, similar economic pressures also exist so that the majority of households still require both husbands' and wives' incomes to support the family. However, data from the State Statistical Bureau (2002) shows that, after adjusting for inflation, the average personal income in urban China had increased by 225% between 1982 and 2001. And, at the same time, the income distribution for individuals has also become more unequal (World Bank 1997), suggesting an even faster rise of the upper end of the curve. This rapid increase of individual earning potential during the reform period indicates the emergence of wealthy households, especially in the coastal cities with the most rapid economic growth. According to the economic necessity perspective, this should create a class of married women who are able to afford to be housewives.

### Labor Market Conditions

Finally, labor market conditions also play a crucial role in explaining the variation in married women's labor force participation. Unlike the perspectives discussed above that stress the importance of micro-level factors such as human capital, gender role attitudes, numbers of children, and spouses' income, this school of thought emphasizes how women's labor force participation may be structurally constrained by labor market conditions. Female labor force participation rates would be higher, according to this perspective, if the labor markets have higher demand for female labor and vice versa (Cotter et al. 1998). For instance, Brinton, Lee,

and Parish's study (1995) on South Korea and Taiwan demonstrates how the different characteristics in the two societies' labor markets could explain their distinct patterns of married women's labor force involvement, despite the two societies' similarity in levels of economic development, the influence of patriarchal values, and women's educational level. Specifically, the demand for female labor is higher in Taiwan because of the labor-intensive, small-scale nature of Taiwanese firms. In contrast, the demand for female labor in Korea is largely reduced by the government's active involvement in encouraging the capital-intensive industries which favor male instead of female labor.

The emergence of full-time housewives in postsocialist China, thus, should be influenced by the conditions of the new labor markets in the reform era – a subject discussed in detail in Chapter Two. On the one hand, the booming marketized economy in China to some degree may prevent the problem of a massive rise in female unemployment experienced, for example, in many East European countries. On the other, the discriminatory labor markets against female employees may discourage female labor force participation. Moreover, Chinese women's labor force participation is also shaped by government policies, as shown in Chapter Two, for example, the reform of the state-owned enterprises since the mid-1990s resulted in decreased labor market demand for female workers.

### **Research Hypotheses**

The discussion above shows that married women's labor force involvement in postsocialist China is influenced by factors at both the macro and micro levels. At the macro level, the development of a market economy and patriarchal gender norms which were suppressed under the command economy and socialist gender ideology but may be resurfacing in the reform era, create discriminatory labor markets less friendly toward married women's employment. As a

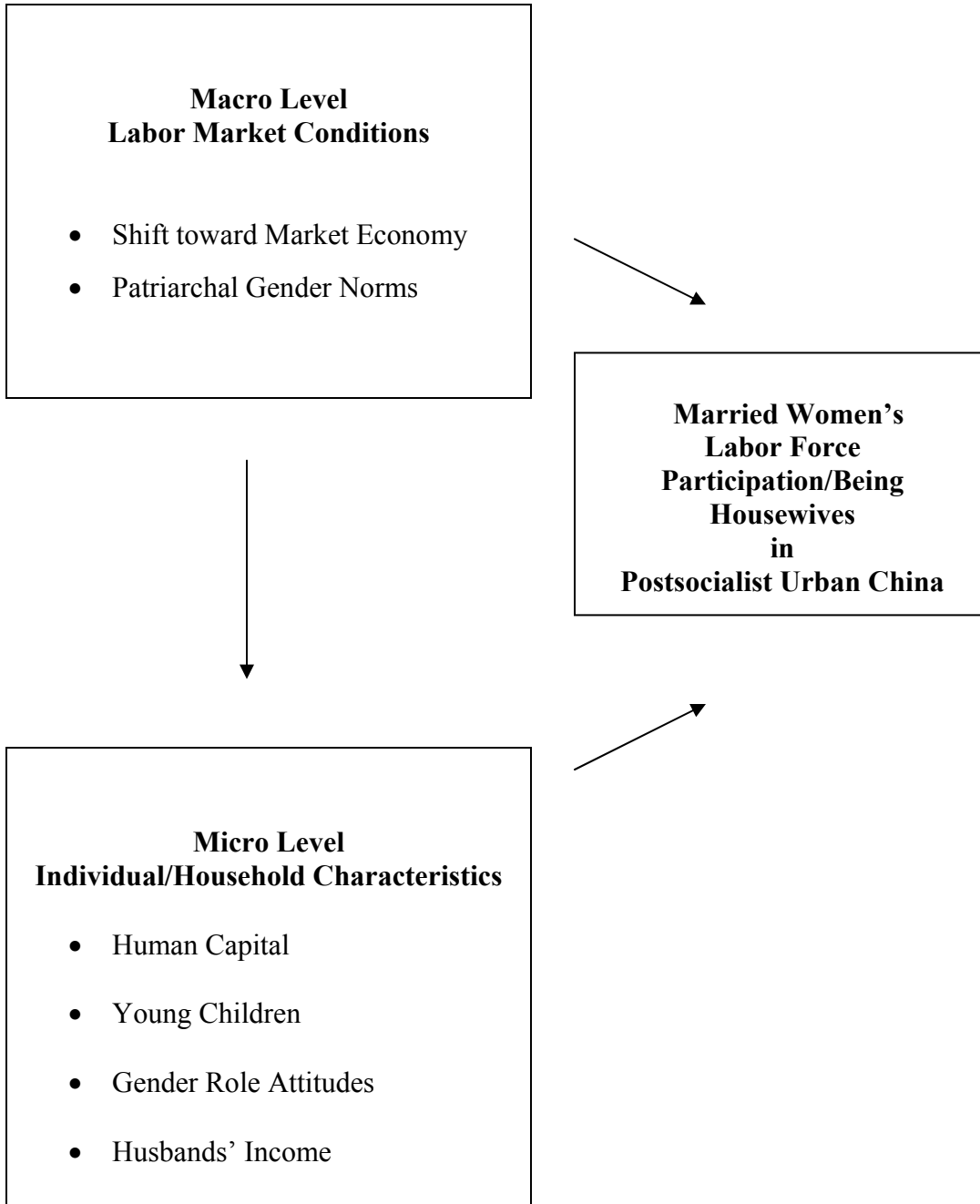
consequence, there are pressures to encourage married women to withdraw from the labor market. At the micro level, married women's labor force involvement is influenced by individual/household characteristics, which include married women's human capital, their gender ideology, the number of preschool children they have, and finally their spouses' income.

This conceptual framework is presented in Figure 2. Five hypotheses of this study are generated from this model. Note that the diagram depicts a link between labor market conditions at the macro level and individual/household characteristics at the micro level. Although this study will not test the association, it is important to recognize conceptually that the transition from a command economy to a marketized economy in urban China not only has direct influences on married women's labor force participation, but also works indirectly through those micro-level characteristics. To be specific, in socialist China, the effects of individual/household characteristics on married women's labor force participation were suppressed because of the universal employment policy. However, the economic reforms have had major influences on these individual/household characteristics, such as boosting personal income and advocating the more traditional gender role ideology, and they in turn affect married women's labor force participation.

It is also important to note that, because there is no information about individual gender ideology in the China Health and Nutrition Survey, it is not possible to test the effect of married women's gender role attitudes on their likelihood of being housewives, as presented in Figure 2.

Four of the hypotheses specify the effects at the micro level on married women's probabilities of being housewives. They are:

Hypothesis 1: Married women's educational attainment is negatively associated with their likelihood of being housewives.



**Figure 2. Factors Associated with Married Women's Labor Force Participation in Urban China**

Hypothesis 2: Past employment is negatively associated with married women's likelihood of being housewives.

Hypothesis 3: The presence of preschool children is positively associated with married women's likelihood of being housewives.

Hypothesis 4: Husband's income is positively associated with married women's likelihood of being housewives.

Both Hypotheses 1 and 2 are derived from the human capital perspective. This perspective states that human capital such as education and labor market experience is positively related to women's labor force participation. For example, the increase in female labor force participation rates during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is often credited to the rising female educational attainment. Hypotheses 3 and 4 are related to characteristics of the household, specifically, the presence of young children and household financial resources. In many East Asian countries, married women's employment is often interrupted by the presence of children in the household. Therefore, having young children should increase women's likelihood of withdrawing from the labor market. The household financial resources, usually measured by spouses' income affect married women's labor force participation, too. According to the economic necessity perspective, women's labor force participation is a strategy of working- and middle-class families to supplement inadequate family income. Thus, the higher the husband's income, the more likely the wife would stay home.

In addition to the above four hypotheses, Hypothesis 5 concerns the macro-level effects on married women's probabilities of being housewives in the reform era.

Hypothesis 5: The probabilities of married women being housewives are higher in the later stage of economic reforms than in the earlier stage of the reforms.



As discussed previously, the market-oriented economy and the revival of patriarchal gender norms in the reform era may encourage married women to exit the labor market and become full-time housewives in postsocialist China. Nevertheless, I expect their effects to be nonlinear. Specifically, these macro-level effects should grow stronger over time as the reforms intensify and the state gradually relinquishes control of employment decisions to employers and workers. This is because the communist economic system largely remained intact during the initial stages of the reforms. The increase in the number of married women being housewives, therefore, is likely to be less visible during this earlier period. It is only after the mid-1990s that the reforms went in full force and the rise in married women's probabilities of being housewives may have become more visible. As a result, I hypothesize that the probabilities of married women being housewives are higher in the later stage of economic reforms than in the earlier stage of the reforms.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **Data**

I utilized the China Health and Nutrition Survey (CHNS), collected jointly by The Carolina Population Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the National Institute of Nutrition and Food Safety, and the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention. The survey was designed by researchers in various fields including nutrition, public health, economics, sociology, Chinese studies, and demography. It is well acknowledged that one of the major obstacles in studying postsocialist China is the lack of reliable and representative survey data. The CHNS is one of the few most comprehensive and large-scale surveys about postsocialist China up to date. The sampled population consists of nine provinces that differ widely in geographic locations, level of economic development, and other indicators such as employment rates. Figure 3 and Table 1 present the map and a few economic indicators for the nine provinces.

The CHNS includes seven panels collected in 1989, 1991, 1993, 1997, 2000, 2004, and 2006. Two more waves of data are proposed to be collected in 2009 and 2011. This longitudinal panel design of the CHNS makes it an ideal data set for studying the socioeconomic transition in China. Because the 2006 survey data was not yet released to the public during the time of this study, I used the first six panels of the survey, 1989, 1991, 1993, 1997, 2000, and 2004, to assess the trend over time in married women's employment status and their probabilities of being housewives.

The survey used a multistage, random cluster sampling process to draw a total of about 4400 households with 19000 individuals (from 1989 to 2004) from the nine participating provinces. The actual numbers of participating households vary across different survey years,



**Figure 3. Map of Geographic Locations of Survey Provinces.**

**Source: The China Health and Nutrition Survey, The Carolina Population Center at The University of North Carolina.**

ranging from the lowest of 3441 households in 1997 to the highest of 4403 households in 2000.

In the first step of the sampling process, four counties in each province were randomly selected.

In addition, the provincial capital and a lower income city were selected, except in two provinces where other large cities rather than provincial capitals had to be selected. Villages and townships within the counties and urban and suburban neighborhoods within the cities were selected

**Table 1. Selected Economic Indicators of Survey Provinces. Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China**

	Gross Product in 2000 (100 million Yuan)	Gross Product in 2004 (100 million Yuan)	Per Capital Gross Product in 2004 (Yuan)	Mean Annual Income in 2004 (Urban household, Yuan)
Guangxi	2050	3320	7196	9324
Guizhou	994	1592	4215	7519
Heilongjiang	3253	5303	13897	7803
Henan	5138	8815	9470	8073
Hubei	4276	6310	10500	8522
Hunan	3692	5612	9117	9190
Jiangsu	8583	15403	20705	11237
Liaoning	4669	6873	16297	8706
Shandong	8542	15491	16925	1018

randomly, and finally, twenty households were randomly chosen in each. Since 1997, new households were added to replace those households no longer participating in the survey. The survey started with eight provinces but one new province, Heilongjiang, was added in 1997 to replace the province of Liaoning that was unable to participate for that particular year. Both provinces participated in the surveys of 2000 and 2004. As shown in Table 1, these nine provinces differ widely in their level of income per capita. It appears that Jiangsu and Shandong, two coastal provinces, were the most economically developed, while Guizhou and Guangxi were the least developed.

The primary goal of the CHNS is to understand how the social and economic transformation of Chinese society in the reform era is affecting the health and nutritional status of its population; though it also contains data that are necessary for this study. The CHNS consists of three separate surveys – the household survey, the community survey, and the nutrition and physical examination. During the three-day interview, a household roster was developed and then used to record information on every member in the household. For this study, I used the household survey, which contains each household member’s age, sex, marital status, educational level, employment-related information, and the amount of time spent in household work. Unfortunately, the survey does not contain information on respondents’ gender role attitudes. Therefore, I am unable to test whether husbands’ and wives’ gender role attitudes may affect wives’ probabilities of being housewives.

## **Measures**

This study will test the five hypotheses formulated in Chapter Three in order to understand what factors may affect married women’s likelihood of being housewives in urban China. These five hypotheses are:

Hypothesis 1: Married women's education is negatively associated with their likelihood of being housewives.

Hypothesis 2: Past employment is negatively associated with married women's likelihood of being housewives.

Hypothesis 3: The presence of preschool children is positively associated with married women's likelihood of being housewives.

Hypothesis 4: Husband's income is positively associated with married women's likelihood of being housewives.

Hypothesis 5: The probabilities of married women being housewives are higher in the later stage of economic reforms than in the earlier stage of the reforms.

About 70% of the households participating in the survey were in rural areas and thus are not included in this study. Only married women who were between 18 and 55 years old in each panel of the CHNS are included in the sample. Once married women became retired, they are excluded from subsequent samples for regression analyses as well. In addition, agricultural workers (farmers, fishermen, or hunters) are excluded in the multivariate analysis for two reasons. First, the nature of agricultural work is much different from that of non-agricultural work. For instance, the former offers more flexible work schedule and the workers often receive forms of compensation other than regular wages. Second, the design of the CHNS uses the household as the unit of analysis, and this poses special difficulties in separating the incomes of the couple who were engaged in household-based agricultural work.

Based on the hypotheses stated above, the dependent variable in this study is whether married women are full-time housewives or not. This variable is constructed from a question in the survey "Why are you not working?" in which non-working married women could identify

themselves as full-time housewives. The value 1 means that the women were housewives at the time of the survey, while the value 0 indicates they were either employed or out of jobs for various reasons other than being housewives, such as retired or looking for work.

The explanatory variables in this study are educational attainment (Hypothesis 1), employment in the previous survey (Hypothesis 2), presence of pre-school children (Hypothesis 3), husbands' income in the previous survey (Hypothesis 4), and the stages of the economic reforms (Hypothesis 5). There are two questions about respondents' educational level in the survey that can be used to construct the education variable. One asks "How many years of formal education have you completed in a regular school" with categories from no schooling to 18 years or more, and the other one asks "What is the highest level of education you have attained" with six categories from primary school to master's degree or higher. I used the first question as a continuous variable of educational level which ranging from 0 (no schooling) to 18 years. Respondents were also asked to report their employment status and occupation in the survey. I used the information to create five dummy variables for employment in the previous survey. They are professional workers, skilled workers, service workers, without jobs, and housewives; with non-skilled workers as the reference category. The variable indicating the presence of preschool children is constructed by using information from the household member roster in which I identified whether married women had any children 6 years old or younger in the household at the time of the survey. Because the vast majority of the families with children in the sample had only one child (78% in 1989, for example), most likely the result of the One-child policy in China since 1979, a dummy variable for preschool children is used rather than creating a variable measuring the exact number of preschool children married women had. The value 1 means married women had at least one preschool child while 0 indicates they had none.

Husbands' monthly wages reported in the survey are used to construct the income variable.

These numbers are inflation-adjusted to 2004 Chinese Yuan because the study period spans more than a decade. The fifth explanatory variable in the model, the stages of the reforms, consists of a set of two dummy variables, survey year 2000 and survey year 2004. The other three survey years (1991, 1993, and 1997) are used as reference. The discussion in Chapter Two suggests that the socioeconomic changes brought by the economic reforms in urban China intensified since the late 1990s, which prompts my decision to use years 2000 and 2004 to represent the later stages of the reform period.

In addition to the five explanatory variables described above, the regression model also includes age, employment sector in the previous survey, husband's level of education, husband's occupation and work hours in the previous survey, as control variables. Employment sector is included in the model because employment in the public and private sectors are quite different in urban China. Three dummy variables, employed in the collective sector, employed in the private sector, and employed in other unspecified sectors were created based on a question in the survey "In what type of work unit do you work?" Employment in the state sector is the reference category.

It is also necessary to control for husbands' characteristics because some studies have suggested that husbands' resources in the labor market can affect their wives' labor force participation (Salazar 2002). The same procedures I used to create respondents' educational attainment and occupation stated above were used to construct husband's level of education and occupation. In addition to controlling for these individual/spousal characteristics, the location of the households—whether the households were in urban or suburban neighborhood<sup>4</sup> and which

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<sup>4</sup> In the survey, urban areas refer to cities which include both urban and suburban neighborhoods, while rural areas refer to counties which consist of towns and villages.



provinces they were in—are also included in the model to account for any other potential macro-level differences.

### **Analytical Technique**

The analyses reported in Chapter Five are divided into two parts. The first is a series of descriptive statistics that show the general trend of married women's involvement in paid work and in domestic tasks from 1989 to 2004 in urban China. If, as suggested in Chapter Two, the shift from a command economy to a marketized economy in the reform era has created a less favorable labor market toward married women's employment in urban China, the results should indicate that there has been an increase in the number of full-time housewives in postsocialist China, and thus warrant additional, multivariate analyses.

The second part of the analyses is a longitudinal model estimating various factors' effects on married women's probabilities of being housewives, as noted in the five hypotheses stated in Chapter Three. The longitudinal panel design of the CHNS means that the same households (and the married couples in these households) were interviewed repeatedly. Thus, the observations are not independent of each other; rather, they are clustered on household/couple. As a result, we can not apply the standard logit analysis to examine the probability of being housewives at a particular time point over an extended period of time. Instead, the method of generalized estimating equations (GEE) is applied in this study.

Developed by Liang and Zeger (1986), the GEE is a common choice for analyzing longitudinal and other correlated data when the outcome measure of interest is discrete (e.g., binary or count data, possibly from a binomial or Poisson distribution) rather than continuous. When data are collected on the same units across successive points in time, these repeated observations are correlated over time. If this correlation is not taken into account, the standard

errors of the parameter estimates will not be valid and hypothesis testing results will not be possible. GEE addresses this problem by allowing for the specification of the within-group correlation structure. When an independent correlation structure is specified, its analysis is essentially the same as OLS regression which assumes independence among the observations.

## CHAPTER 5: RESULTS

This chapter is organized into two sections. The first section describes the trend in married women's involvement in wage work and housework between 1989 and 2004. The second section reports the results of the longitudinal regression analyses which examine the factors that are associated with married women's being housewives. The interpretation and discussion of these findings are presented in Chapter Six.

### **Trends in Married Women's Labor Force Participation and Housework Time**

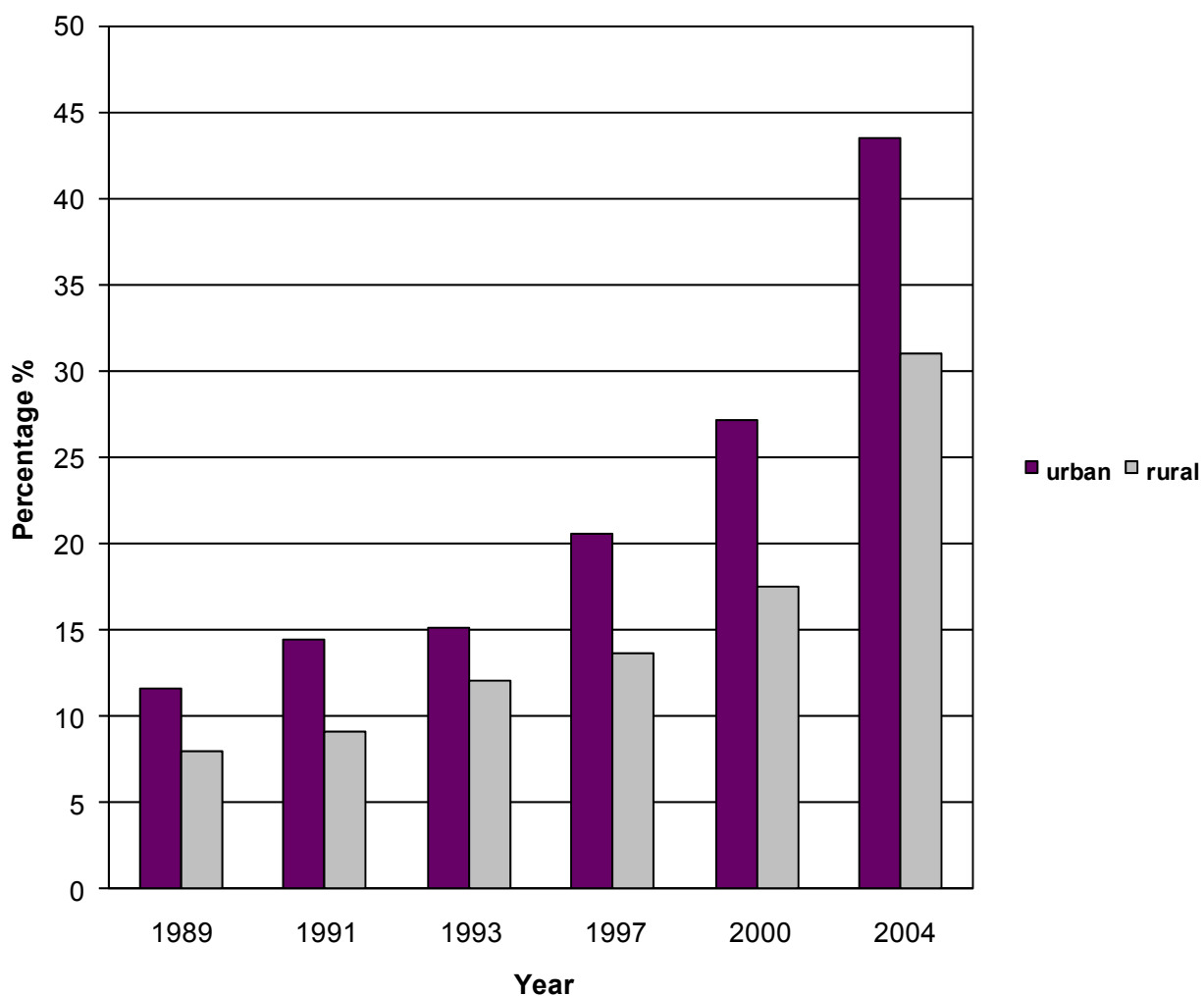
I begin with a series of descriptive statistics exploring how married women's involvements in wage work and in housework have changed between 1989 and 2004. These findings will give us some basic ideas about the changes in married women's role in postsocialist urban China, before we move to the longitudinal regression analyses.

#### Employment Status

Employment status is the most straightforward measure of urban Chinese married women's labor market status since the late 1980s. Figure 4 displays the percentages of married women aged between 18 and 55 who were not working during each survey year.<sup>5</sup> Although the main focus of this study is on women in the cities, Figure 4 includes the information on women in rural areas as a point of a reference. These data show that there were 11.6% of urban women who were not working in 1989. Between 1989 and 1997, the numbers slowly grew with an annual increase about one percentage point. The rate of increase then doubled between 1997 and 2000 (more than two percentage points annually). Between 2000 and 2004, the annual increase jumps to more than four percentage points. In 2004, over 40% of urban married women were not employed.

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<sup>5</sup> Respondents were asked "Are you presently employed?" in the 1989 survey. Since the 1991 survey, the question was modified to "Are you presently working?"



**Figure 4. Percentages of Married Women without Employment in Urban and Rural Areas**

Overall, the percentages of non-working married women in the countryside are lower than those in the cities. Nevertheless, the trend of rising nonworking population in rural areas between 1989 and 2004 is similar to that in urban areas.

The data in Figure 4 clearly demonstrate the rising number of married women without employment in urban China since 1989; and this increase especially gained momentum after 1997. In 2004, over four out of ten urban married women were not working. However, the panel nature of the CHNS may render the growth reported here somewhat artificial because of the

aging of the respondents. For instance, a 40 year old woman in 1989 becomes 55 years old and reaching retirement age in 2004. Table 2 illustrates this aging process by showing the age distribution of respondents in each survey year. While only 21.5% of the women in the sample were between 45 and 55 years old in 1989, the number jumps to 41.9% in 2004. In other words, although the panel design of the data set enables us to trace married women's life histories, the increase in married women who were not employed over time showed in Figure 4 may also be due to the fact that more of the respondents were approaching retirement age in the later survey years.

This problem is solved by excluding respondents who were not working because of retirement from the analysis. The results are shown in Table 3. As expected, the percentages of married women without employment after excluding retired respondents are slightly lower than the percentages presented in Figure 4. Nevertheless, there were still 36% of women who were not employed in 2004, which is almost four times as large as the percentage in 1991, according to Table 3.

Next, I consider how age and human capital may influence the employment status of married women in postsocialist China. For example, women in childbearing ages are more likely to drop out of the labor force, especially in several East Asian countries such as South Korea and Japan, where the labor force participation rates of married women in childbearing ages are significantly lower than the rates of married women in other age groups. In addition, women with higher educational attainment are also more likely to be continuously employed when compared with those with lower educational attainment.

Do these two factors also affect married women's employment status in urban China? The answers are displayed in Tables 4 and 5. Table 4 shows that the percentages of married women

**Table 2. Age Distribution of Married Women in the Sample, by Survey Year**

	<b>1989</b>	<b>1991</b>	<b>1993</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2004</b>
<b>18-24 yrs</b>	10.0%	5.5%	3.7%	5.2%	3.1%	2.2%
<b>25-34 yrs</b>	38.3%	37.3%	34.6%	30.6%	24.5%	21.8%
<b>35-44 yrs</b>	30.2%	34.3%	38%	34.7%	35.5%	34.1%
<b>45-55 yrs</b>	21.5%	22.9%	23.7%	29.5%	36.9%	41.9%
<b>N</b>	1139	992	865	1033	1039	994

**Table 3. Percentages of Married Women without Employment in Urban Areas, 18 to 55 Years Old, Excluding Retirees**

	<b>1989<sup>6</sup></b>	<b>1991</b>	<b>1993</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2004</b>
<b>%</b>	n.a.	9.3	11.7	15.3	20.7	36.1
<b>N</b>	n.a.	934	827	963	945	875

**Table 4. Percentages of Married Women not Working, by Year and Age Group, in Cities**

	<b>1989</b>	<b>1991</b>	<b>1993</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2004</b>
<b>18-24 yrs</b>	15.93	14.55	16.13	18.52	29.03	36.36
<b>25-34 yrs</b>	4.14	8.70	10.70	11.82	21.20	31.34
<b>35-44 yrs</b>	3.21	6.49	9.12	14.57	20.27	35.99
<b>45-55 yrs</b>	34.57	35.24	31.53	36.63	37.60	56.52

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<sup>6</sup> There is no information on retirement in this survey year.

not employed increased over time for all four age groups. However, married women between 18 and 24 years old and those between 45 and 55 years old consistently have the highest nonworking rates. Women in the youngest age group were likely to be finishing schooling and/or may have been searching for stable employment. They were also in the age of forming their own family, which could hinder their labor force participation. On the other hand, older women's high nonworking rate is likely to be a product of early retirement. Yet, early retirement might also be considered as an indication of working women choosing to withdraw from the labor market. The fact that the official retirement age is 60 for men and 55 for women reflects the Chinese government's more reserved attitude toward women's employment and a growing labor surplus problem in urban China (Bauer et al 1992). Women have been encouraged to retire earlier in order to create positions for younger people. For instance, the "Ding-Ti" policy states that the children of employees who are willing to accept early retirement can take over the position left by their parents. This motivates more women to take early retirement than men because women can help with housework and child care while men often resist doing housework (Bauer et al 1992). The rationale for these women to retire early – to secure their children's employment and to do housework – is similar to that for other married women who leave the labor market and become housewives in order to take care of their families. Therefore, it is reasonable to consider married women who retired before reaching official retirement age of 55 as housewives and to include them in the following analyses.

One of the most striking trends in Table 4 is the dramatic increase in nonworking women between ages 25 and 44, especially since 1997. The percentage of women between 25 and 34 years old without employment grew from 4.14 in 1989 to 31.34 in 2004. Similarly, the percentage of women between ages 35 and 44 without employment rose from 3.21 to 35.99

within those fifteen years. These trends show that women in childbearing ages are increasingly likely to be out of the labor force in postsocialist China. In other words, the marketized economy in China seems to have a negative impact on the labor force participation of married women in childbearing ages, a pattern commonly found in other East Asian countries.

We can also examine the impact of educational attainment on the increase in nonworking women from 1989 to 2004 (see Table 5). As expected, these data show that, married women with lower level of education are more likely to stay home in every survey year. For instance, for 2004, while over 50% of women with primary school or lower middle school education were not working, the percentage among those with college degree was only 7.92. Moreover, the non-employment rate for women with college degrees remains stable between 1997 and 2004. In contrast, women of all other levels of education experienced sharp increases in non-employment, such as that only about 10% of women with upper middle school or vocational degree were not employed in 1997, but over 38% of them were not employed in 2004. A reasonable explanation for this trend is the increasing importance of human capital in the recent period – education is becoming more valuable in urban labor markets.

Table 6 represents another way to depict the relationship between education and nonworking rates over time by looking at the educational levels of nonworking women in each survey year. As shown there, the nonworking population was dominated by married women with primary school or lower middle school education, especially during the earlier years. Although the majority of nonworking women were those with lower educational attainment, non-employed women with higher education have become more common since the late 1990s. For instance, the percentages of nonworking women with upper middle school or higher education jumped from 19.24% (10.90% + 5.13% + 3.21%) in 1997 to 30.17% (17.6% + 10.34%



**Table 5. Percentages of Married Women without Jobs, by Levels of Education**

	<b>1989</b>	<b>1991</b>	<b>1993</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2004</b>
<b>Primary school or less</b>	18.99	18.37	24.77	29.32	39.26	51.35
<b>Lower middle school</b>	12.32	11.8	14.45	22.29	30.7	51.18
<b>Upper middle school</b>	3.05	9.43	11.28	10.37	23.98	38.41
<b>Vocational degree</b>	2.82	7.02	5.08	10.67	13.75	38.14
<b>College degree</b>	1.82	2.13	3.23	7.14	8.79	7.92

**Table 6. Education Levels for Married Women without Employment, by Year**

	<b>1989</b>	<b>1991</b>	<b>1993</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2004</b>
<b>Primary school or less</b>	47.37%	52.14%	32.50%	35.90%	28.19%	21.23%
<b>Lower middle school</b>	44.21%	30.77%	44.58%	44.80%	42.73%	48.60%
<b>Upper middle school</b>	5.26%	12.82%	18.07%	10.90%	20.70%	17.60%
<b>Vocational degree</b>	2.11%	3.42%	3.61%	5.13%	4.85%	10.34%
<b>College degree</b>	1.05%	0.85%	1.20%	3.21%	3.52%	2.23%

+ 2.23%) in 2004. While women with the lowest educational attainment levels accounted for about half of the nonworking population in the early survey years, their representation in the population had gradually fallen to 21% by 2004.

The above analyses show that, since 1989, more and more married women aged 18 to 55 years old in urban areas were not working outside home. Unlike in the pre-reform era when the nonworking population mainly consisted of older women or those who lacked sufficient education, women of all age groups and of all educational attainment levels have increasingly been withdrawing from the labor market, although the trend among the better educated is less pronounced.

Next, Table 7 and Figure 5 provide a glimpse of why these women were not working.<sup>7</sup> As displayed there, being housewives and already retired are the two leading reasons why married women in urban China were not employed during the entire study period. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that women increasingly give “seeking work” or “other unspecified reasons” as reasons for their non-employment. In 1991, these two categories accounted for only 6% of nonworking women. In 2004, by contrast, one out of four nonworking women falls into these two categories. One possible explanation for this trend is that the diminishing emphasis on communist propaganda and policies regarding gender equality in the reform era has gradually created a discriminatory labor market unfavorable toward married women’s labor force participation in urban China. It is likely that many of these married women who were unemployed and “seeking work” belong to the large group of female “Xiagang” (laid-off) workers of public firms since 1997. Another possibility is related to respondents’ reluctance to acknowledge themselves as “being full-time housewives.” Specifically, after decades of propaganda and the practice of participating in the labor force just like their male counterparts, it

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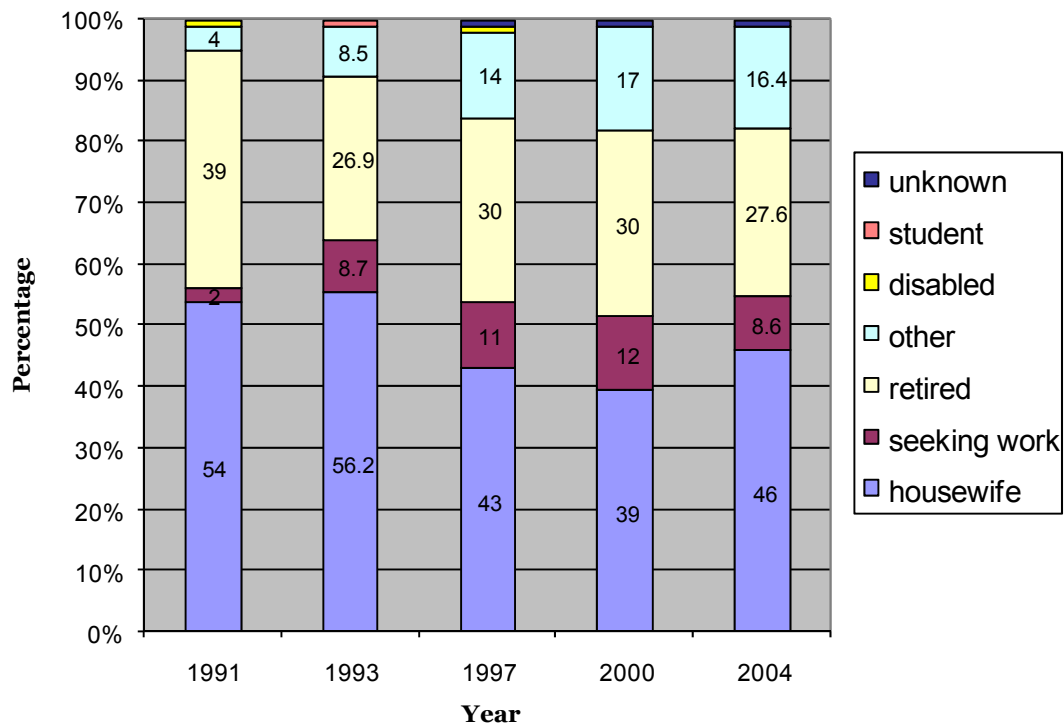
<sup>7</sup> Respondents were not asked why they were not working in the 1989 survey.

**Table 7. Reasons for Not Working among Married Women in Cities**

	<b>1991</b>	<b>1993</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2004</b>
<b>Housewife</b>	77	73	92	108	197
<b>Seeking work</b>	4	11	23	34	38
<b>Retired</b>	55	35	64	84	120
<b>Other Reasons</b>	5	10	29	47	68
<b>Disabled</b>	1	0	1	0	0
<b>Student</b>	0	1	0	0	0
<b>Unknown</b>	0	0	1	3	4
<b>N</b>	142	130	212	276	428

is possible that married women would find it difficult to accept that they now break “norms” and become full-time housewives. Similarly, the general public may still consider the role of housewives as deviant and hold negative attitudes toward it. As a result, some married women in urban China might prefer not to label themselves “housewives” and instead choose “seeking work” or “other reasons” to explain their non-employment status.

While we do not directly see an increase in the percentages of housewives from Table 7 and Figure 5, this does not mean that the number of housewives in urban China has not increased between 1991 and 2004. First of all, the percentages of housewives in later survey years may be underestimated because of the aging problem mentioned earlier that more respondents were approaching retirement age over time. Secondly, Table 8 and Figure 5 show that, between 1991 and 2004, about half of married women without employment were housewives. Yet, the total population of married women without employment has more than tripled during the same period (see Figure 4). This increase in housewives in urban China from 1989 to 2004 is shown in Figure 6. Up until 2000, about one out of ten married women were housewives. The number has grown

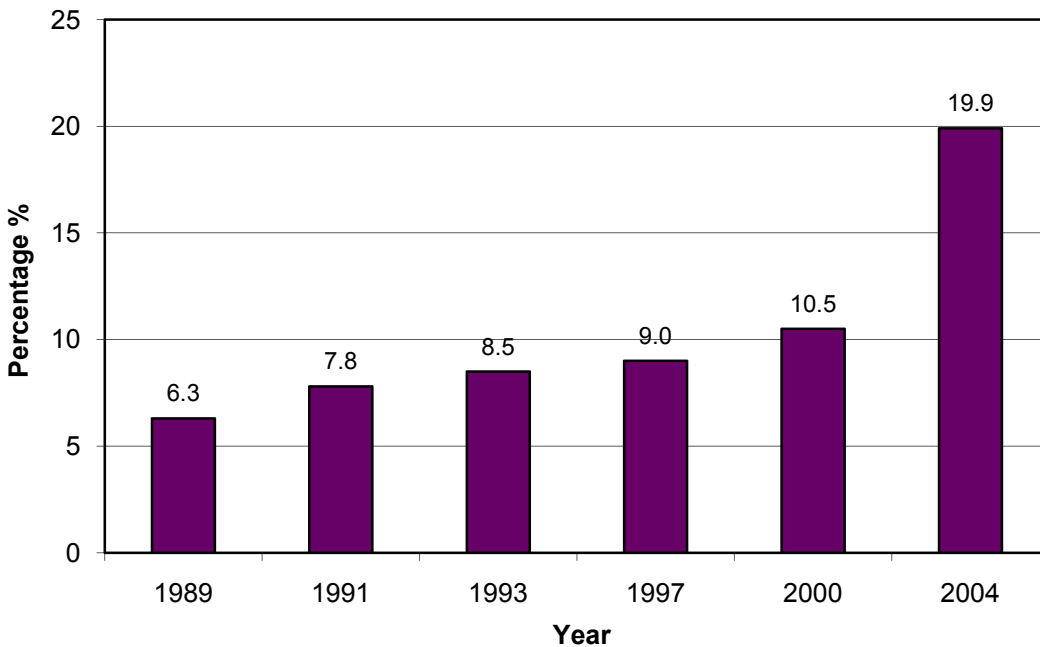


**Figure 5. Reasons for not Working among Married Women in Cities**

more rapidly after 2000, so that one fifth of married women were housewives in 2004. This finding offers strong support that more and more married women were becoming housewives in postsocialist China.

#### Work Hours and Housework Time

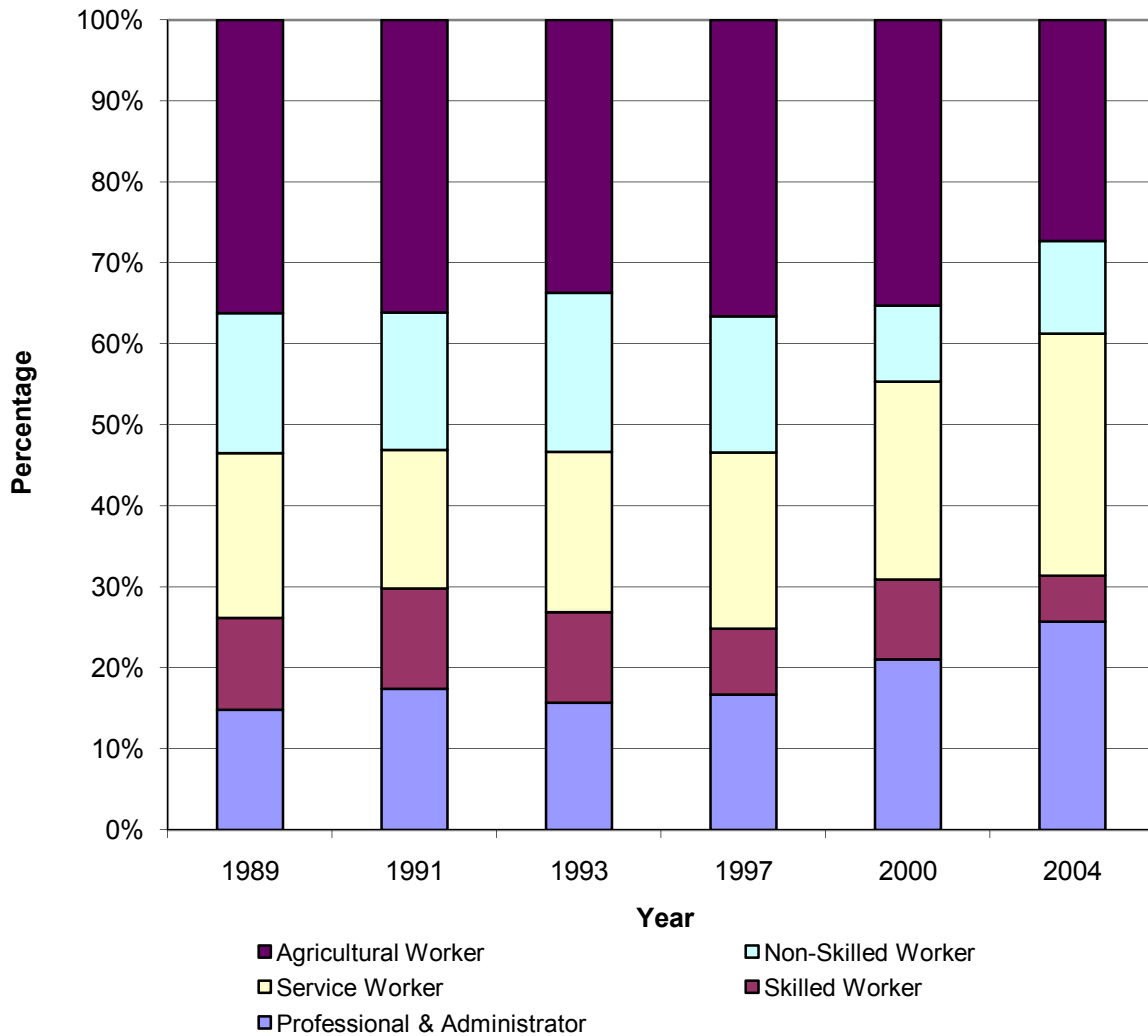
The above analysis of employment data shows that, as suggested in Chapter Two, the socioeconomic changes in postsocialist China may actually support a more traditional household division of labor, since married women have been gradually withdrawing from the labor market since the 1990s. In this section, I further explore the trends in women’s employment hours and housework hours to understand how their involvements in the workplace and in housework have changed in the reform era.



**Figure 6. The Growth of Married Women Being Housewives in Urban China<sup>8</sup>**

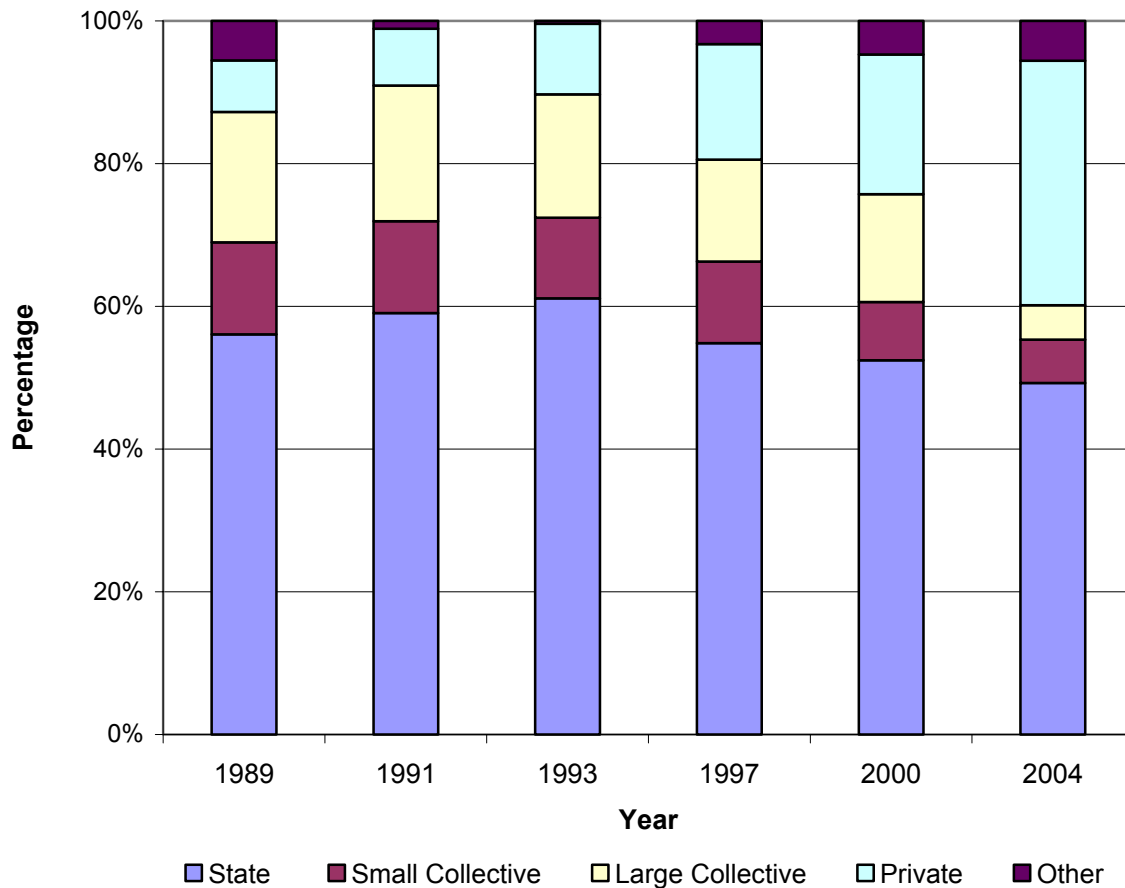
Figures 7 and 8 summarize married women's occupation and the sectors in which they worked. In Figure 7, we see increases in the percentages of women working as professional and service workers over time, and an accompanying decrease in the percentages of women working as skilled, non-skilled, and agricultural workers. These show a growth of the service-oriented industries and the marginalization of the agricultural sector under the market-oriented economy of postsocialist China. The effects of the reforms are also clearly illustrated in Figure 8 which shows the expansion of the private sector and the decline of state and collective enterprises since 1993. As a result, the percentage of urban married women working in the public sector has fallen from 87% in 1989 to 60% in 2004. This trend reflects the effect of the labor retrenchment program in public firms since the mid-1990s (Du and Dong 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Although there is no information on why respondents were not working in the 1989 survey, housewife was considered a type of occupation in that survey year, thus enabling me to calculate the percentage of housewives in 1989.



**Figure 7. Occupation of Employed Married Women in Urban China**

Table 8 presents the average work hours per week for all working women. The work hours for all women were reduced from 47.21 in 1989 to 43.29 in 1997, which may reflect the adoption of the 40 hours a week policy by the Chinese government in 1995. In 2000, it even dropped to 39 hours a week. However, by 2004, the number jumped to almost 48 hours a week. To further understand this phenomenon, I calculated the average by occupation and sectors, which is also shown in Table 8.



**Figure 8. Employment Sector of Married Women in Urban China**

\*Women working in agriculture are not included in this figure because over 90% of them worked in private sector.

Table 8 reveals that, as suspected, employment in different occupation/sectors affects working married women's work hours. First of all, the numbers for agricultural workers are included as a point of reference. It is obvious that the work hours for agricultural workers are different from those for non-agricultural workers. They not only had extremely low number of work hours in 2000 (36.5) but also the highest number of hours in 2004 (55.6), when compared with non-agricultural workers. However, I am skeptical about these numbers since they fluctuate so much. Secondly, the hours for women working in the state enterprises were consistently the lowest and closer to official work hours, followed by the hours for those working in collective enterprises. On the other hand, women working in the private sector had the longest work hours,

**Table 8. Married Women's Average Weekly Work Hours**

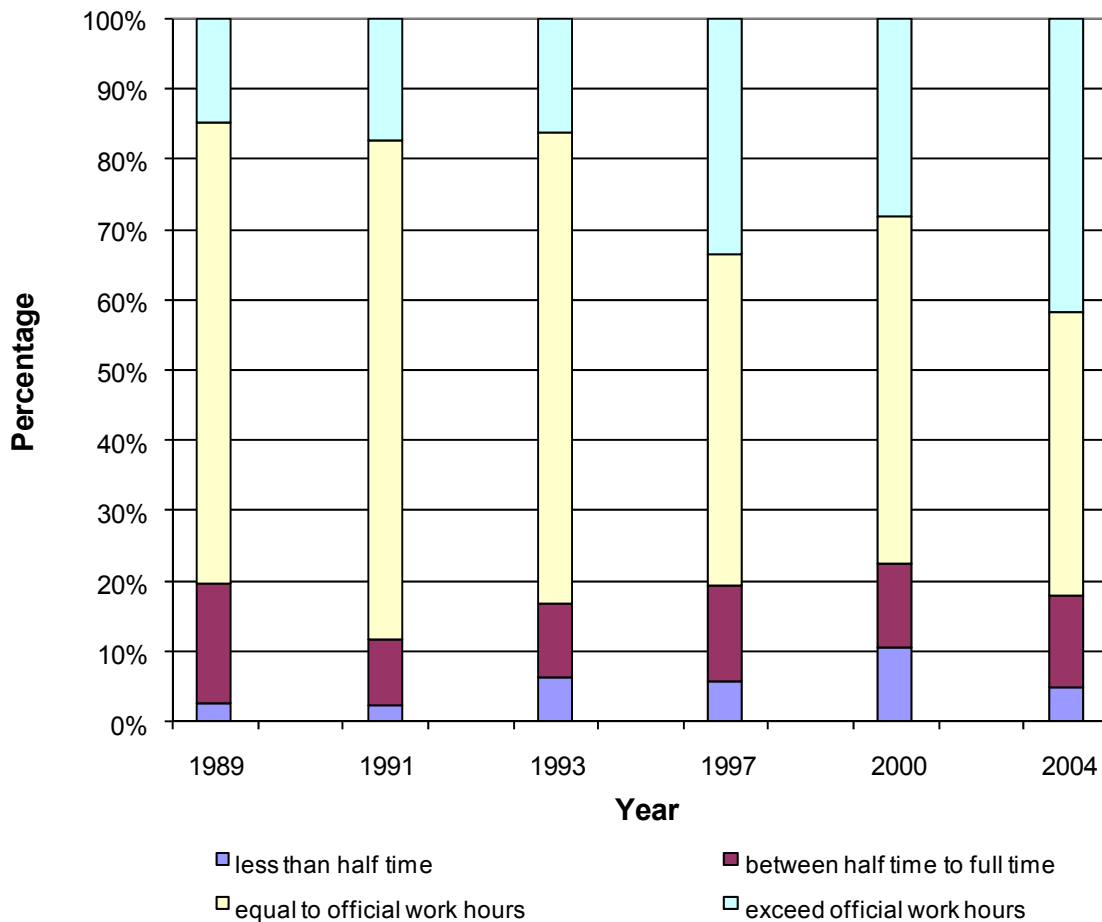
	<b>1989</b>	<b>1991</b>	<b>1993</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2004</b>
<b>All Working Women</b>	47.21	50.76	47.40	43.29	39.39	47.99
<b>Non-Agricultural Worker</b>	47.24	49.48	47.96	42.76	40.88	45.49
<b>Agricultural Worker</b>	47.16	53.15	46.26	44.29	36.49	55.61
<b>State Sector</b>	46.91	47.29	45.75	40.50	38.21	40.97
<b>Small Collective Sector</b>	49.69	50.92	47.38	42.50	39.75	43.46
<b>Large Collective Sector</b>	47.12	48.21	47.57	40.27	41.61	41.89
<b>Private Sector</b>	49.17	65.71	63.89	53.64	50.97	52.75
<b>N</b>	932	812	713	781	720	509

\* In 1995 China adopted the five-day work week policy and shortened the work hours to 40 hours a week.

which exceeded the 40-hours-a-week policy by more than 10 hours in 1997, 2000, and 2004. It seems likely that the longer work hours for married women working in the private sector is the result of the private sector's more market-oriented, competitive nature when compared with the public sector. Besides, many of the married women working in the private sector may be self-employed or participate in the family businesses, which would also explain their longer work hours.

These findings suggest that there is little evidence that working married women were spending less time in the workplace in the reform era. On the contrary, when taking into account, as shown in Figure 8, that more and more women were working in the private sector, they suggest that more married women are working overtime to a greater extent than before. To explore this issue, I divided non-agricultural women into four categories based on their total





**Figure 9. Average Weekly Work Hours for Non-Agricultural Workers**

work hours: those who worked less than half of the official work hours, those who worked below the official work hours but more than half of the official work hours, those who worked exactly the same as the official work hours, and finally those who worked more than the official work hours. The results are presented in Figure 9. The figure shows that, except during 2000, less than 20% of women worked below the official work hours. However, the percentage of women working longer than the official work hours has grown from only 15% in 1989 to 42% in 2004. This trend is consistent with the growing number of women employed in the private sector where long work hours are often required.

With these trends in mind, I now turn to married women's time spent in household labor. I calculated the average hours per week spent on four housework tasks for all married women and the time spent on child care for those with young children (6 years old or younger) in the household. These data are displayed in Table 9. The results there indicate increases in time spent on grocery shopping, doing laundry, and cleaning the house. More specifically, married women in 2004 spent 2.4 more hours on grocery shopping and 1.0 more hour on laundry than their counterparts did in 1989. From 1997 to 2004, the time spent on cleaning the house also increased by 0.8 hours. On the other hand, the time spent on cooking has dropped 2.9 hours between 1989 and 2004.

The increased time on tasks such as doing laundry and cleaning the house may imply the rising housekeeping standards; the increased time on grocery shopping may reflect the rapid economic growth in China that has expanded the variety of goods available. On the other hand, the modernization of the kitchen, processed dinner at stores, and more opportunities to dine out may explain the reduced time on cooking.

The trend over time is less clear with regard to the time spent on child care. Nevertheless, women with minor children at home seem to have slightly decreased the amount of time they spent on taking care of children since 1997.

Finally, Table 10 compares the average housework hours for working and nonworking women. Table 10 shows that, hours on grocery shopping, doing laundry, and cleaning the house have increased regardless of women's employment status, though working women generally spent less time on every housework task in every survey year than non-working women did. In addition, both working and nonworking women devoted less time to cooking than before, but the reduction for nonworking women is larger (5.4 hours or 38%) than that for working women (3.2

**Table 9. Married Women’s Weekly Household Work Time (in Hours), by Household Work Items and Year**

<b>Hours per Week</b>	<b>1989</b>	<b>1991</b>	<b>1993</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2004</b>
<b>Grocery Shopping</b>	1.72	2.64	2.73	3.18	2.98	4.08
<b>Cooking</b>	10.69	12.57	11.84	8.98	8.16	7.84
<b>Laundry</b>	3.37	3.79	3.96	4.13	3.84	4.38
<b>Cleaning the House</b>	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	2.67	3.01	3.51
<b>Total Housework</b>	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	18.96	17.99	19.81
<b>Child Care</b>	15.14	27.03	21.20	26.49	25.43	23.52

\* In 1989, 1991, and 1993, respondents were not asked to report time spent on cleaning the house.

hours or 32%). It also appears that working mothers reduced their child care time considerably between 1997 and 2004, which could be interpreted as a necessary response to deal with their long work hours. The hours spent on child care for non-working mothers was more stable during this period.

### Summary

The analyses in this section reveal, on the one hand, that there has been a steady increase in the number of nonworking married women and full-time housewives in urban China between 1989 and 2004. On the other hand, married women who remained employed did not scale back their time at work. Instead, the results indicate that many working married women, especially those employed in the private sector, were working overtime. There is also no significant reduction in the time married women spent on major household tasks, except for the time on cooking. Thus, it seems that balancing work and family may have become increasingly

**Table 10. Weekly Household Work Hours for Married Women in Urban China, by Employment Status and Year**

		1989	1991	1993	1997	2000	2004
<b>(Hours)</b>							
<b>Grocery Shopping</b>	working	1.53	2.31	2.52	2.93	2.50	3.39
	non-working	2.93	4.19	3.82	4.14	4.16	4.88
<b>Cooking</b>	working	10.21	11.95	11.51	8.68	7.48	6.99
	non-working	14.35	16.29	13.95	10.21	9.96	8.94
<b>Laundry</b>	working	3.37	3.65	3.87	4.01	3.67	4.23
	non-working	3.44	4.64	4.48	4.66	4.28	4.59
<b>Cleaning the House</b>	working	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	2.40	2.71	3.28
	non-working	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	3.74	3.82	3.82
<b>Child Care</b>	working	15.36	25.67	19.91	25.78	23.55	19.48
	non-working	13.32	35.10	30.00	30.96	29.24	29.47

challenging for working married women in urban China. This is one potential explanation for why more married women were opting out of the labor market to become full-time housewives.

#### **Longitudinal Analysis of Married Women's Probability of Being Housewives**

The analyses above explored married women's labor force participation, the characteristics of their employment, and their involvement in work and in household work between 1989 and 2004. Among other things, these analyses reveal an ongoing but rarely studied phenomenon - the emergence of full-time housewives in urban China. The percentages of married women without

employment in urban areas grew from 9.3% in 1991 – almost a decade after the initial implementation of the urban economic reforms in 1983 – to 36.1% in 2004. Meanwhile, the percentages of self-reported full-time housewives also grew from 6.3% in 1989 to 19.9% in 2004. Unlike in the pre-reform era where an extremely high female labor force participation was the norm and only a fraction of married women were housewives (due to illness or exceptionally low human capital), being housewives is becoming a more common experience for a sizable group of married women in urban China.

Now that I have shown housewives are becoming more common in urban China, the next step is to understand who these housewives are and how they are different from working married women. Thus, my focus in this section is to examine the factors associated with married women's being housewives using a multivariate regression model.

Table 11 presents the descriptive statistics for major variables in my model. It is important to note that, because the China Health and Nutrition Survey (CHNS) does not contain retrospective questions regarding respondents' past employment experiences, all employment-related variables are constructed from information reported in the previous survey. Therefore, observations in the 1989 survey are not in the analysis. In addition to the restrictions on respondents' age (18 to 55 years old) and occupation (non-agricultural work) mentioned in Chapter Four, the longitudinal analysis requires respondents to have at least two consecutive years of data for every variable in the model. This reduces the number of cases for each survey year, as shown in Table 11, compared to the number of cases in the analyses of the previous section.

Despite the smaller sample sizes, Table 11 shows several trends similar to the findings reported in the previous section. First, the percentages of full-time housewives increased as well

**Table 11. Descriptive Statistics for Married Women in the Sample**

	1991 Survey		1993 Survey	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
Housewives	.05	.22	.04	.20
Age	36.10	7.52	37.59	7.16
Education	10.62	2.76	10.82	2.88
Professional Worker in t-1	.26	.44	.32	.47
Skilled Worker in t-1	.15	.36	.16	.37
Service Worker in t-1	.30	.46	.25	.43
Non-skilled Worker in t-1	.21	.41	.18	.39
State Sector in t-1	.64	.48	.67	.47
Collective Sector in t-1	.28	.45	.25	.43
Private Sector in t-1	.04	.21	.03	.17
Presence of Preschool Children	.42	.55	.30	.47
Husbands' Education	11.22	3.05	11.56	3.09
Husband Professional Worker in t-1	.37	.48	.41	.49
Husband Skilled Worker in t-1	.19	.39	.25	.44
Husband Service Worker in t-1	.18	.39	.18	.38
Husband Non-skilled Worker in t-1	.21	.41	.13	.33
Husbands' Work Hours in t-1	47.39	6.71	47.82	5.85
Husbands' Monthly Wage in t-1	157.01	323.25	124.88	58.45
Lived in Urban Neighborhood	.74	.44	.70	.46
Number of Observations		384		324

(continued to the next page)

Note: "t-1" indicates lagged variables constructed from the information in the previous survey. For instance, in the 1991 survey, we have 26% of married women who reported themselves as professional workers in 1989.

**Table 11.**

	1997 Survey		2000 Survey	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
Housewives	.07	.26	.07	.25
Age	40.88	6.06	40.54	6.69
Education	10.84	2.95	11.50	2.79
Professional Worker in t-1	.30	.46	.36	.48
Skilled Worker in t-1	.19	.39	.12	.32
Service Worker in t-1	.25	.43	.24	.43
Non-skilled Worker in t-1	.17	.38	.17	.38
State Sector in t-1	.63	.48	.61	.49
Collective Sector in t-1	.23	.42	.22	.42
Private Sector in t-1	.06	.23	.07	.26
Presence of Preschool Children	.08	.30	.16	.37
Husbands' Education	11.39	3.15	12.05	2.93
Husband Professional Worker in t-1	.41	.49	.45	.50
Husband Skilled Worker in t-1	.25	.43	.23	.42
Husband Service Worker in t-1	.17	.38	.16	.37
Husband Non-skilled Worker in t-1	.15	.36	.12	.32
Husbands' Work Hours in t-1	45.62	8.12	40.43	10.22
Husbands' Monthly Wage in t-1	189.61	127.82	512.73	691.38
Lived in Urban Neighborhood	.77	.42	.74	.44
Number of Observations		158		225

(continued to the next page)

**Table 11.**

	2004 Survey	
	Mean	Std. Deviation
Housewives	.14	.35
Age	41.84	7.08
Education	11.68	3.00
Professional Worker in t-1	.37	.48
Skilled Worker in t-1	.11	.31
Service Worker in t-1	.22	.41
Non-skilled Worker in t-1	.11	.32
State Sector in t-1	.57	.50
Collective Sector in t-1	.16	.36
Private Sector in t-1	.11	.31
Presence of Preschool Children	.11	.31
Husbands' Education	12.22	2.92
Husband Professional Worker in t-1	.41	.49
Husband Skilled Worker in t-1	.21	.41
Husband Service Worker in t-1	.21	.41
Husband Non-skilled Worker in t-1	.11	.32
Husbands' Work Hours in t-1	41.52	11.88
Husbands' Monthly Wage in t-1	689.89	695.88
Lived in Urban Neighborhood	.63	.48
Number of Observations	160	



as the percentages of married women working in the private sector. Correspondently, fewer and fewer married women were employed in the state and collective sectors. The average age of the respondents increased from 36 years old in 1991 to 42 years old in 2004. The drop in husbands' average work hours from 47 hours per week in 1989 to 42 hours per week in 2000 also follows the trend for female non-agricultural workers shown in Table 8. At the same time, husbands' monthly wages (adjusted for inflation in Yuan of 2004) have grown more than four times over 11 years (from 1993 to 2004), reflecting the rapid economic growth in China. Husbands' level of education is 11 years to 12 years on average and is slightly higher than the wives' (by 0.5 to 0.7 years). Compared to their wives, husbands were also more likely to be professional or skilled workers than service workers. Finally, the majority of people in the sample lived in urban rather than suburban neighborhoods, which is not surprising given the fact that the sample excludes agricultural workers.

The results of the GEE estimation are shown in Table 12. The regression results show that education and past employment –the two measures of human capital –significantly affect married women's likelihood of being housewives. These results support Hypothesis 1: Married women's education is negatively associated with their likelihood of being housewives. I found that the more years of formal schooling married women have, the less likely they are to be full-time housewives. These data also support Hypothesis 2: Past employment is negatively associated with married women's likelihood of being housewives. I found that being housewives or not being employed in the previous survey significantly increases married women's likelihood of being housewives in the present. In addition, the results show that having preschool age children significantly increases married women's probability of being full-time housewives. This support Hypothesis 3: The presence of preschool children is positively associated with married women's

**Table 12. GEE Estimation on Married Women Being Housewives**

Variables	Regression Coefficients	
	Model 1	Model 2
<u>Human Capital</u>		
Education	-.136* (.065)	-.158* (.072)
<u>Employment Status /Occupation</u> in the Previous Survey(Non-skilled Workers as Reference Group):		
Were Housewives	2.657*** (.524)	2.484*** (.579)
Had No Jobs	1.266* (.577)	1.161 (.677)
Were Professional Workers	-.682 (.631)	-.954 (.659)
Were Skilled Workers	-1.146 (.608)	-.940 (.638)
Were Service Workers	-.587 (.458)	-.752 (.469)
<u>Employment Sector in the Previous Survey</u> (State Sector as Reference Group):		
In the Collective Sector	.300 (.451)	.148 (.499)
In the Private Sector	1.988*** (.466)	1.663*** (.519)
In Other Unspecified Sectors	2.877*** (.655)	2.812*** (.540)
<u>Husbands' Wage in the Previous Survey</u>		
	.030** (.010)	.033** (.012)
<u>Presence of Preschool Children</u>		
	.760* (.321)	.941** (.357)
<u>Time</u> (Year 1991 to 1997 as Reference Group):		
Year 2000	.368 (.349)	.606 (.371)
Year 2004	.935* (.436)	1.332** (.468)
<u>Control Variables</u>		
Age	.045 (.027)	.057 (.030)
Husbands' Education	-.157* (.069)	-.168* (.075)
<u>Husbands' Occupation in the Previous Survey</u> (Professional Workers as Reference Group):		
Were Skilled Workers	-.139 (.415)	.156 (.456)
Were Service Workers	-.019 (.425)	.325 (.464)
Were Non-skilled Workers	-.001 (.438)	.420 (.510)
<u>Husbands' Work Hours in the Previous Survey</u>		
	.014 (.013)	.009 (.016)
<u>Lived in Urban Neighborhood</u>		
	-.003 (.356)	-.089 (.379)
<u>Provinces (Shandong as Reference Group):</u>		
Liaoning		-1.081 (.799)
Heilongjiang		-.674 (1.085)
Jiangsu		-2.160*** (.663)
Henan		-1.445 (.788)
Hubei		-.520 (.672)
Hunan		.725 (.477)
Guangxi		-.807 (.710)
Guizhou		-.256 (.590)
Intercept	-3.174	-2.786
Chi Square	182.80	193.51
N	1251	1251

Notes: 1. Standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* p<.001 \*\* p<.01 \* p<.05

2. I tested the differences between the six employment/occupation categories, which show that married women being housewives or not working previously are more likely to be housewives than those who were employed, but there are no significant differences among professional, skilled, non-skilled, and service workers.

likelihood of being housewives. Finally, the results support Hypothesis 4: Husbands' wages are positively associated with married women's likelihood of being housewives. I found that married women with higher income husbands are more likely to be able to afford staying home, as suggested by the economic necessity perspective.

In addition to the above results that are consistent with research in other societies, these data partially supported Hypothesis 5: The probabilities of married women being housewives are higher in the later stage of economic reforms than in the earlier stage of the reforms. Specifically, I found that married women's likelihood of being housewives in 2000 is not significantly different from the likelihood in 1991, 1993, and 1997. However, they became more likely to be housewives in 2004 than in 1991, 1993, and 1997. This sudden surge of housewives between 2000 and 2004 may be related to the worsening urban unemployment that followed the restructuring of the public enterprises in the late 1990s.

Two other control variables, employment sectors and husbands' education, show significant effects on married women's probabilities of being housewives. Concerning the effect of employment sectors, I found that women who had worked in the private sector are significantly more likely to report being housewives than those who had worked in the state sector. The effect of working in the non-public sector might be explained by the fact that jobs in the non-traditional sectors are more demanding (such as requiring long work hours as shown in Table 8) and could create more work/family conflicts for married women. Therefore, women who previously worked in the non-public sector have higher chances of being housewives in the present. Jobs in the private sector are also less secured than those in the state sector, which may lead to married women's non-employment. The results show that those women who had worked in other unspecified sectors are more likely to report being housewives than those who had

worked in the public sector as well. However, since the survey does not specifically define the meaning “unspecified sectors” and respondents were not asked to report what these “unspecified sectors” are during the interview, the significance of this particular finding is not clear.

In addition to the effect of employment sectors, the regression analyses show that married women are less likely to be housewives when their husbands are more educated. This negative relationship between husbands’ educational level and married women being housewives may be possibly explained by considering husbands’ high levels of education as an indicator of their more egalitarian gender role attitudes. It can be argued that educated husbands, who possibly hold more egalitarian attitudes, may be more supportive of their wives’ employments than less educated husbands, who on the other hand, may have traditional views on the division of labor in the household and prefer to have their wives stay at home. Another possible explanation is to view husbands’ education as social capital that is critical to their wives’ positions in the labor market (Coleman 1990). Husbands with higher education are likely to have better connections and resources in the labor market and can use these resources to advance their wives’ positions as well. This could also explain why married women with educated husbands are less likely to be housewives.

Finally, the effect of provinces is shown in Model 2 of Table 12, which produces nearly identical results to those of Model 1, with the exception that Model 2 includes eight provinces dummies to account for regional differences. The results indicate that married women in Jiangsu are less likely to be housewives than women in Shandong. To further test whether the difference in married women’s probability of being housewives among these provinces is significant, I ran several additional regressions with different provinces as the reference group. The findings suggest that married women in Hunan, Shandong, and Guizhou are significantly more likely to

be housewives than married women in Jiangsu. Compared to married women in Hunan, those in Jiangsu, Henan, Liaoning, and Guangxi appear to have stronger labor force attachment. Overall, Jiangsu women are the least likely to withdraw from the labor market. These regional differences do not seem to be related to the economic indicators of the nine provinces presented in Table 1 of Chapter 4. For instance, Jiangsu and Shandong have the highest Gross Regional Product and mean household income in 2000 and 2004, yet married women in Shandong are more likely to be housewives than those in Jiangsu. As a result, I suspect that there may be other factors that could explain these regional differences in married women's labor force participation, a subject which I will turn to in the next chapter.

### Summary

This section examines the factors associated with married women's being housewives in postsocialist urban China using a multivariate regression model. The findings suggest, on the one hand, that married women's likelihood of being housewives is influenced by micro-level individual/household characteristics. While educational attainment and past employment experience are negatively associated with being housewives, the presence of pre-school children and husbands' income are positively associated with being housewives. On the other hand, married women's probability of being housewives is also influenced by the conditions of the labor markets in urban China. I found that married women are significantly more likely to be housewives in 2004 than in 1991, 1993, and 1997. This result suggests that the shift toward a market economy is showing its negative effect on married women's labor force participation in urban China since the beginning of this century.

## CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

How gender stratification in China has evolved since the country's implementation of the economic reforms in the late 1970s has become a heated issue among scholars of China studies in recent years. Various researches have addressed the concern about the possible deterioration of gender inequality during this economic transition (Bian et al 2000; Shu & Bian 2002; Cai & Wu 2006; Giles et al 2006). Some found no significant changes in gender gap in earnings and in job inequalities from the 1950s to the 1990s in urban China (Bian et al. 2000; Shu & Bian 2001). Others revealed, however, a gloomier picture whereby the labor market discrimination against female workers in the reform era, caused by the weakening redistributive power of the state in advocating and protecting women's rights, has led to the decline of women's economic positions (Honig & Hershatter 1988; Summerfield 1994; Cai & Wu 2006; Giles et al 2006).

Most of these previous research has focused on the status of women participating in the labor market. While they have yielded insightful findings on gender disparities in the labor market, their approach, however, overlooks the population of women who are not working – such as housewives, a group which was nearly nonexistent during Mao's era but is becoming more visible in postsocialist China. By studying married women who are not working and housewives in particular, a subject that has received little research attention so far, this study has contributed to our knowledge about gender inequality in postsocialist China.

This study is among the first to examine whether growing numbers of married women in urban China have been withdrawing from the labor market and becoming full-time housewives since the late 1980s, and the factors associated with their withdrawal. I argued that the unique socioeconomic environment in postsocialist China, specifically the transition from a command economy toward a market-oriented economy, may have pushed married women out of the labor

market and encouraged them to become housewives. During this transitional process, the Chinese government gradually ceased to control employment decisions. While married women gain the freedom to choose whether to work outside the home or not, they also lose the safety net of the universal employment policy in place during the pre-reform period. In addition, the Chinese government's diminishing roles in advocating communist gender ideology and in reinforcing gender equality has created less gender-neutral labor markets regarding married women's labor force participation. Yet, the effect of the reforms on married women's likelihood of being housewives also depends on individual/household characteristics including human capital, gender role attitudes, the responsibility of motherhood, and husbands' income. Therefore, some married women would be more vulnerable to the rising labor market discrimination and the worsening urban unemployment in postsocialist China, such as those with young children, with lower education, and with fewer work experiences.

Methodologically, unlike many previous studies that relied on cross-sectional data gathered in only one or two localities, this research utilizes six waves of the China Health and Nutrition Survey from 1989 to 2004 in nine provinces. The survey is large-scale and representative, and thus eliminates one of the most serious problems upon studying gender inequality in postsocialist China – the lack of reliable data. Since the CHNS spans several stages of the economic reforms, it also enables me to study the changes in married women's labor force participation and their probability of being housewives over time.

### **Trend in Employment Status, Work Hours, and Housework Time**

#### The Growth of Married Women without Employment and the Emergence of Housewives

The analyses have revealed that the percentages of married women aged between 18 and 55 years old in urban China without employment have quadrupled in just 15 years (see Figure 10).

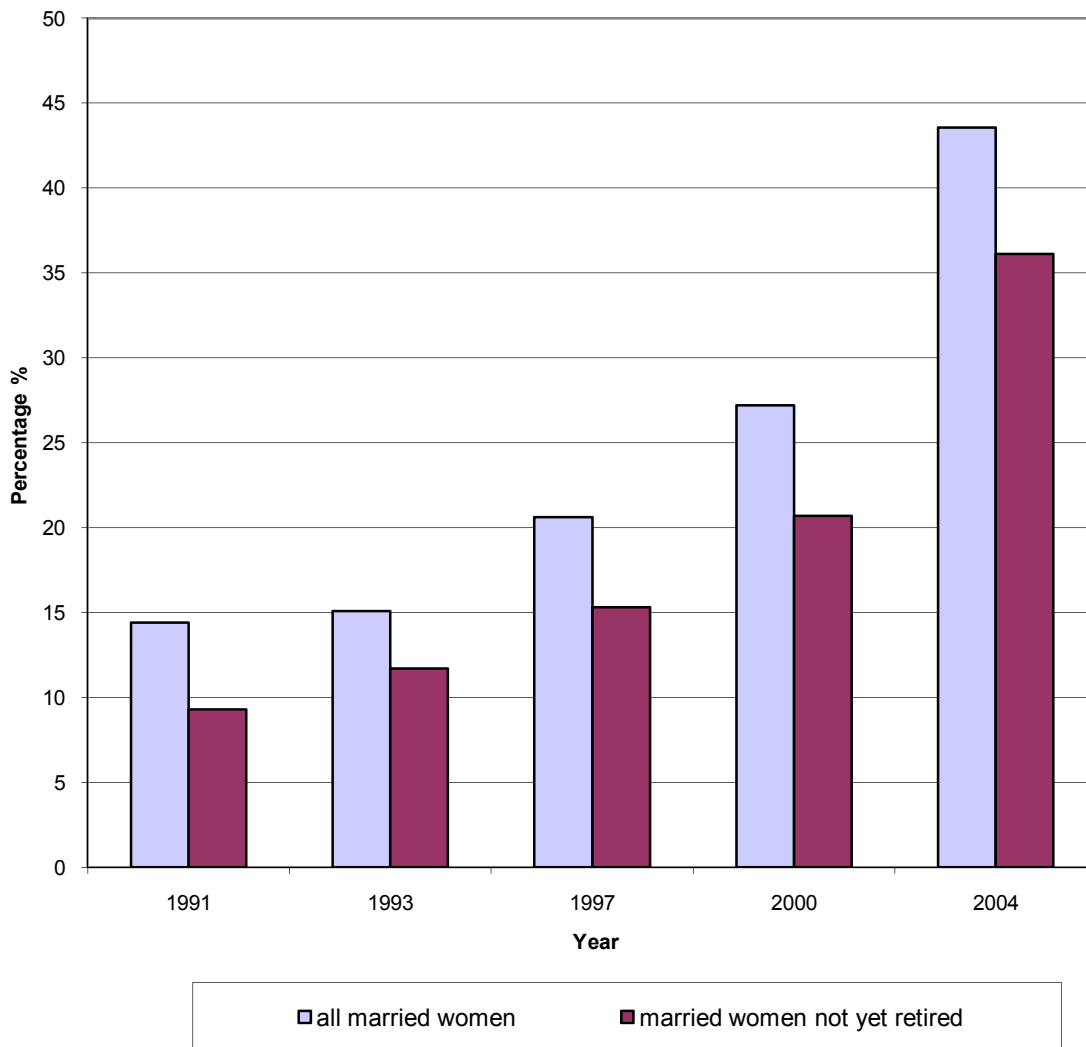
This increase applies to all married women regardless of age, although the most significant increases have occurred among two age groups – 25 to 34 and 35 to 44 years old. For example, in 1989, only 4.14% of married women aged between 25 and 34 years old were not employed. By 2004, the percentage reached 31.34 (see Table 4). I suspect that because married women of this particular age group are in prime childrearing age, their family responsibilities could hinder their labor force participation, thus causing their higher rates of non-employment than previous periods.

The data show that by 2004, the non-employment rate of married women in this particular age group is still slightly lower than the rates for married women in other age groups. Given the lack of effective family-friendly policies and the revival of traditional gender norms that stress the responsibilities of motherhood in China, however, it is highly possible that the non-employment rates for married women aged between 25 and 34 years old will continue to rise and surpass the rates for women of other age groups. In the near future, the age pattern of female labor force participation rates in urban China might exhibit an M-shaped pattern, such as that found in South Korea where married women tend to leave the labor market when their children are young.

Consistent with the human capital argument, the data also show that married women with higher educational attainment, especially those with college degrees, are more likely to be employed in postsocialist China. Although their chances of not being employed are also increasing over time, the percentages of nonworking married women with higher education remain small.

Why are these married women in postsocialist China increasingly less likely to be employed? The analyses on the reasons for married women's non-employment showed that





**Figure 10. Percentages of Non-employed Married Women in Urban China**

being housewives is the number one reason why these women did not work. Between 1989 and 2004, the percentage of housewives in urban China grew from 6.3% to 19.9%, and the biggest increase occurred between 2000 and 2004 (see Figure 6). At the same time, the percentages of married women not working because of seeking work and other unspecified reasons also climbed from 6% in 1991 to 25% in 2004 (see Figure 5). Thus, it appears that, in the wake of China's rapid economic development in the reform era, more and more married women were out of jobs. Some of them continued to seek reemployment; while the others became full-time housewives.

The increase in the percentages of married women looking for employment in recent years, on the one hand, reflects the fact that economic reforms have brought individuals the freedom to change/choose jobs according to their own preferences and thus created more job seekers. However, it is worth noting that job changes do not necessarily entail upward mobility for married women, as shown in Cao & Hu's 2007 study on gender inequality and job mobility in six coastal cities in postsocialist China. According to their study, married men were almost twice as likely as married women to experience career-oriented job changes which often generate higher income and status. Married women, however, were more likely to experience family-related job changes, such as moving with spouses.

On the other hand, the rising number of married women seeking employment also reflects the simple fact that the Chinese government no longer has the obligation to ensure universal female employment in the postsocialist era. This leads to problems such as higher than usual lay-off rates for female employees in the public sector since the late 1990s and the growing difficulty for married women to find employment in the new gender-biased labor market.

The increase in the numbers of housewives in urban China could also indicate that more married women are willing to stay home taking care of the family. While further research on the issue of individual motivations is needed, this study at least offers a few insights into the emergence of housewives in postsocialist China, a phenomenon that was rarely examined in the past.

Some may argue that the rising number of full-time housewives found in this study may be a result of changing attitudes toward the role of the housewife in postsocialist China. Because being housewives was regarded as a serious deviance from the communist gender ideology in the pre-reform era, married women may have been more reluctant to report themselves as

housewives in earlier survey years than in later survey years. Therefore, the observed increase in the number of housewives over time could be an overestimation and mainly caused by the growing number of respondents who were willing to identify themselves as housewives as the reforms progressed.

However, this argument seems unsupported when we examine Figure 5 which shows how married women explained their non-employment in each survey year. If the increase in the number of housewives is the result of more married women willing to report being housewives over time, we should also find that the percentages of “not currently working because of being housewives” go up. Instead, the data show an overall decrease in the percentages of women saying their non-employment status is due to their being housewives (from 54% in 1991 to 46% in 2004). The observed growing number of housewives between 1989 and 2004, thus, is not because non-employed married women were becoming more likely to report that they are housewives. Rather, it is simply because there were more and more married women staying home instead of being employed over time.

#### Longer Work Hours without Significant Relief on Housework

To better understand how married women’s roles in the workplace and family changed in postsocialist China, I also analyzed their involvement in both fields by measuring the absolute hours they spent in the workplace and on housework. The data analysis showed a general decline in work hours from 1989 to 2000, regardless of the employment sector. This is largely the result of the five-day-work-week policy adopted by the Chinese government in 1995 that shortened the standard work hours to 40 per week. However, the average work hours rebounded by almost 5 hours from 2000 to 2004. Most importantly, married women working in the private sector consistently reported working at least 10 hours longer per week than the official work hours. For

example, in 2004, the average weekly work hours for married women in the privately-owned businesses was 52.75, almost 13 hours longer than the standard 40 hours limit (see Table 8).

This exceptionally long work week in the private sector has serious implications for many working married women in postsocialist China. As we know, the economic reforms have had major influences on people's occupation and the sectors in which they are employed. For instance, the percentage of married women working in the service industry in 2004 is 1.5 times higher than the percentage in 1989 (see Figure 7). The percentage of married women working in the privately-owned businesses in 2004 is 4.7 times higher than the number in 1989 (see Figure 8). Both increases correspond to the rapid expansion of the service industry and the private sector of China's marketized economy. The decline of the public sector began in the mid-1990s and by 2004, nearly 40% of working women were employed in the private sector that demands long work hours, compared to a merely 7% in 1989. As more and more married women participated in the private sector, the percentage of women working overtime also grew from 15% in 1989 to 42% in 2004.

Thus, it appears that, while there are increasing numbers of married women withdrawing from the labor force and becoming full-time housewives in the reform era, there are also more married women spending longer hours in the workplace. On the one hand, the percentages of married women working in professional occupation grew from 15% in 1989 to 26% in 2004; and instead of scaling back from their work, many working women were spending more time in the workplace. On the other hand, the rising non-employment rates for married women and the growing number of housewives in urban China found in this study seem to suggest that gender inequality has intensified in the postsocialist era, and married women are losing out in a discriminatory labor market.

I also examined the trends in housework time for married women in the reform era. Were they spending less time on housework because of the longer work hours in recent years? The data showed that, between 1989 and 2004, married women were spending less time in the kitchen – the reduction is especially large for those who were working, which is likely caused by the improvements in kitchen equipment, prepared dinners at stores, and also the availability/accessibility of restaurants as the economy develops. However, the shortening hours on cooking are offset by the fact that married women were also spending more time on grocery shopping, laundry, and house cleaning. This shows that the spread of modern household appliances does not necessarily save women housework time. The gradual increase in grocery shopping time may even indicate the growing importance of consumption in postsocialist China.

Consistent with previous research that suggests, that employment status is negatively related to women's housework time (Blair & Lichter, 1991; Brayfield, 1992; Presser, 1994), the analysis showed that married women without employment spent more hours on every task including child care than those who were employed. The differences in the time spent on child care are the most significant, as non-working women spent as many as 10 hours more on child care than working women. However, the time gap in the other four housework tasks (grocery shopping, cooking, laundry, and cleaning the house) between married women without employment and those with employment were becoming narrower in recent years. This is largely due to the increased time working women spent on tasks other than cooking. Overall, the housework time for married women between 1989 and 2004 in urban China does not show significant decrease, despite the longer work hours for many working married women in more recent years. Therefore, I expect that the issue of how to balance work and family is going to become a more pressing concern for working married women in urban China. The family/work

conflict may also be an increasingly important factor that pushes more married women away from work and toward the domestic sphere.

### **Factors Associated with Married Women's Probabilities of Being Housewives**

The results from longitudinal regression analyses on determinants of married women's likelihood of being full-time housewives support the findings of existing literature on women's labor force participation discussed in Chapter Three. Below, the findings on each determinant will be briefly discussed.

#### The Effect of Human Capital

As predicted by the human capital perspective, education and prior employment experiences have positive effects on married women's labor force participation in urban China. The fewer years of schooling women have, the more likely they are to be housewives. Similarly, married women who were previously out of the labor force are also more likely to be housewives. Because the transition from a central command economy to a market economy means that employment is no longer controlled and regulated by the state's redistributive power, as a result, education and employment experiences become more crucial in determining individuals' labor force outcomes in postsocialist China, which is especially true in the private sector (Cao 2004). Some of the increase in the number of housewives I found could be attributed to married women with low education being pushed out of the labor market in the reform era. For these women, retaining or obtaining employment has become more difficult in recent years. Similar trends were found in Central and Eastern European countries where many women with low-paying jobs dropped out of the labor force since the collapse of the communist regime (Heyns 2005).

Nevertheless, the growing influence of human capital on married women's labor force participation does offer some comforting news because in urban China, the success of the One-

child policy seems to contribute to a smaller gender gap in educational attainment than might otherwise be the case. Recent studies suggest that no significant gender differences were found in parents' investment in children's education, student achievement in math, and educational aspirations of the student (Tsui & Rich 2002; Hannum & Kong 2002). In addition, the education, training, and work experience women received in the socialist era could actually benefit them more in the reform era. This is because, when compared with women in the West, women in socialist countries are often overrepresented in professions such as medicine, management, law, education, and administration, all of which are more highly rewarded in a market economy (Bial\_eck & Heyns 1993). Unlike married women with lower educational levels, the impact of the reforms should be more positive for married women with these valuable credentials which can bring them more economic rewards and opportunities in a marketized economy.

### The Influence of Young Children

The regression analyses show that married women with preschool children are significantly more likely to be housewives than those who do not have young children. Working women in urban China often rely on help from retired parents, or child care facilities if they are employed in the state and the collective sectors, to care for their children. The negative effect of young children on married women's labor force participation found in this study is likely the result of the continuing decline of the public sector that often offers more assistance in child care than the private sector. Married women employed in the private sector with long work hours should especially find it difficult to balance their roles as workers and mothers. Therefore, the availability of child care facilities and family-friendly policies such as flexible work schedules that allow working mothers to attend their family responsibilities should help encourage high female labor force participation rates in China.

### The Effect of Household Financial Resources

However, not every full-time housewife in postsocialist China is the result of being “pushed” out of the labor market due to either low level of education or/and the burden of family responsibilities. As proposed by the economic necessity perspective that contends that women’s labor force participation is often the strategy of working- and middle-class families to supplement inadequate family income, this study found that when husbands’ wages increase, their wives are more likely to stay home. In other words, some married women become full-time housewives simply because their households can afford this kind of lifestyle in urban China. Under socialism’s “low wage but universal employment policy,” which aimed to ensure high labor force participation and to keep income inequality at a minimum, both husbands and wives had to participate in wage labor in order to make ends meet in pre-reform China. However, the rapid economic development brought by the reforms has created vast opportunities for individuals/households to accumulate significant levels of personal wealth rather quickly. Currently, the affluent households in urban China earn more than 100,000 yuan a year, while 77 percent of urban Chinese households live on less than 25,000 yuan a year (The McKinsey Quarterly, 2006 special edition). Married women in these high-income households thus have more opportunity to choose to be housewives.

### Other Variables Unique to Postsocialist China

In addition to the factors discussed above, married women’s probability of being housewives is also influenced by a few other variables unique to the postsocialist Chinese society. First of all, the regression analysis shows that married women’s likelihood of being housewives in 2004 are significantly higher than in other survey years. This corresponds to the sudden surge of housewives and the steeper rise in the percentages of non-employed married women between



2000 and 2004 presented in Figures 6 and 10 of Chapter 5. Because the regression model includes other individual/household level variables, such as education, presence of young children, and spouses' income, that could affect married women's probability of being housewives, the significant increase of non-working population between 2000 and 2004 is likely to be related to structural factors, such as the worsening labor market conditions for married women since the late 1990s, triggered by the reform of the state and collective sectors.

According to Ghose's study (2005), between 1996 and 2002, formal employment in urban China showed a steep decline. Employment in state and collective enterprises decreased by a staggering 59 million (42.5%), while the formal employment in newly emerging private enterprises increased only by 16 million, so that 43 million jobs in the urban economy were lost and replaced by irregular/informal employment which grew by 71 million during this period. A few recent studies utilizing data collected between 2001 and 2003 have also showed that women, less educated, and older workers suffer the most from the urban unemployment problem, and they have greater difficulties in finding new employment due to discrimination (Ghose 2005; Giles et al 2005; Du & Dong 2007). Nevertheless, since the majority of prior research on gender stratification in postsocialist China covers the period before 2000, and relatively little is known about changes beyond the late 1990s, this explanation is only tentative and requires further research to confirm.

Next, this study also found that former private sector employees are more likely to be housewives than former public sector employees. Married women may be "pushed" out of the labor market because jobs in the private sector often demand longer work hours and are less stable than those in the public sector. The higher possibility of withdrawing from the labor force for former private sector employees, however, may also be related to the discriminatory practices

against female employees commonly found in the private sector. Studies in China have documented that the thriving private sector is often not sufficiently regulated by the government (Summerfield 1994). Similar phenomena can be found in other former communist countries, such as the Czech Republic and Slovakia, where violations against gender equality in the workplace are much more likely to be reported in the private sector than in the public sector (Jurajda 2003; Heyns 2005). Therefore, as more and more married women join the private sector in urban China, the lack of well-developed legislation and effective law enforcement regarding gender equality in the labor market could push more working married women to return home.

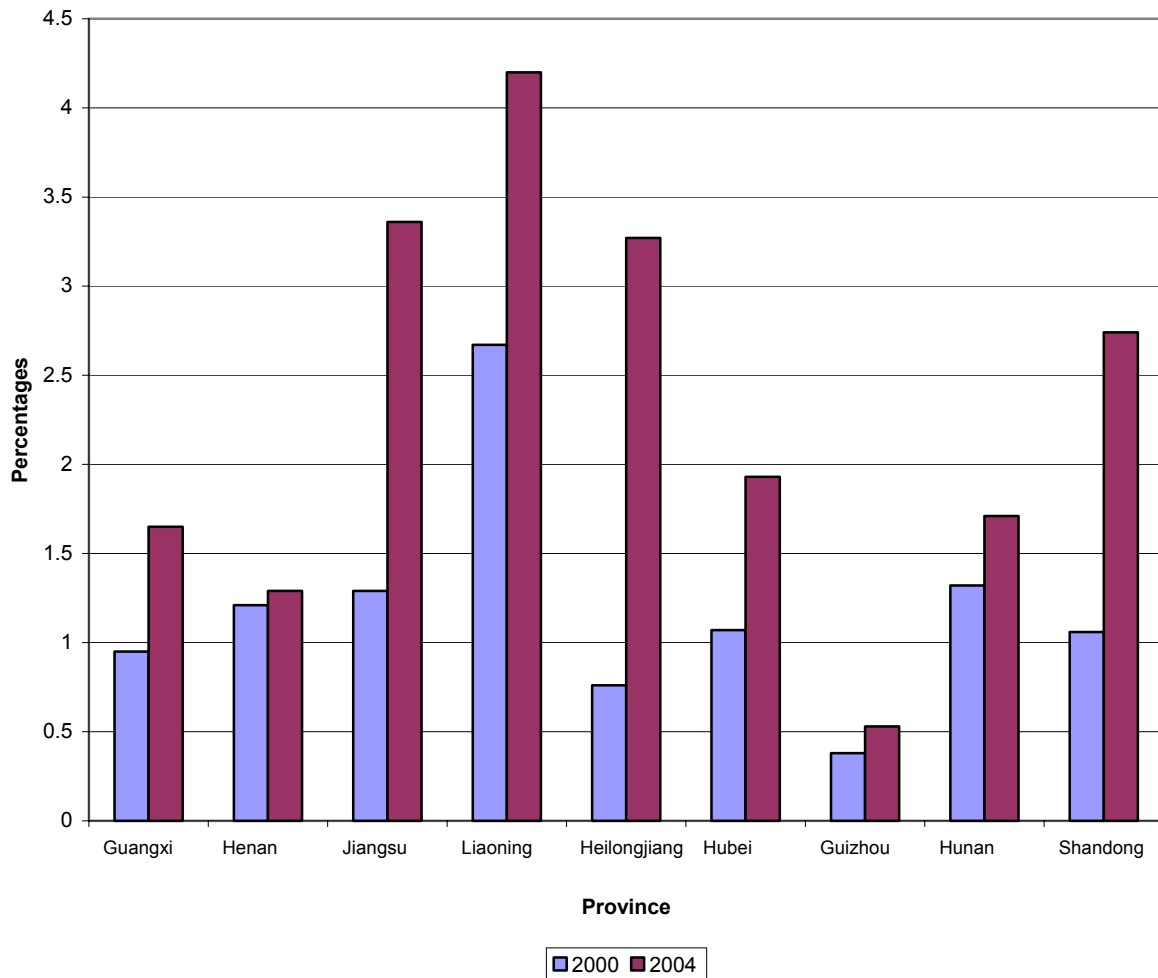
However, it is also possible that the positive relationship between working in non-public sector and being housewives may reflect that married women who had previously worked in the public sector were more likely to report their present status as “retired” rather than “being housewives.” Specifically, we know that workers in the state and the collective sectors enjoy retirement benefits which are often unavailable to private sector workers. Therefore, married women who are currently not employed but worked in the public sectors in the previous survey may be more likely to report their present status as “retired” rather than “being housewives” since they have retirement benefits and are able to “retire.” To more fully examine the observed association between employment sectors and being housewives, I ran additional regression analyses using a younger sample: married women between 18 and 45 years old, who were a lot less likely to be retired. The results are almost identical. The effects of working in the private and other unspecified sectors remain unchanged (significant at the  $p < 0.001$  level). Thus, working in the non-public sectors indeed increases married women’s chances of being housewives.

Finally, I found regional variations in married women’s probabilities of being housewives. Married women in Hunan, Shandong, and Guizhou are significantly more likely to be

housewives than those in Jiangsu. Compared to married women in Hunan, those in Jiangsu, Henan, Liaoning, and Guangxi are less likely to be housewives. Overall, Jiangsu women are the least likely to have withdrawn from the labor force. One possible explanation for these regional differences is that married women in provinces with higher female unemployment rates might be more likely to be housewives than those in provinces with lower female unemployment rates. Unfortunately, the information on female unemployment rates by province is not available. Instead, Figure 11 shows the percentages of women who were unemployed and seeking employment at local career services centers for each province in 2000 and in 2004. These numbers only represent a fraction of the female unemployed population and I assume that they are positively correlated with female unemployment rates. However, as we can see, the regional differences in married women's probabilities of being housewives appear to have little, if anything at all, to do with the numbers shown in Figure 11.

Alternatively, variations in married women's probabilities of being housewives may be related to the level of marketization in these provinces: the higher the level of marketization, the more housewives we will find. This is an argument similar to Hypothesis 5, which proposes that married women are more likely to be housewives in the later stage of the reforms when the economy is more marketized. Two indicators of the level of economic marketization, direct foreign investment rates and the percentages of urban workers in the private sector, are shown in Figures 12 and 13. Again, there is little, if any at all, evidence that these two indicators could explain why married women in some provinces are more likely to be housewives than their counterparts in other provinces.

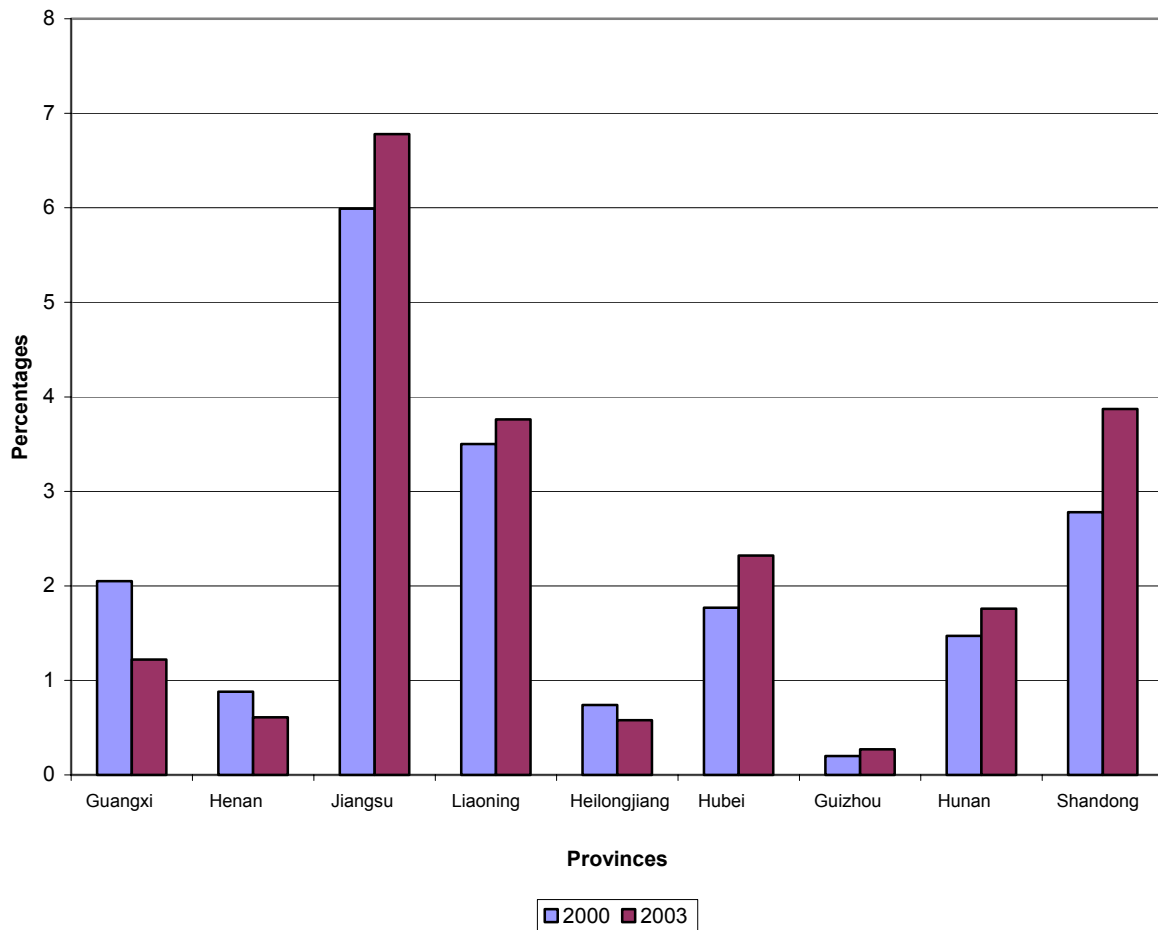
Since these two arguments involving economic factors fail to explain the regional variations, married women's labor force participation might be affected by their cultural norms



**Figure 11. Percentages of Women Searching for Work at Career Services Center, by Region and Year.**

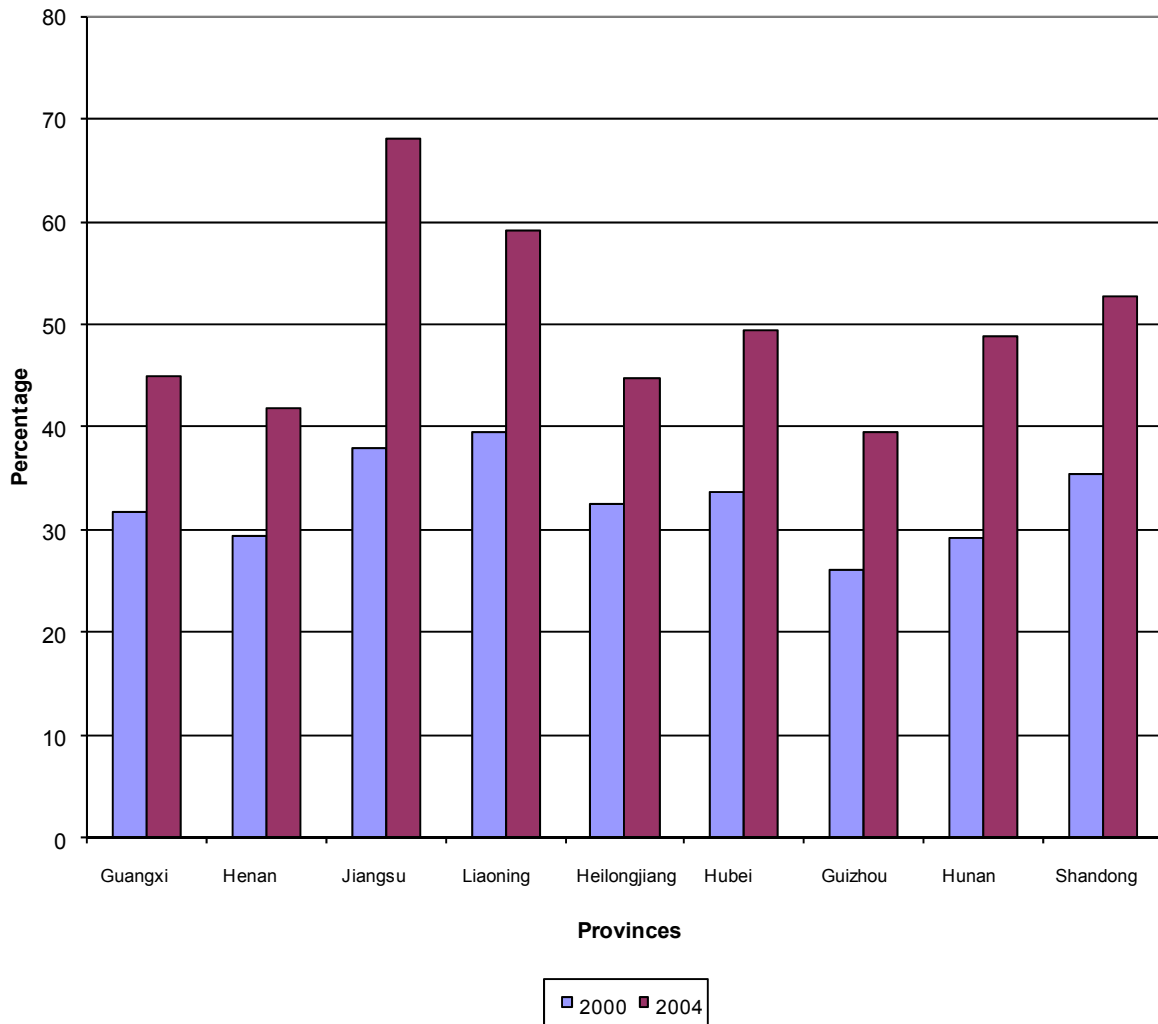
**Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China.**

in each region. For instance, the regression analysis shows that, other things equal, married women in Jiangsu are the least likely to be housewives. Jiangsu is adjacent to Shanghai, the largest city in China and citadel of its modern economy. Nearly all Shanghai residents are descendants of immigrants from Jiangsu and the other neighboring province, Zhejiang, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The high labor force participation rate for married women in Jiangsu, therefore, is likely influenced by egalitarian gender norms in Shanghai. The saying that “In Shanghai, the women wear the pants” reflects a unique and well known



**Figure 12. Direct Foreign Investment Rates, by Region and Year.**  
**Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China.**

phenomenon that sets the city apart from the rest of China. Women in Shanghai enjoy higher status and they are more active in the labor market. For example, in 2005, 28% of entrepreneurs in Shanghai were women, which is above the national average of 20%. Shanghai men are also famous for doing a significant portion of household work. Scholars trace Shanghai women’s unusually high status to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when foreign influences brought dramatic socioeconomic changes to Shanghai while the rest of China remained in feudalism (Lan 2003). Because of the rapid growth of the service sector in the city, which demands a large number of female workers, Shanghai women joined the workforce and gained



**Figure 13. Percentages of Urban Workers in the Private Sector, by Region and Year.**  
**Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China.**

financial independence long before women in other parts of China did. In those early years of development, there were more jobs available in Shanghai for women than for men. Women’s roles thus were dramatically changed. Today, in many Shanghai families, the women are the breadwinners while their husbands are responsible for household work. The continuous tradition of high female labor force participation in Shanghai might contribute to neighboring Jiangsu women’s stronger labor force attachment found in this study, though more research on this phenomenon is needed to confirm this “cultural diffusion” hypothesis.

## **Limitations of this Study and Suggestions for Future Research**

This study found that, although dual-income households continue to be the mainstream in postsocialist urban China, the remarkably high female labor force participation rates once achieved in the pre-reform era have been falling since the late 1980s. Between 1989 and 2004, the percentages of married women aged between 18 and 55 years old and without employment grew from 12% to 44 %. Some of these nonworking married women became housewives. The data showed that the percentages of full-time housewives tripled during this same period, and almost 1 out of 5 married women aged between 18 and 55 years old were housewives in the early 2000s.

The findings further support major theoretical perspectives that propose that married women's probability of being full-time housewives is influenced by their educational attainment, their past employment experience, their husbands' income, and whether they have young children at home or not. It appears that, as China gradually transforms into a market-oriented economy, housewives in urban China are undergoing a process of "polarization." On the one hand, we have married women who are forced out of the labor market due to their low human capital and/or family responsibilities. On the other hand, we also have married women who choose to become housewives because their household can afford such a lifestyle. Either way, both are in striking contrast to the near universal female labor force participation in pre-reform China where housewives were a rare find.

However, because of its focus on collecting data about the health and nutritional status of the Chinese people, the China Health and Nutrition Survey, the data set used in this study, does not contain information regarding individuals' gender role attitudes. This study thus did not examine the effect of gender role attitudes on married women's employment status, and I am

unable to examine whether they have any impact on married women's labor force participation in postsocialist urban China. This data limitation actually points out the scarcity of large-scale survey data faced by social scientists studying contemporary Chinese society. Often, researchers have to collect their own data in a few locations with limited resources, resulting in a non-representative sample.

Next, although the analyses showed the increases in the numbers of non-working married women and full-time housewives over time and the characteristics of these married women, the precise reasons that motivate these women to withdraw from the labor market and become housewives are less clear and require future study. I can only speculate that some women may be reluctantly pushed out of the labor market, such as those with lower educational attainment or those being laid off from state and collective enterprises, while others may choose to be full-time housewives willingly, such as those with high income husbands. This issue reminds us that the subject of full-time housewives in urban China requires more research attention and we still know very little about these women. For instance, we do not know how full-time housewives in China perceive themselves. Since employment was an integral part of women's life in the pre-reform era, do women feel shameful and unproductive now that they are housewives, and thus eager to find employment? Or do they find the domestic role self-fulfilling and rewarding, since the emerging gender norms in the reform era seem to regard being a "good mother and virtuous wife" as women's destiny and sacred duty? In addition, we also need more research to explore the daily life of these full-time housewives. Are they only taking care of the family or are they actually participating in family-based businesses actively? For instance, one study on the wives of "new rich" entrepreneurs in postsocialist China emphasizes their role as the manager of the family-run businesses and rejects the notion that these wives are not working (Hershatter 2007).



Essentially, we need more studies on gender inequality inside the family, when most of the researches on gender inequality in postsocialist China focus on gender disparities in the labor market. The trend of rising non-employment for married women found in this study indicates that the division of labor among couples in urban China is under transition. As more and more married women drop from the labor force, their roles in the family change from provider to homemaker. How this change would affect women's status in the household, such as the division of household work, should be the focus of future research in this area.

In sum, the results of this study provide some evidence that compared to men, women's economic position in urban China may be weakening in recent years, as a few other studies have suggested (Wang 2003; Cai & Wu 2006; Giles et al 2006), since more and more married women are withdrawing from the labor force. Nevertheless, the impacts of economic reforms on gender stratification in urban China are not unidimensional and straightforward. For instance, while there are increasing numbers of married women leaving the labor force, there are also more married women as professional workers and possibly enjoying greater economic returns than in the pre-reform era. Different segments of women thus may have dramatically different experiences in postsocialist Chinese society. Recently, the data from the 2006 China Health and Nutrition Survey have become available and further data collection is expected in 2009 and 2011. Future studies employing these newer data will certainly help us to understand the complex question of how gender stratification has evolved in urban China.

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