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Marital Construction of Family Power Among Male-Out-Migrant Couples in a Chinese Village

A Relation-Oriented Exchange Model

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This study examines marital construction of family power among male-out-migrant couples in a Chinese village in Guangxi Province. In-depth interviews show that male-out-migrant couples prefer joint decision making. When couples are in disputes, power tends to go to the ones who shoulder greater household-based responsibilities; in this case, they are mainly married women. The couples achieve power–responsibility congruence by following relation-oriented exchange, which emphasizes spouses’ obligations to the family and relational harmony, as opposed to equity-oriented exchange, which stresses the importance of comparative resources in one’s ability to wield power. Consequently, family power among male-out-migrant couples is group serving and enhances marital harmony. However, married women’s greater family power constrains as well as empowers them precisely because of the power–responsibility congruence. The unique power processes generated from relation-oriented exchange observed in this study are attributable to ecological and institutional constraints facing the village couples.

Keywords: *family power; male-out-migrant couples; relation-oriented exchange; equal obligations; China*

China’s post-Mao market reforms (1978–) have prompted a massive male out-migration among rural married couples. By contrast, married women are less likely than their husbands or unmarried women to seek urban employment (Davin, 1999; Feng, 2000; Gaetano & Jacka, 2004; Liang & Chen, 2004). Concomitant with this trend is a rising concern among scholars about a possible decline of female farmers’ family power, caused by their confinement to the economy of subsistence and nonpaid household responsibilities (Croll,

1995; Entwisle, Henderson, Short, Bouma, & Zhai, 1995; Matthews & Nee, 2000; also see Gasson, 1988, for a more general discussion).

Such concern seems to rest on two theoretical frameworks: resource theory and patriarchy perspective. Resource theory contends that family power is determined by comparative resources, such as spousal differentials in income, migrant status, education, and social connections outside the household (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Tichenor, 1999). Treating individuals' socioeconomic statuses as privately owned resources, resource theory assumes marital exchange that follows the market principle of self-interest and aims at an equitable distribution of family power (cf. Homans, 1961; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). It thus attributes the unequal distribution of family power to the unequal values of resources that the husband and wife bring to the relationship (Blood & Wolfe, 1960). Moreover, equity-oriented exchange processes tend to be ingrained in a zero-sum game structure, hence declaring the one with greater power as the winner of the game (Kranichfeld, 1987). The marital division of labor of "men work, women plough"¹ (*nan gong nü geng*) is expected to widen the gap in comparative resources in favor of men, keeping women in a subordinate position (Jacka, 1997; H. X. Zhang, 1999).

Holding similar premises, the patriarchy perspective sees a male-dominant culture and family structure as the primary source of unequal marital power (Blumberg & Coleman, 1989; Komter, 1989). China is well known for its age-long patriarchal family system, in which women's work was restricted to the "inside" domain of household responsibilities whereas men's extended to the "outside" realm (Jacka, 1997). Even in the heyday of socialism, in which the state severely assaulted the patrilineage by turning the male-controlled private land into collectively owned communes and sending women to work outside the household, men remained the head of the household and maintained the financial power, albeit in a much weakened fashion (H. X. Zhang, 1999). In the ongoing market reforms in rural China, the reconfiguration of the inside–outside dichotomy in family work under the family responsibility system (i.e., "men work, women plough") continues to create gendered spaces operating through patriarchal ideologies (Jacka, 1997; L. Zhang, 2000). Moreover, under the family responsibility system, local governments

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exclude married women when contracting the land to the households. Furthermore, the majority of rural women do not enjoy legal entitlement to their family property. The persistence of male-dominant norms and family structure may further undercut wives' power in male-out-migrant families.

However, as compelling as they are, the two theories are not completely borne out in this investigation as well as in some others (e.g., Oropesa, 1997; X. Xu & Lai, 2002). Despite wives' economically disadvantaged position and the persistence of a male-dominant culture and family structure, most wives of the male out-migrants continue to actively participate in family decision making; some even dominate the process. Contrary to what might be expected, dominant female farmers do not necessarily feel as though they are winning. To gain an understanding of power dynamics among male-out-migrant couples in rural China, one might not need assume the universality of equity-oriented exchange modes.

As Rodman (1967, 1972) points out, the relationship between marital power and resources must be placed in cultural context. Equity-oriented exchange is possible only if marriage partners espouse egalitarian beliefs, which tends to be the case in Western industrial countries. But in nonindustrial societies where patriarchal norms still serve as guidelines for distribution of marital power, not only is the role of comparative resources limited between spouses, but the meanings associated with marital power may also be different. To enhance the understanding of meanings in micro processes, scholars emphasize the need for exploring alternative modes of marital exchange shaped by broader cultural, ecological, and institutional contexts (Brown, 2002; Emirbayer, 1997; Granovetter, 1992; Mauss, 1990; Treas, 1993).

In the case of post-Mao China, in spite of a rapid transition to market economy and the global influence of consumerism (Yan, 2003), many Chinese rural families remain largely collectivized, giving little consideration to self-interest. The persistence of collective families is intimately related to their external circumstances. Moreover, within a multigenerational household, which is not uncommon in rural China, some parents of young married couples continue to control family resources despite their much attenuated power (Honig & Hershatter, 1988; Pimentel, 2000), hence creating more complex gender dynamics than those of the male-female dichotomy. In this light, the husband and wife may not be seen merely as two anatomic sexes but as a bound, mutually dependent dyad whose personal interests may be closely identified with collective well-being and whose marital exchange may take different trajectories and thus reveal marital power processes different from those commonly observed in industrial societies (Becker, 1993; Parish & Whyte, 1978; Zuo, 2004; Zuo & Bian, 2005).

The present study examines family power processes among male-out-migrant couples in a Chinese village. I apply a relation-oriented exchange model (Lin, 2001; M. M. Yang, 1994; Zuo, 2004). I argue that marital exchange in rural collectivized families follows the principle of obligation equality, albeit according to gendered norms. As a result, family power is group serving, going hand in hand with household responsibilities rather than being determined by resources or bestowed to men, and thereby may not always produce privileges to the power holder. Given that wives of male out-migrants are often the primary doers of household tasks, male dominance tends to be attenuated despite husband–wife differentials in socioeconomic status, the persistence of a male-dominant culture, and the patriarchal family structure. In addition, the husband's power may be further diminished in the presence of parental domination.

Collectivized Family, Relation-Oriented Exchange, and Group-Serving Power

The Chinese collectivized family, marked by the multigenerational household, dates from ancient times and was rooted in a household-based agrarian economy and collective culture. Although family forms and utilities varied widely by time, place, class, and ethnicity, some basic practices and ideologies remained unchanged until the advent of China's socialist transformation in the early 1950s (C. K. Yang, 1959). As an economic corporate and welfare unit, the Chinese family performed all-encompassing functions to provide employment, food security, support of the dependents, and personal safety (Lang, 1946; C. K. Yang, 1959). The family division of labor was often created along the gender line—men work outside and women work inside (*nan zhu wai, nü zhu nei*), although the meanings of the phrase tended to vary with circumstances (Rofel, 1999). In addition, like many agrarian households in pre- or nonindustrial societies, the family economy was organized around collective needs because of its importance to the survival of individuals (Fei, 1992), which turned what would otherwise be considered private matters in the contemporary era, such as marriage and childbearing, into collective endeavors undertaken for the continuity of the family as a whole (Cohen, 1976; A. Xu & Ye, 1999).

To be sure, family collectivism in rural China was undermined by the state-run commune system during Maoist years (1949–1976), in which families were deprived of their land, property, and other means of production reserved for family members and future generations (Parish & Whyte,

1978). Instead, peasants worked as members of the collectively owned commune, earning work points solely as labor. As a result, individuals became increasingly dependent on the commune and state for social and economic advancement (Parish & Whyte, 1978).

Under the family responsibility system in the post-Mao reform era, however, the rural family has resumed its role as an economic unit by contracting the land with the state (Croll, 1985; Judd, 1994, 2002). Not only is the family responsible for agricultural production, but it also serves as the welfare provider for its members, with the collapse of the commune system. This return has led to the resurgence of collectivized families in rural areas. It must be pointed out, though, that the recent emergence of collectivized families is not simply a revival of the tradition. Instead, the restoration of the economic and welfare functions of the rural families has been intertwined with China's market transition and globalized consumerism, which continue to dismantle the agrarian collective familial system (Yan, 2003).

Nevertheless, owing to varying ecological and familial circumstances, the same market forces have produced differential impacts in various regions and on diverse families. Jacka (1997) notes that migration and exposure to modernity may "cement the bonds of kinship and reinforce tradition" (p. 139). In some instances, those forces have strengthened the mutual dependence between spouses and facilitated marital divisions of labor—and hence increased the utility of collective strategies within the family. This is especially the case among poor peasant families that rely on collective efforts to ensure individual well-being, a pattern commonly observed in poor ethnic minority families in the United States (e.g., Baca Zinn, 1998; Collins, 1994). The mutual dependence of spouses may also be promoted by such factors as joint investments (e.g., children, land, housing), challenges of a weak economy, the difficulty of finding a spouse (owing to poverty), and normative constraints on divorce. Some or all of these factors may lead spouses to perceive greater rewards in the continuation of their marital relationships in comparison to those derived from pursuit of an equitable power distribution (Becker, 1993; Clark & Mils, 1993; Safilios-Rothschild, 1976). Therefore, in collectivized families, the gendered marital division of labor may be a by-product of collective survival strategies.

However, this by no means suggests that collective strategies are always "men work, women plough." Research in American rural families has shown a trend for farmers' wives to seek off-farm employment as a response to changing circumstances outside the family (Coughenour & Swanson, 1983; Pfeffer & Gilbert, 1991; Rosenfeld, 1985). Even in the villages where my research team and I conducted the study, there were

female-out-migrant couples, albeit in a much smaller proportion when compared with male-out-migrant couples.

Nor do I attempt to justify the unequal marital division of labor in favor of men (cf. Jacka, 1997; L. Zhang, 2000). But if one takes into account institutional factors, the “men work, women plough” strategy may yet reflect another external constraint imposed on rural families. Ample evidence points to the acute reality facing most rural migrant workers, who have been placed in lower economic strata and perceived as outsiders in urban areas because of China’s tightly controlled rural-to-urban migration in the 1950s through the 1970s (Fan, 2003; Feng, 2000; Solinger, 1999). Although migrant men and women tend to be temporary manual laborers without the protection of good working conditions, job security, family housing, and permanent urban residence (Feng, 2000; Liang & Ma, 2004), women encounter greater discrimination in the labor market (Gaetano & Jacka, 2004; Liang & Chen, 2004; Tan, 2004), and they are more susceptible to sexual exploitation and to negative images of prostitution and of destabilizing marriages (Jacka, 1997; Tan, 2004).

As Hochschild (1989) points out in her monumental work on the persistence of gendered marital division of labor in American families, men and women tend to develop their gender ideologies “by taking opportunity into account” (p. 16). Therefore, despite the marital inequality that it creates at the structural level, the “men work, women plough” mentality may be considered as a “gender strategy” (p. 17) that rural couples use to maximize collective benefits through marital cooperation when facing various external challenges (cf. Iwao, 1993; Zuo, 2004).

In addition to valuing the gender-based division of labor, a collectivized family demands the pooling of family resources to ensure the collective survival (Cavounidis, 1994; Fei, 1998; Treas, 1991, 1993; M. M. Yang, 1994). Because equity-oriented marital exchange bears undesirable consequences to the collectivity (e.g., distasteful haggling, unpleasant disputes, awkward policing), marital exchange in collectivized families has been governed by nonmarket mechanisms, such as norms, authority structure, and mutual trust (Curtis, 1986; Ekeh, 1974; Treas, 1993). In the case of China before the 1949-communist revolution, the traditional collective norms placed a strong emphasis on mutual obligations (*vis-à-vis* individual rights) among family members, although such obligations were built on the unequal status of family members by seniority and gender. To make it work, these norms tied the degree of one’s fulfillment of family obligations to the depth of his or her feelings (*ganqing*) toward other family members—the deeper the *ganqing* one proclaims, the more one should be willing to give to other

family members or to the entire family without seeking repayment (Fei, 1998; King, 1992). Here, giving was an act of generating not only debts but also appreciation in the recipient, which ultimately strengthened the relationships among family members (M. M. Yang, 1994). The purpose was to mold individual family members into group-minded beings and to promote relational harmony while enforcing the hierarchical order (King, 1992). Sharp interspousal negotiation and independent claim making of private resources by either spouse were renounced. Instead, spouses reached the balance of marital exchange by fulfilling their obligations to the family as prescribed by their cultural norms (Cohen, 1976; Kim, 1981).

Some of the most remarkable changes that have taken place among Chinese families since the 20th century include the decline of gender- and age-based hierarchies and a rising importance of free-choice marriages and conjugal bonding (Whyte, 1990; X. Xu & Whyte, 1990; Yan, 2003). However, the patterns of obligation-based marital exchange as guided by gendered norms seem quite persistent, especially in rural areas, perhaps because of the stalled gender revolution in the larger society (Wolf, 1985). Not only does this indirect mode of reciprocity recognize spousal contributions that include domestic and market work, but it carries implications for family power as well. Resource-based power or power use is not legitimate, for it may generate high relational costs and undermine marital cohesion or solidarity (cf. Molm, 1987; Simmel, 1978). Here, power is merely a capacity, one that is used to promote the well-being of the others (Cavounidis, 1994; Kranichfeld, 1987).

Consequently, collectivized families may reveal a weak link between one's earning power advantage and power use, and family power may be exercised according to a consensual agreement of who is in the best position to organize and utilize collective resources to the advantage of the entire family. Because women are primarily in charge of household responsibilities, they rule inside the house (H. W. Liu, 1959; Mann, 1997; Zuo & Bian, 2005). Although the power inside the house is far more circumscribed than the power outside it, this power sharing is more indicative of marital cooperation than domination, growing out of the need for economic cooperation in family-based economic activities and the sustaining of the collectivized family (Fei, 1992; Mann, 2002; Zuo & Bian, 2005). As the woman's role extends to household-based sideline production (e.g., animal raising, produce selling), the woman's family power may increase accordingly. Research on rural labor in the reform era shows that as men work in distant cities, women become effective heads of the household (Hershatter, 2004). Similar patterns are found in cross-cultural studies (Amandiame,

1987; Cavounidis, 1994). Resource-induced power use in collectivized families may be likely in only incompatible marital relationships where one spouse is much less involved in the relationship or the mutual trust is violated (Safilios-Rothschild, 1976; Zuo & Bian, 2005).

Compared to the gender dimension, family power relations in rural China had been organized around the age hierarchy, given the corporate nature of the family organization and the cultural norm of filial piety in pre-Mao periods (Whyte, 2003). Although the intergenerational patriarchy was effectively undermined under Maoist socialism and, as such, continues to erode in the reform era (Jacka, 1997; Pimentel, 2000; Yan, 2003), parental power has not totally disappeared; when present, it may complicate power dynamics between spouses.

This study examines family power distribution between wife and husband among male-out-migrant families. Guided by the relation-oriented model described earlier, I explore power processes in a collective family setting forged by adversarial ecological and institutional conditions. I ask the following questions: How is family power constructed through spousal interactions? How do wives and husbands experience and perceive their power differentials? Under what circumstances do resource theory and patriarchy perspective apply?

Research Site

We selected our research site in Village G, Mashan County of Guangxi Province in southern China. It had a population of 2,897 in 704 households with per capita landholding of 0.70 *mu* (0.11 acre) and annual per capita income of 816 yuan (\$102).² Although the village's per capita landholding is almost the same as those at the provincial and county levels (0.13 acres and 0.11, respectively), its per capital income was less than half of the average amount at the provincial level (1,865 yuan, or \$233) but slightly lower than the county average (1,000 yuan, or \$125). Both per capita landholding and income in Village G are far below the averages at the national level (.29 acres and 3,088 yuan, or \$386).³

Like many areas in Guangxi Province, the geography of the village features limestone mountains with little topsoil, high vulnerability to constant floods and droughts, and low agricultural yields—less than 200 yuan (\$25) per *mu* (or less than \$158 per acre). Despite its geological advantages for developing small industries, such as those of logging, fishing, tea, and herbal medicine, the lack of a well-developed transportation infrastructure

has greatly hampered such efforts. Economic devastation and poverty have pushed many married couples to seek nonagricultural opportunities.

According to village officials, the majority of the farmers sought off-farm economic activities. Among married couples, 70 of them had both spouses working in towns or in cities, and another 368 couples sent the husbands to work off-farm—accounting for 74% of the total households in which only one spouse worked off-farm. Only 139 couples had both spouses engaged mainly in agriculture. In addition, the married couples who found urban jobs or businesses that sufficiently supported their families had moved to cities. Some of them took their children with them, whereas others left their children behind with grandparents or other relatives. Still others improved their standard of living by running family businesses. The majority of the male-out-migrant couples in the village, however, included those who did not hold good city jobs or family businesses and those in which husbands were somewhat more marketable or more mobile than their wives, given the complex interactions between personal characteristics (e.g., the wife's pregnancy, education, job skills), family and ideological considerations (e.g., the presence of young children and ailing parents, traditional gender ideology), and urban conditions (e.g., lower-paying jobs for women, harsh working conditions, the lack of housing and child care). Consequently, they chose the "men work, women plough" strategy to generate more cash income while using farming as a safety net (cf. Jacka, 1997; Song, 1998).

The above factors suggest that women's engagement in agriculture were not likely to generate much economic value beyond the subsistence level, which put them at a clear structural disadvantage when compared to their out-migrant husbands. However, adversarial environmental factors heightened the woman's role of sustaining the lives of the entire family through her productive work and her caring for the family dependents, making the woman an indispensable family provider and caregiver.

By contrast, an overwhelming majority of the male out-migrants in the village were temporary manual laborers with low education. Although they might enjoy some economic advantages when compared with their wives, their secondary citizenship in cities motivated them to sustain their family ties. As a result, the male out-migrant workers tended to hold a strong identity with their rural families and eventually return to their villages, no matter how distant their workplaces were. The above patterns are consistent with the national trends found in previous studies (Feng, 2000; Liang & Chen, 2004; Liang & Ma, 2004). The challenging ecological and institutional constraints strengthened the mutual dependence between husband and wife and, hence,

the marital relationship. This formed a collectivized familial context for observing power processes guided by relation-oriented exchange.

Like the entire Mashan County, Village G was distinctive for its large concentration of Zhuang and Yao ethnic minorities, making it differ substantially in ethnic composition from Guangxi Province and the nation as a whole. Nevertheless, like the entire Mashan county, it is similar to the rest of Guangxi and rural China on other demographic characteristics (data available upon request). Although possessing their own languages and customs, Zhuang and Yao have been strongly influenced by, as well as influential on, Han culture and Confucian ethics, given Zhuang and Yao's more than 2,000 years of history under the central leadership of the Han Chinese, resulting in the co-residence and intermarriage of the Zhuang and Yao with the Han Chinese (Fang, 1939; X. Liu, Wang, Li, Deng, & Qin, 1999; Qian & Liang, 1997; Xiao, 2000). In this sense, the village people who were studied in Guzhai were comparable to the other rural Chinese who were in similar situations.

Sampling and Interviews

In the spring of 2001, the research team interviewed male-out-migrant couples in Village G to discern patterns of their power formation in family decision making and financial management, guided by the aforementioned theoretical concerns. The research team consisted of seven social researchers. Two were from outside China, and the remaining five were recruited from the Guangxi Women's Federation.

Our main sample-selection criterion was male-out-migrant couples aged 64 or younger. We did not include couples older than 64 who were themselves undergoing or whose parents were undergoing later-life transitions that had profoundly reduced older family members' work and family roles, changed household composition, and hence altered power processes between spouses as well as between generations. Specifically, when compared with younger couples, older people were less likely to consider one spouse's working off-farm. In fact, many of them have retired from some or all major family decision making, as well as from performing major family tasks, in multigenerational households (cf. M. C. Yang, 1945). Some couples have moved in separately with their adult children for old-age support. However, to discover various lived experiences and relations, we made a deliberate effort to include couples with diverse backgrounds in ethnicity, age, education, living arrangements, family income, work distance, types of employment, and marital happiness (Weiss, 1994). Although our goal is to

understand power processes among male-out-migrant couples, we included in our sample various other types of families as reference groups. The village women's representative helped us identify candidates for in-depth interviews based on the above criteria.

Our effort resulted in a small but diverse sample of 19 couples. As summarized in Table 1, the average household size was 5.4 (min. = 3, max. = 11). Fifteen couples (79%) lived with the husband's or wife's parents. The average couple was married for 20 years (min. = 1, max. = 38) and had 2.1 children (min. = 0, max. = 5), with a per capita income of 1,555 yuan, or \$194 (min. = 318 yuan, or \$40; max. = 4,667 yuan, or \$583) and per capita arable land of 0.11 acre (min. = 0.03, max. = 0.12). More couples are in free-choice marriages (52%) than in negotiated marriages (48%). Here *negotiated marriages* refers to those whose marriages were arranged by their parents or constituted through intermediaries (Pimentel, 2000). The average age was 40 for the wife (min. = 21, max. = 59) and 44 for the husband (min. = 27, max. = 62). Regarding education, 36.8% of the 19 wives were illiterate; another 26.3% had elementary school education; and the remaining 36.9% enjoyed secondary education. For the husbands, the percentages were 20%, 2%, and 60% respectively.

Other types of families included male farmers whose wives engaged in wage labor in cities ($n = 2$) and couples from farming households ($n = 13$). Of the 13 farming couples, 7 had both spouses work in agriculture; 3 ran small family businesses in addition to farming; another 2 ran small businesses but hired individuals to do farming; and in one family, the husband was a salary-earning village official, and the wife was a farmer who also ran a small tailor shop. These 15 couples were similar to male-out-migrant families in most of the above social demographic characteristics. However, their average per capita income (1,840 yuan, or \$230) was higher than those of male-out-migrant households owing to the fact that several households were engaged in family businesses that generated considerable household cash incomes. Yet, when compared with male-out-migrant households, the other types of households revealed much greater variations in per capita income (min. = 250 yuan, or \$31; max. = 6,000 yuan, or \$750), suggesting much more diverse economic arrangements and living standards. Perhaps the most distinguishable characteristic of the other types of families was the blurring of the husband's and wife's economic contributions owing to their shared economic activities and the non-wage-earning nature of agricultural production, with the exception of the two female-out-migrant couples and the male official's family.

We first interviewed the wife and husband in each household together to establish rapport and to obtain general information about their family and

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Male-Out-Migrant
Households (*N* = 19)

Characteristics	<i>M</i>	%
Households		
Size	5.4	
Number of children	2.1	
Multigenerational households		79
Marital duration	20	
Per capita income (yuan)	1,555 ^a	
Per capita arable land (acre)	0.11	
Free choice marriage		52
Negotiated marriage		48
Wife		
Age	40	
Ethnicity		
Zhuang		66.7
Yao		27.8
Han		5.6
Education		
Illiterate		36.8
Elementary		26.3
Junior high		21.1
Senior high		15.8
Husband		
Age	44	
Ethnicity		
Zhuang		73.3
Yao		26.7
Han		0.0
Education		
Illiterate		20.0
Elementary		20.0
Junior high		53.3
Senior high		6.7

a. \$194.

household activities. We then conducted a separate interview with each spouse. The informants were first asked to identify major decision-making items made after the husband took off-farm jobs. They then were invited to talk about power-formation processes; perceptions and meanings of family power; and the familial context that shaped those processes, perceptions, and meanings. All the interviews were conducted in the informants' homes;

note taking was the only data-recording method acceptable to our informants. The seven researchers were divided into three groups in conducting interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour. We also collected information from village officials to get an overview of the history and situations of the village.

Results

“Men Work and Women Plough” (*Nan Gong Nü Geng*)— A Collective Gender Strategy

As presented in Table 2, our in-depth interviews with 19 male-out-migrant couples from Village G show that when compared with the husbands, wives shoulder much heavier burdens of agricultural production and household-based responsibilities, ranging 63% to 88%, with the exception of house building and repair. These percentages are also much higher than those of the wives of other types of families, ranging from 14% to 47%.

Although not shown in the table, our qualitative data suggest that wives of male out-migrants, when compared to those in other types of households, share heavier burdens of all family tasks and that the extent of sharing is much greater, which increases to 80% or even 100% of family work. This is especially the case when the husband works in a distant city and only visits the family briefly (e.g., once a year).

In addition, unlike in the past when the husband and wife both worked on the farm, male out-migration implies possible separate accounts of husband's and wife's cash income, with a large income gap in favor of the husband. According to our data, the husband's average income is 4,600 yuan (min. = 700 yuan, max. = 11,200 yuan), whereas the wife's is 2,000 yuan (min. = 0 yuan, max. = 8,000 yuan). The husband's income is, on average, 76% of the couple's combined income.

Nonetheless, the gendered division of labor seems mainly the result of family considerations. In the interviews, a common response from the couples was “We do whatever is good for our family and children.” All but one husband indicated that they took nonagricultural jobs to support the family. One 43-year-old porter working in Nanning (capital of Guangxi Province) said, “I could not have afforded my children's education had I not taken an off-farm job.” A quarryman commented, “I work 10 hours a day, 7 days a week, very exhausting, a lot of harassment, but earn only 16 yuan a day. I do this solely for increasing my family income.”

Table 2
Distributions of Family Tasks and Family Power Among
Male-Out-Migrant Households (N = 19)

Category	Wife More <i>n</i> (%)	Equal <i>n</i> (%)	Husband More <i>n</i> (%)	Parents More ^a <i>n</i> (%)
Agriculture/sideline				
Plough	12 (63)	4 (21)	3 (16)	0 (0)
Plant	12 (63)	6 (32)	1 (5)	0 (0)
Hoe	14 (74)	5 (26)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Harvest	13 (68)	6 (32)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Sideline (<i>n</i> = 18)	14 (78)	2 (11)	1 (6)	1 (6)
Household tasks				
House building/repair (<i>n</i> = 12)	3 (25)	5 (42)	3 (25)	1 (8)
Cooking	14 (74)	2 (11)	1 (5)	2 (11)
Laundry	15 (33)	1 (5)	1 (5)	2 (11)
Child/elder care (<i>n</i> = 17)	15 (88)	1 (6)	0 (0)	1 (6)
Family power				
Decision in production	9 (47)	4 (21)	3 (16)	3 (16)
Decision in household matters	12 (63)	3 (17)	2 (11)	2 (11)
Financial power	12 (63)	2 (11)	3 (16)	2 (11)

a. Although the percentage is based on the total number of cases, keep in mind that only 15 couples from male-out-migrant households live with their parents or parents-in-law.

The wives generally support their husbands' pursuit of off-farm jobs. In some cases, wives are the ones who persuaded their husbands to leave the farm. The wife (age 35) of the aforementioned porter offered the following account:

It was me who asked my husband to look for a job in cities. He disagreed initially because I was pregnant at the time. He wanted to share the workload with me until the child was born. But we were too poor to have anything to eat. I often felt dizzy due to malnutrition. . . . I then took up all the work at home after he was gone. I wish he could help me around the house, to share my feelings when I get depressed. . . . But he has to make money to support the family. . . . We are forced into this situation.

Why do men, and not women, pursue nonagricultural jobs? On the surface, we repeatedly heard from women and men about their adherence to the traditional gender ideology of "men work outside and women, inside." But we noted that beneath the saying, those women were concerned about taking denigrating jobs in cities; living in an unsafe urban environment for

rural migrants; and lacking off-farm opportunities for married women, given urban employers' preference to younger, single women. Consequently, they believed that their husbands had a better chance in handling the urban job market and living environment. One 39-year-old woman commented, "It is easier for my husband to earn money for he is physically stronger. I would not want to take indecent jobs [implying prostitution]." When considering the hazardous urban settings, women find it much more rewarding to assume household responsibilities. A 32-year-old woman with two young children said, "I do not want to look for a job elsewhere. I want to see my kids right after my fieldwork and be close to my family." Therefore, unless they are able to find decent urban employment and a safe place to stay or afford urban housing for both themselves and their family, these married women are unwilling to take risks. This finding is consistent with the patterns that Hochschild (1989) found about American wives who embrace the ideologies that suit their perception of chances.

Sometimes, women send their husbands away because they do not think them to be quite helpful around the home. A 41-year-old woman not only shoulders farming, child care, and the care of her paralyzed father but runs a small tofu business. She makes tofu by herself and sells it at a local farmers' market three times a week. Her tofu business brings her an annual cash income of 2000 yuan (or \$250). In contrast, her husband (age 44) attempted to run a small fish farm but wound up losing money. Now he works as an ore miner in a distant city, managing to send home more than half his annual income of 7,200 yuan (\$900) each year. The wife hires others to help her with the fieldwork during agriculturally busy seasons.

In Village G, wives generally work in cities alone when their husbands are in poor health, are unwilling to leave the home, or are believed to be a more skilled laborer around the home. In one case, the couple initially worked in cities together as manual laborers. The husband eventually quit because of his deteriorating health. Now he takes care of farming, child care, and domestic chores, whereas his wife works as a cleaning lady in a fruit-processing factory. In another case, the couple were compelled to work in cities as wage laborers after suffering a loss in the family business. The husband returns to the village to take care of farming, sideline production, and domestic chores, whereas the wife remains in the city as a porter. The rationale, according to the husband, is that he is much more skilled in pig raising and in domestic chores than his wife is, who has little knowledge about pig raising and seldom did chores before marriage. A reason that the husband claims himself to be a better housekeeper is that he lost both parents in his childhood and had to do everything by himself. Like male out-migrants, these

two women have endured the hardship to make more money for their children's education, but unlike that of their male counterparts, their annual income tends to be lower—each around 4,800 yuan (\$600).

The above evidence suggests that unlike in urban families, where the rejection of the socialist gender-equality ideal marks a backlash of egalitarian marital relations (Pimentel, 2006), the gendered division of labor through “men work, women plough” in this rural village is largely a collective response to the institutional and labor market constraints that the couples encounter.

Whenever possible, most husbands return home to help with farming. One 55-year-old woman said, “He will come home and help during busy seasons. Life is hard for both of us this way, but it will be worth it if we can earn more money for our children.” Like their farming counterparts, male-out-migrant couples continue to pool family resources. The husbands who are working in distant cities generally send home over 50% of their income. Although the bank accounts are always under one spouse's name,⁴ both spouses consider them to be joint assets. Most couples report a higher cash income since the husbands began engaging in nonagricultural activities; some can even afford a new house.

In addition, husbands and wives perceive the wife's work to be crucial in sustaining their family lives. A typical reflection of this perception can be found in the comment made by one wife: “My husband works in cities to support the family. So do I at home.” The husbands, too, recognize the important contributions made by their wives. Because all the husbands whom we interviewed are temporary urban workers with little job security and low social status, they maintain strong ties with their families and appreciate the hardship that their wives endure in holding the family together. When we complimented their industriousness as migrant workers, men's common response was “I work hard; my wife works even harder.” The same response came from the wives when they were complimented in the same way because they understand their husbands' harsh working conditions and deprivation of their privileges to be with their families. The mutual appreciation is grounded in relation-oriented spousal exchange, which emphasizes the fulfillment of family obligations by each spouse rather than the individuals' claiming of their contributions to the family as privately owned resources.⁵ Relation-oriented exchange, in turn, promotes spousal relational harmony. In our sample, spouses in all but two couples hold good relationships and are committed to their marriages.

The spousal relation-oriented exchange turns family decision making and financial management into a site for enhancing the well-being of the

entire family. The power-formation processes thus take a path different from those in an equity-oriented, individualized family setting, a subject to which I now turn.

Power Sharing Rather Than Power Competition

The scope of family power in this study covers three areas: decision making in agricultural and sideline production, decision making in major household matters, and financial management. I note that the majority of husbands and wives are not only able to participate in major family decision-making processes but prefer to do so; a similar pattern was found in urban families (Pimentel, 2006; Zuo & Bian, 2005). As many of them said, two heads are better than one. One young female farmer (age 21) was pleased when her husband (age 36), working as a coal miner for almost 1 year, returned home: "Now I have someone to share the burden of making family decisions. We just purchased a dining table set which cost us 105 yuan (\$13). This was a joint decision." Joint decision making also strengthens the marital union (Pimentel, 2006). A male out-migrant worker told us,

We consult each other on major family issues, such as the purchase of big-ticket items, house building. . . . How could you make this kind of decisions without getting your wife's opinions since they concern both of us? It would do neither of us any good if her feelings got hurt.

Some villagers and village officials, male and female, told us that it was difficult for a man to find a wife in this region, owing to poverty. Therefore, men respect their wives' opinions; otherwise, their wives might run away.

In the majority of the cases, the wife handles the family budget because both husband and wife believe that the wife is a better financial manager. In three cases, the husbands turn most of their earnings to their wives and ask for money when they need it. According to these husbands, they all have the tendency to overspend. One husband (age 31), a worker in a local quarry, hands over his money for an additional reason: It is good for strengthening his relationship with his wife. But the most common answer among wives and husbands for the question of who has more power is "It does not matter. We listen to whoever is right."

Household Responsibilities as a Primary Source of Power

The couples' emphasis on joint decision making does not preclude the situations in which the wife and husband disagree with each other. When it

happens, decision-making power often goes to the one who shoulders the greater responsibility of the family tasks on which the decisions are being made. For example, the wife of the above-mentioned porter reported,

Men used to be in charge of housing. But now I am the primary decision maker in the family. I brought up the idea of building a new house and began the work in 1997 at the cost of 10,000 yuan, somewhat exceeding the budget proposed by my husband. . . . I am also the one who attends teacher-parent conferences of our children. My oldest son wanted to attend vocational school whereas my husband thought otherwise. But I supported my son, who was finally enrolled in a vocational school.

In Table 2, we can see that of the 19 male-out-migrant couples, the wives outnumber the husbands in the amount of power in agricultural and sideline production (47% versus 16%), in major household matters (63% versus 11%), and in financial management (63% versus 16%), despite that sharp disagreements are not a common phenomenon.

Indeed, male temporary migration does not necessarily undermine the power of the primary doers of family work. More often than not, the doers easily get their way without much opposition from their spouses. Couples believe that decisions are more efficient when the doers are bestowed with greater power, because the doers tends to have more experience and knowledge about family tasks for which they are responsible (cf. Becker, 1993). Because women shoulder disproportionately agricultural, sideline, and household responsibilities, they have somewhat greater family power than do their husbands. One small businessman has worked in cities since 1985 and often goes on interprovincial business trips, leaving most agricultural and domestic tasks to his wife. The wife said,

We consult each other on major decisions, but my opinions usually prevail. For example, I brought up the idea of building a new house a few years ago. My husband wanted two stories so that we would not have to take a loan. But I proposed three stories and a mortgage plan. He said, "Okay, let's do it your way." This was because I knew better about the kind of house we needed and how to spend the money wisely.

The husband offered a similar account: "My wife has the last word on almost every major issue. I am happy the way she handles the money, agricultural production, and the household. She is a better decision maker than me." This is consistent with Cavounidis's study (1994) of Athens, where the researcher found that artisan wives increased their family power as they became involved in their family economic activities.

To further increase efficiency, the couples in which the husband was the owner of the bank account have changed the name to that of the wife since the Chinese banks adopted the “real name” system (*shiming zhi*), which allows only the owner of the bank account to do financial transactions. As a result, the wives’ family power actually grows when their husbands work in cities. By contrast, among farming couples, some husbands remain the owners of their family bank accounts. One male farmer gives the following rationale: “I am the one who purchases seeds, fertilizer, and so forth. It is therefore more convenient to set up a bank account under my name.”

The notion of the power–responsibility congruence means that one must do the work if he or she wants to make a decision on a major family project. One’s anticipated doing of the family work increases his or her chance to obtain the decision-making power on that project. One woman was interested in opening a brown sugar retail business. Her husband opposed the idea for fear of failure. But she eventually got her way, for she was the one who would do the work and later made profits.

It can also be argued that husbands yield because some decisions are relatively unimportant to them and can thus be delegated to their wives (Hood, 1983; Rodman, 1972; Zuo & Bian, 2005). As true as it is, our study reveals additional patterns. Those husbands who yield in decision making offer such explanations as lacking expertise or experience, showing respect for their wives’ hard work, and wanting to hold harmonious relations with their wives.

The responsibility-embedded family power disadvantages women as well as empowers them (cf. Zuo & Bian, 2005). Those women whose husbands seldom come home and who have limited family networks tend to be emotionally as well as physically exhausted because of the overwhelming demands in decision making. This is especially the case among poor families. Ms. Wang, a mother (age 37) of three school-age children, sobbed throughout the interview. We learned that her husband (age 37) worked as a construction worker in another province to support their children’s education. He could only afford to come home once a year or even less frequently, given his low annual income as a manual laborer (less than 3,000 yuan, or \$375). Moreover, Ms. Wang has few relatives in the village to help her. These factors compound the stress on Ms. Wang, who has to shoulder all the agricultural and domestic burdens and make all the decisions alone with few resources. Wang said, “I prefer my husband to be the manager of the household [*dang jia*] to lift some weight off my shoulder.” Her oldest daughter (age 14) added,

I sometimes see my mother come home from the field with teary eyes. She has been very depressed: She has no one to talk to when feeling sad, no one to

look after her when falling ill, and no one to consult when making tough decisions. I have already quit school due to a shortage of money. Now my mother borrows money to keep my younger sister and brother staying in school.

The men of female-out-migrant families sometimes encounter a similar predicament. Below is the account offered by Mr. Pan (age 35):

My wife [age 34] has worked in Nanning since 1990 as a manual laborer. She makes about 400 yuan [\$50] a month. I have also worked in Nanning for a while but had to quit in 1999 due to a deteriorating health. There are strengths and pitfalls for us to live separately. A good thing is that my wife can bring home additional cash income; but I often have no one to talk to for family decision making. Fortunately, she comes home once a month. We try to make major decisions together and shop together as much as we can. For major decision-making items, I'd like to follow her opinions, for she has a better vision and is more thoughtful than me.

The Use of Negotiations When One Spouse Shirks Family Responsibilities

Although relation-oriented exchange in collectivized families generally denounces direct negotiations and bargaining, it involves the use of these strategies when one spouse shirks his or her family responsibilities or is perceived as failing to meet them. Bargaining power in collectivized families is mainly derived from the extent to which one fulfills his or her family obligations, whether these obligations lie in the market sphere or the domestic sphere. For example, one female farmer (age 41) had shouldered almost all the agricultural and sideline production as well as the domestic tasks before her husband (age 44) landed a job in Guiping—a distant city in Guangxi Province. By contrast, he had done little to help. The woman complained, “He was not only unhelpful around the home but also liked drinking and smoking. He sometimes even asked *me* for money. This made me very unhappy!” She finally persuaded her husband to seek urban employment as a way to restore the balance of equal obligations. Now her husband works as an ore miner in Guiping and manages to send home around 5,000 yuan (\$625) a year.

In another case, the aforementioned 35-year-old female farmer, whose husband was a porter in Nanning, told us that she would travel to Nanning and ask her husband for money if he failed to send her remittance on time. The woman hardly earns any cash income, but the fact that she performs most of the agricultural and household tasks, including taking care of her

paralyzed father-in-law, and that she does so for the entire family rather than merely for herself, empowers her to do so.

Male Dominance in Patriarchal and Incompatible Marriages

Patterns of power sharing and power–responsibility congruence will fail to hold if one or both spouses stick with male-dominance ideology. One 34-year-old woman is disappointed with the fact that her husband (age 36) still controls major family decision making, because she is the one who does most of the work around the home. The husband’s rationale: “I am the head of the household. I should be able to make major decisions for the family.” But the wife disagreed: “Women and men should be equal!”

In another case, a meat-selling peddler (age 34), is in charge of the family budgets and major decision making, except for agricultural production. Both wife (age 33) and husband believe that the husband is a better decision maker by virtue of his male status and his higher education (junior high versus 2 years in elementary school). The above examples lend support to the patriarchy perspective.

Male dominance also occurs among couples in which the husband is less committed to the relationship. One female farmer (age 37) said that her husband (age 40) never loved her and allegedly had extramarital affairs when he was away from home. He did not share family work or decision making but interfered with his wife’s activities:

He started working in cities in 1990 and I did in 1994. But he did not want *me* to work in the cities. I returned home in 1997 to take on all the agricultural and domestic tasks. . . . I wanted to raise pigs, but he disagreed and taught me nothing on pig raising. He does not give me money and often gets drunk. He would beat me and the children if I attempt to stop his drinking.

The husband said,

Men should work in cities because they make much more money than do women. Women should take care of the household. My wife tried to persuade me to be home with her, but I did not listen. . . . My wife does not like me drinking, but I must—my work is too exhausting for me not to.

The unbalanced marital relation has prompted a constant power struggle between the spouses, which often turns the wife into the victim of her husband’s tyranny. This is a stark example lending support to resource theory—the husband’s less commitment and greater economic resources enhance his dominance in the marital relationship.

Nevertheless, even in incompatible marriages, power sometimes goes to the doer of household chores. Instead of resorting to privatized resources, doers use their domestic responsibilities as bargaining chips in negotiations. For example, one wife (age 36) holds a separate purse and cooks just for herself (age 44) following the death of her parents-in-law and the sending of their children to a boarding senior high school. She said in the interview,

I would turn to my husband for money whenever our fellow villagers collect gifts from us for various occasions. I would tell my husband that I would not attend the event on behalf of our family if he gives me no money.

The Case of Parental Domination

Although married couples are the primary decision makers in the majority of the multigenerational households, as shown in Table 2, sometimes, particularly in the case of young marriages, parents still hold greater family power. For example, one young couple with two children live in a household of 11 members headed by the husband's father, who works for pay in the Rural Fund in the village. The husband (age 28), a worker at a local stone pit, makes between 3,000 and 4,000 yuan (\$375–\$500) a year and hands over two thirds of his annual income to his father. The wife (age 25) does most of the farming; her husband helps with the fieldwork during busy seasons. However, it is the father who handles all major decisions and finances. The parental power extends to what would otherwise be conjugal or even personal decisions. For example, the wife said, "I must consult my parents-in-law besides my husband regarding whether I should use ligation of oviduct as a contraceptive, for the operation would have a negative effect on my ability to do heavy labor." In this case, neither the husband nor the wife has control over family decisions, suggesting that parental control may suppress male dominance and push marital relations into a state of near equality (Ortner, 1981). Nevertheless, the young couple prefers to continue to stay with the husband's parents and defer to their opinions. They do so in exchange for lower living expenses, a carefree lifestyle, and convenient child care. The wife explained,

We do not have the economic capacity to move out; moreover, I do not trust my husband's ability to run the household. He likes smoking and drinking. Neither do I trust my own ability. My father-in-law is very good at running the household. He has built three houses for all three of his sons albeit all in his name.

In some other cases, however, parental totalitarianism may make the situations of daughters-in-law, who are often seen as outsiders and disruptive forces of familial harmony (Yan, 2003), particularly devastating. One 36-year-old woman offered her story:

My father-in-law [age 81] has been the head of the household. He does not work much in the field, but he'd like to give orders to other family members. . . . He used to control all the money. Then, he transferred the power to my husband [age 44] as he grew older. But he'd like to remain in control. I remember that he always asked me to turn over all my cash income to my husband in front of his eyes to make sure that I would not have any money left for my natal family. Moreover, my husband must consult my father-in-law, not me, for major family matters and spending. This practice lasted for quite a while until I was elected as a village official in 1997.

Discussion

This study examines marital construction of family decision-making power and financial power among male-out-migrant families in a Chinese village. Contrary to earlier concerns that rural women might lose their family power as their husbands enhance their economic advantage through off-farm activities, the data show that wives of male out-migrants have successfully maintained their power. In the cases in which the husbands could afford to visit their families only a few times a year, the power shifted from husbands to wives because of the husband absence effect (also see Jacka's similar comment, 1997, p. 139). Equally phenomenal is the fact that husbands and wives prefer to share family power and do so especially when major household decisions are involved. The reason is that these couples are unions whose gendered division of labor is formed as a collective gender strategy for coping with ecological and institutional constraints. In this case, family power is group serving, producing incentives for the couple to share power.

In addition, in collectivized families, not only is wives' agricultural work greatly appreciated, but so are their domestic services, which are life sustaining in the absence of socialized child care and old-age support systems outside the family. This finding suggests that the gendered marital division of labor pushed by externally imposed forces signifies spouses' sharing of family tasks, albeit in a more segregated than integrated fashion (Pimentel, 2006).⁶ Consequently, instead of seeking direct reciprocity, spouses balance

their exchange relations by fulfilling their culturally prescribed family obligations, which include domestic and market work, and by achieving relational harmony rather than an equitable distribution of power. As a result, family power goes hand in hand with household responsibilities.

The responsibility-generated power tends to raise efficiency and promote marital harmony by granting the doer greater power, which can be seen through our informants' narratives. Because women from male-out-migrant families are the primary doers of agricultural production, major family projects, and other household-based chores, they are bestowed with greater power than men are. It seems that power-responsibility incongruence in favor of men mainly occurs under two circumstances: when the husband or both spouses still believe in the male-dominance ideal and when the husband becomes less committed to his marriage. In the above situations, male power tends to be self-serving and detrimental to relational harmony in marriage.

In addition to the predominant trend of marital power sharing and power-responsibility congruence, the present study demonstrates a weak yet persistent parental domination over household decision making and financial management, under which neither husband nor wife has full control over family matters, thereby attenuating husband-wife power differentials.

The overall findings suggest that the family power dynamics rooted in relation-oriented marital exchange could be treated as alternative patterns to those stemming from resource-based, equity-oriented marital exchange, which sees family power as being self-serving, competitive, and advantageous to the power holder. This alternative model is worth noting not only because it promotes relational harmony between spouses but because it carries implications about women's holding of power somewhat different from those embedded in equity-oriented exchange models. Notwithstanding privileges and empowerment, women's holding of greater family power may work against their personal interests or to their disadvantage in a relation-oriented exchange process, in which power and family responsibilities go hand in hand. This may be especially so when women face multiple daunting family tasks but with limited financial or other resources, as is the case with the wives of male out-migrants in the present study. What female power holders truly gain is group solidarity and collective survival, more so than personal freedom and autonomy.

For the above reason, we must caution against the relational harmony achieved in the settings of the unequal marital division of labor. Although the relationship between the gendered division of domestic labor and marital quality is a complex one (e.g., Wilcox & Nock, 2006), considerable research across societies indicates that couples may enjoy better marital quality when

they believe in egalitarian ideology and engage in the integrated sharing of the family work (e.g., Coltrane, 1996; Pimentel, 2000, 2006; Schwartz, 1994; X. Xu & Lai, 2004). The male-out-migrant couples in our study may run a risk of lowering their marital quality by largely engaging in the segregated sharing of chores, by living apart, and by having the wife be disproportionately burdened with the tasks of family decision making.

Finally, it must be emphasized again the role of ecological and institutional factors in shaping spousal responsibility-based power dynamics. The hostile natural environment increases the appeal of marital stability to the villagers who are stuck in the situation. The limited land holdings and the lack of other means of living in the local area turn the otherwise unequal gendered division of labor into a collaborative project. The gendered division of labor is also attributable to the unfriendly urban environment in which rural migrants, particularly married women, have been discriminated against in nearly every aspect of their lives. Consequently, married women and men in the village have a great deal of interest in maintaining their marital relations and thus meet their individual needs through collective efforts, demonstrating little incentive to exercise resource-based power. Therefore, various issues of family power should be addressed in broader context that shapes different modes of marital exchange and gives meaning to various power dynamics.

Several limitations should be noted when interpreting these results. First, the study was conducted in one village, which undoubtedly misses out on a much greater variability in family organization and ecological conditions across the nation, region, and even the county to capture wider-ranging power processes. Second, the village that we studied was poverty-stricken, which did not allow for ample opportunities to observe well-to-do families, in which equity-oriented exchange and male dominance seem most likely as men become entrepreneurs but not their wives (Entwisle et al., 1995; L. Zhang, 2000). Finally, our sample size is too small to make any bold generalization beyond the power processes that we have examined. For these reasons, instead of claiming uniformity among rural households in family power formation, this study, with rich interview data in hand, hopes to draw attention to alternative family power relations between spouses who mainly follow a relation- rather than an equity-oriented mode of exchange when facing ecological and institutional challenges.

Notes

1. Here "men work" means that rural men take a wage job in nonagricultural sectors.
2. At the time of the study, the exchange rate was \$1 = 8 yuan.

3. The full data set available upon request.
4. Under the Chinese banking system, there are, to date, no joint account services available.
5. See Zuo (2004) for a detailed discussion on how relation-oriented exchange works among male-out-migrant couples with respect to marital division of labor.
6. The distinction between integrated and segregated family work can be found in Pimentel's work (2006). According to Pimentel, "integrated sharing of the family work" refers to the situation in which the husband and wife share each chore and decision making equally, whereas "segregated sharing" (p. 350) means that each spouse is responsible for different chores or decisions.

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