

Feminization of Agriculture, Relational Exchange, and Perceived Fairness in China: A Case in Guangxi Province*

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ABSTRACT This study examines the inconsistency between the unequal allocation of family labor and a lack of perceived unfairness among spouses of male-outmigrant couples in rural Guangxi, China. It explores relational (versus transactional) exchange processes conditioned by husband-wife mutual dependence. Using both qualitative and quantitative data collected in three villages, this study finds that among male-outmigrant couples the gendered division of labor—"men work and women plough"—serves as a collective strategy to cope with poverty. Consequently, instead of engaging in direct exchange using privatized resources, marriage partners indirectly reciprocate each other through culturally prescribed family roles. Relational exchange emphasizes the equality of obligations and nonmarket strategies, which are likely to strengthen relational harmony by enhancing marriage partners' appreciative feelings of each other's contributions to the well-being of the family, thus promoting perceived fairness despite the uneven allocation of family tasks.

One of the most remarkable changes in the Chinese market transition (which began in 1978 and continues today) has been the feminization of agriculture—men work and women plough (*nan gong nu geng*) (Judd 2001; Song 1998). As rural China shifts from commune- to household-based farming, increasing numbers of married men seek off-farm employment, leaving agricultural and household tasks to their wives (Entwisle et al. 1995; Hare 1991, cited in Entwisle et al. 1995; Johnson, Parish, and Lin 1987). According to recent statistics, more than 100 million rural residents have streamed to the cities for paid employment (Zhang 2001), and more than two-thirds of them are men (Labor Security Department & China Statistical Bureau 2000). This trend has not only substantially altered the gender composition of the agriculture labor force but it also carries profound implications for marital equality and the well-being of economically disadvantaged women.

Research has increasingly focused on rising marital inequality as the gaps in economic status and agricultural and household burdens widen

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between husband and wife. These studies suggest that men's outmigration offers new opportunities for men to improve their own social and economic prosperity. Women, by contrast, are confined to the economy of subsistence and nonpaid household responsibilities (Croll 1995; Entwisle et al. 1995; Matthews and Nee 2000; also see Gasson 1988 for a more general discussion). As women are trapped in farming, they contribute less to the family income than their husbands, further diminishing their bargaining power for marital equality. Given husbands' superior cash income as a result of off-farm work and wives' increased workloads with low occupational status, wives might be expected to show resentment against the current unequal division of labor. However, this is not borne out by the results of our investigation. Despite their multiple burdens, few women view this gendered division of labor as unfair. Similar patterns have also been found in a study of married couples in urban areas (Zuo and Bian 2001), as well as in some Western countries (e.g., Haugen and Brandth 1994; Lennon and Rosenfield 1994).

This study examines the inconsistency between the unequal marital division of labor and perceived fairness among male outmigrant couples. It argues that the uneven distribution of family tasks, though important in assessing marital inequality, only reflects the structural dimension of the inequality using objective measures. To reveal the full range of gendered patterns within marriage, one must also look at exchange processes that illuminate subjective experiences while producing objective outcomes that are shaped by given cultural and familial circumstances.

Previous research has tended to focus on market models of marital exchange, emphasizing transactional justice (cf. Homans 1961; Thibaut and Kelley 1959). It attributes the persistence of the unequal division of household labor and the lack of a sense of injustice on the part of women to the unequal amount of exchange values of the resources each spouse brings to the relationship (Blood and Wolfe 1960; Brines 1994; England and Farkas 1986). Because men tend to earn more, hold more prestigious jobs, and have more skills in the use of authority and power due to their role as the main financial provider, they do less housework but enjoy greater family power (England and Farkas 1986). Similarly, women who are financially dependent on marriage tend to view the unequal division of household labor as being fair (Lennon and Rosenfield 1994).

A major problem with market models, however, is that they fail to ground individuals' behaviors in the various social contexts within which they are embedded (Brown 2002; Emirbayer 1997; Granovetter 1992). The same behavioral or structural pattern (e.g., unequal division of household labor) does not necessarily represent the same exchange processes, and the meaning of individual actions emerge only in given

familial contexts. In her discussion of financial management in marriage, for example, Treas (1991, 1993) distinguishes two kinds of marital organization that produce two different marital exchange patterns—privatized versus collectivized. In privatized marriages, individual economic interests are recognized and separate purses are allowed. As a result, self-serving bargaining and market-like exchange between husbands and wives are not only legitimate but are also desired to ensure a more equitable distribution of family resources. At the same time, however, market-like exchange based on individual rational choice produces undesirable consequences for sharing and cooperation. Collectivized marriages, by contrast, subordinate individuals to the conjugal unit and partners share a common pot, aiming to maximize collective benefits. To reduce the negative consequences of individual self-interest in marital exchange, collectivized marriages reject economic principles in favor of social mechanisms, such as norms, values, and authority structures (Curtis 1986; Treas 1993). Accordingly, nonmarket social exchange usually “involves factors that create diffuse future obligations, not precisely specified ones, and the nature of the return cannot be bargained about but must be left to the discretion of the one who makes it” (Blau 1964: 93). Consequently, marital exchange in collectivized unions tends to suppress unpleasant haggling and conflicts and strengthen spousal relationships (Treas 1993), which may be coined as relational exchange (cf. Nan Lin 2000).

According to Treas (1993), choice of exchange mode and family organization in a marriage depends on family transaction costs that are determined by the couple’s circumstances. In the situations where spouses are economically dependent on each other, face a threatening environment, find it difficult to monitor each other’s contributions, and have many marriage-specific investments or greater relationship certainty, nonmarket relational exchange and collectivized unions may be preferred over market exchange and privatized arrangements (Brines and Joyner 1999; Treas 1993).

Collectivized Families and Relational Exchange in Rural China

Chinese rural families have been predominately collectivized, and spouses have paid little attention to individualistic self-interest. Therefore, to explore contemporary Chinese peasants’ experiences, it is imperative to examine marriage exchange processes that emphasize relational harmony in their collectivized familial and agrarian economic contexts.

Chinese families have a long history of collectivism rooted in an agrarian economy in which the family was an economic unit and its

collective survival was much more important than the individual happiness (Fei 1998). Although family collectivism in rural China was considerably undermined by the state-run commune system during the socialist era (1949–1977), it has recently resurged under the family responsibility system instituted as part of China's market transition (Judd 1994, 2001). The corporate nature of the collectivized family demands the pooling of the family resources (cf. Treas 1991, 1993; Yang 1994) and requires somewhat hierarchical relations, traditionally based on seniority and gender, in order to achieve economic efficiency (Fei 1998). Traditional Confucian ethics, which have been conducive to Chinese agrarian economy, place strong emphasis on social order among family members in the stratified corporate-like family system.

However, the status-based inequality in patriarchal Chinese families has yet another important aspect as part of the patriarchal family system; that is, the mutual obligations of every family member to everyone else in the family by virtue of their family statuses (Fei 1998; King 1992; Mann 2002). For example, Confucian ethics emphasize the loyalty of the husband (*fu yi*) to his wife while demanding the chastity of the wife (*qi zhen*) to her husband. Such mutual obligations are fulfilled mainly through each member's performance of his or her family role, prescribed by Confucian norms (Lin 2000; Mann 2002). Moreover, Confucian ethics tie the degree of fulfillment of mutual obligations to the depth of one's feelings (*ganqing*) toward other family members; the deeper the *ganqing* one proclaims, the more one should give and help other family members without seeking repayment (Fei 1996; King 1992; Yang 1994). The purpose is to mold individual family members into group-minded and family-dependent beings; to ensure internal harmony while enforcing the hierarchical order (King 1992).

To reduce potential conflict among family members, the collectivized Chinese family espouses the ethics of familial sentiments and obligations as the organizing principles of family life (Fei 1949, 1998; Liang 1949). Between the husband and wife, emphasis is placed on cooperation and relational harmony rather than on achieving a sense of economic equality (Fei 1949, 1998). These cultural norms thus make it illegitimate for either the husband or the wife to claim individual rights or benefits; to do so might undermine spousal cooperation by hurting the spouse's *ganqing* (feelings) and, therefore, the relationship (cf. Fei 1998; Treas 1993). From this perspective, an individual's rights are not achieved through open advocacy or explicit legal maneuverings, but are built instead through each individual fulfilling his or her own obligations to the others in the family (Kim 1981).

Given the importance of marital cooperation and relational harmony in Chinese collectivized families, marital exchange is indirect: the

husband and wife achieve a balance in their relationship by fulfilling their obligations to the family according to their culturally approved roles, rather than pursuing direct exchange using their personal resources. As a result, marital exchange is governed by social rather than by economic mechanisms, as argued by Curtis (1986) and Treas (1993). Moreover, the Confucian indirect-exchange ideal emphasizes “giving” and “obligations” rather than “taking” or “rights” (King 1992). Giving is an act of creating a debt in the recipient in order to maintain a relationship (Yang 1994). This indebtedness plays two roles in marriage. First, it strengthens the marital relationship by increasing the marriage partners’ *ganqing* toward each other. Second, it makes the recipient feel obligated to contribute to the family even more. Therefore, acts of giving should enhance harmonious rather than conflicting marital relationships.

This indirect mode of marital exchange grows out of the need of the collectivized family for group solidarity, preconditioned by high levels of mutual dependence between spouses whose benefits from the current relationship are understood to exceed prospective gains from alternatives (cf. Brines and Joyner 1999; Clark, Dubash, and Mills 1998). The mutual dependence of spouses may be promoted by a variety of factors, such as joint investment (e.g., in children, land, housing), the challenges of a weak economy, the difficulty of finding a spouse in a poverty-stricken area, and normative constraints on divorce. Some or all of these factors may lead spouses to perceive greater rewards in the continuation of their marital relationship than pursuit of transactional justice (cf. Clark and Mills 1993; Safliios-Rothschild 1976). In collectivized families, therefore, the gendered marital division of labor may be a by-product of collective survival strategies. However, this does not necessarily suggest that collective strategies always mean “men work and women plough.” Prior 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 and Swanson 1983; Rosenfeld 1985; Pfeffer and Gilbert 1991). The point here is that “men work and women plough” collective strategies certainly demonstrate gender inequality at the structural level; nevertheless, they might also maximize collective benefits through marital cooperation, promoting relational exchange (cf. Iwao 1993; Zuo 2003).

Context of Study

We selected our research site in Mashan County of Guangxi Province. Like many areas in Guangxi, the geography of the county features

limestone mountains with little topsoil, high vulnerability to constant floods and droughts, and low agricultural yields. Despite its geological advantages for developing small industries, such as logging, fishing, tea, and herbal medicine, the lack of a well-developed transportation system has greatly hampered such efforts. Economic underdevelopment and poverty have pushed many married couples to seek nonagricultural opportunities. According to our conversations with county, township and village officials, as well as villagers in Mashan, the married couples who found urban jobs that provide livable family wages have moved to cities. Some of them take their children with them, while others leave their children in the village with their parents or other relatives. Still others improve their standard of living by running family businesses. The majority of the male-outmigrant couples in this region, however, are those who do not have good city jobs or family businesses; and those in which husbands are somewhat more marketable or more mobile than wives, given complex interactions between personal characteristics (e.g., wife's pregnancy, education, job skills), family and ideological considerations (e.g., presence of young children and ailing parents, traditional gender ideology), and urban conditions (e.g., lack of housing and childcare) (cf. Song 1998; Zhang 2000). Consequently, they choose the strategy of men work and women plough to generate more cash income while using farming as a safety net.

The above factors suggest that women's engagement in agriculture is not likely to generate much economic value beyond the subsistence level, which puts them at a clear economic disadvantage compared to their outmigrant husbands. At the same time, however, challenging ecological conditions might serve to strengthen the mutual dependence of husband and wife. Thus, this setting forms an ideal context for observing collectivized families that may reveal underlying relational exchange processes.

Mashan is also distinctive for its large concentration of Zhuang and Yao ethnic minorities, making it differ substantially in ethnic composition both from Guangxi Province and from the nation as a whole. Nevertheless, it is similar to the rest of Guangxi and of rural China on other demographic characteristics (see the Appendix). Although possessing their own language and customs, Zhuang and Yao have been strongly influenced by (as well as influencing) Han culture and Confucian ethics, given their more than 2,000 years of history under the central leadership of Han Chinese, which has involved both co-residence and intermarriage with Han Chinese (Fang 1939; Liu, et al. 1999; Qian and Liang 1997; Xiao 2000). In this sense, the Mashan residents we studied appear to be comparable to other rural Chinese.

Hypotheses

Given the lingering importance of Confucian ideals in rural China, a relational exchange model seems most likely to underpin marital exchange in which marriage partners exchange role-bound family obligations rather than privilege-embedded personal economic resources. The emphasis on “giving” instead of “taking” in relational exchange may generate feelings of appreciation instead of a sense of injustice in both spouses. This means that while individuals may be aware of their greater contributions made to the well-being of the family in their own areas of responsibility, they may equally recognize the contributions made by their spouses in the other areas of family responsibility. Accordingly, a person’s perception of fairness may depend on his/her own attitudes toward the family role of the spouse, rather than on the relative personal economic resources each spouse brings to the family.

Therefore, I hypothesize that while one spouse may acknowledge his or her own fulfillment of family obligations, this spouse will also recognize the role-based contributions made by the other spouse, thus reaching a view with the spouse that the marital division of labor is fair, in spite of an unequal marital distribution of agricultural and nonagricultural family tasks. More specifically, in the context of male-outmigration in rural China, I expect that the stronger the wife’s favorable attitude toward the husband’s nonfarm jobs or toward the male-provider role, the more likely she will be to perceive an unequal division of labor as fair or even more than fair.

Methods

In late spring 2001, we conducted a two-phase research project—in-depth interviews and a survey—in Marshan County. Survey data were collected to test the relational exchange hypotheses. The qualitative data from our prior in-depth interviews were intended to validate the measurements of the quantitative variables and to “give a voice” to the statistical results. The research team consisted of seven social researchers. Two were from outside China, and the remaining five were recruited from the county and provincial levels of Guangxi Women’s Federation.

Sampling

Probability sampling for the survey. We selected three villages from three different townships for our survey. We chose villages with varying levels of economic development and standards of living to ensure

a representative sample. Village Y was the richest, with per capita landholdings of 0.13 acre (0.92 *mu*) and average annual per capita income of \$190 (1,548 *yuan*). Village G had per capita landholdings of 0.11 acre (0.70 *mu*) and per capita income of \$102 (816 *yuan*). Village L was the poorest of all despite its slightly higher per capita landholdings of 0.12 acre (0.83 *mu*) compared to Village G's 0.11 acre. Its per capita income was less than two-thirds (474 *yuan*, or \$59) that of Village L. To determine whether the wives of outmigrants have different views from the wives of farmers, we included couples aged 60 or younger from both types of families in our sample selection. We did not include couples older than 60 because we were concerned that their marital division of labor might be obscured by factors associated with their unique later-life-course transitions, such as moving in with their adult children for old age support, or the inability of one or both spouses to work full time.

We first obtained from each village committee a list of all couples younger than 61 years old as our sampling frame. Given the unequal number of couples in each village, we then employed the probability proportional to sample size (PPS) method to determine the subsample size for each village, followed by systematic random sampling (i.e., picking every *n*th couple in the village directory depending on the population-sample ratio) in all three villages to select married couples. The final sample consists of 114 couples, 77 of which had husbands engaged in nonagricultural migrant activities. Of the male outmigrant couples, 61 percent of the men worked outside the county or province, another 10 percent worked within the county, and only 29 percent worked in their own village. Those who worked far away from home visited the family only during agriculturally busy seasons (e.g., harvest time) or in Chinese New Year holidays. Forty-five outmigrant husbands were unavailable at the time of the survey due to their urban employment, which left only 73 husbands to participate in the survey.¹ Consequently, the quantitative data analysis mainly relies on the wives' answers to our survey questions. Table 1 provides the demographic information about the 114 couples.

A set of informants selected for in-depth interviews. Prior to the survey, we did in-depth interviews with 19 male-outmigrant couples in Village G using the same age criterion discussed above. Because our target population was male-outmigrant couples, a random sampling procedure

¹ The absent husbands were similar to those who participated in the survey in terms of age, educational attainment, ethnicity, and the number of children. They were different from the latter in that they were all temporary outmigrants. The majority of them (30 out of 41) held a job across the County and Province, and their average relative incomes were higher (78% of family income, *s* = 22%) than those surveyed (70% of family income, *s* = 24%).

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Samples

Characteristic	Village G (<i>N</i> = 19 Couples)			Three Villages (<i>N</i> = 114 Wives)		
	Mean	SD	%	Mean	SD	%
Family						
Size	5.4	1.9		4.9	1.3	
Number of children	2.1	1.2		1.9	0.94	
Multigenerational households			79			46.5
Marital duration	19.6	11.9		15	8.8	
Per capita income (yuan)	1,555	1,322		898	778	
Per capita arable land (acre)	0.12	0.01		0.14	0.01	
Wife						
Age	40	11.5		36	9.7	
Ethnicity						
Zhuang			66.7			59.8
Yao			27.8			36.6
Han			5.6			3.6
Education						
Illiterate			36.8			31.3
Elementary			26.3			48.2
Junior High			21.1			17
Vocational			0			1.8
Senior High			15.8			1.8
Husband						
Age	44	11.9		39	9	
Ethnicity						
Zhuang			73.3			65.8
Yao			26.7			20.7
Han			0			13.5
Education						
Illiterate			20			2.7
Elementary			20			40
Junior High			53.3			43.6
Vocational			0			1.8
Senior High			6.7			10.9

was unattainable. But to discover various life experiences and perceptions, we made a deliberate effort to include couples with diverse backgrounds in ethnicity, age, education, living arrangements, and family income (Weiss 1994). We first determined our selection criteria, after which the village women's representative helped us to identify appropriate couples. Our effort resulted in a small but diverse sample of 19 couples. Only one of the 19 couples was chosen again for the survey through the random sampling process. Thus, there was little overlap between the survey respondents and our interview informants (see Table 1 for the demographical information about both samples).

When the two samples are compared, it is clear that although they are similar in family size and the number of children, the couples selected for the survey are somewhat younger, better educated, have been married fewer years, earn less family cash income, and are less likely to live in a multigenerational household. This is not surprising given the larger geographical areas covered and the probability sampling techniques employed in the survey.

Survey and In-depth Interviews

All seven researchers participated in the survey and the in-depth interviews. In both cases, the husband and wife were interviewed separately. The survey was conducted village by village. On the days of the survey, all the chosen respondents from each village gathered at their village committee offices. Each researcher conducted face-to-face, one-on-one surveys. The researchers read questions to the respondents and then recorded the answers directly on the questionnaire.

For the in-depth interviews, the seven researchers were divided into three teams. All the interviews were conducted at the informants' homes. Note taking was the only data-recording method acceptable to the respondents. In our interviews, one researcher from each team was designated to take notes to ensure the quality of data recording. Each interview lasted approximately one hour.

Measurement

The dependent variable is perceived fairness in the marital division of labor. Prior interviews had demonstrated that our informants lacked a sense of transactional equity (see the qualitative data in the "Findings" section). For this reason, we constructed two questions that reflected perceived fairness in terms of equality of obligations derived from the relational exchange perspective. They are: (1) Which spouse do you think works harder (*geng xinku*) in household-based activities? (2) Which spouse do you think works harder (*geng xinku*) in providing the financial support for the family? Both questions were measured on a 10 point scale with lower scores indicating that husbands are more hardworking, and higher scores indicating that wives are more hardworking. The number 5.5 would be assigned if respondents thought both spouses were equally hardworking. This level of measurement was used for two reasons. First, it is attuned with the measure that Chinese peasants often use in describing the efforts that one makes. For example, one point (*yi fen*) means 10 percent of the effort, and 10 points (*shi fen*) refers to 100 percent of the effort. Second, this ratio level makes more sense than other measurements (e.g.,

a dichotomous one) when the scores of the two fairness indicators are later combined into one measure. A total of 11 points implies a perceived balance of spousal exchange across domestic and provider roles. Any score higher or lower than 11 indicates perceived unfairness on the part of either the husband or wife. Such operationalization apparently deviates somewhat from the conventional scholarly understanding of fairness (e.g., Lennon and Rosenfield 1994). It is, nevertheless, a more valid instrument to capture the mindset of Chinese peasants in collectivized families regarding fairness issues.²

The independent variables are wife's attitude toward male urban employment and wife's attitude toward male financial provider role. Control variables include the husband's relative cash income, the wife's share in agricultural labor, the wife's share in household-based work, the wife's satisfaction with husband's care (*titie*) about her, and the husband's occupational status. To measure a wife's attitude toward male urban employment, we made a statement: The husband should do so if one of the spouses must find urban employment to support the family. The variable is measured on 5-point Likert scale from (1) strongly agree to (5) strongly disagree.

The wife's attitude toward male financial provider role is concerned about whether the husband should be the primary financial provider when both spouses work to support the family. This variable is measured on the same Likert scale as the above attitude variable.

A husband's relative income is measured by the proportion of the combined cash income of the couple that is contributed by the husband. For those couples in which both spouses were farmers, the husband's relative income is considered to be 50 percent of the couple's combined income.

A wife's share of agricultural work is measured in terms of six task indicators: plough, seeding, weeding, fertilizing, harvesting, and seed selecting. Each task variable is measured on a 3-point ordinal: (1) primarily done by the wife, (2) shared equally with the husband or done primarily by other family members or by hired people, and (3) primarily done by the husband. The six indicators are finally combined into one scale; the smaller the value, the less the involvement of the husband in agricultural work.

Household-based work includes routine and nonroutine sideline production (i.e., possible cash-generating activities, such as pig raising) and housework, including the following ten items: pig feeding, poultry

² The statistical results show that the dependent variable of perceived fairness is basically a normal distribution with a very slight positive skew (.467) and low Kurtosis score (.449).

feeding, cooking, laundry, eldercare and childcare, shopping for the family, large animal feeding, fuel collecting, repair, and other physical work. All these items are measured on a 5-point ordinal: (1) done by wife only, (2) done primarily by wife, (3) equally divided between spouses or done by other family members, (4) done primarily by husband, and (5) done by husband only. Because routine domestic chores tend to be the most contested area in terms of gender equality (Coltrane 2000), the present study uses a combined indicator of the first six items of sideline production and routine housework.³

A wife's satisfaction with her husband's care about her is measured on a 5-point ordinal from (1) very dissatisfied to (5) very satisfied.

A husband's occupational status is treated as a dichotomous variable, with agriculture being coded as zero, and nonagriculture as one.

Analytical Procedure

The quantitative data is used to examine wives' and husbands' perceptions of fairness in the marital division of labor, and comparisons are made where comparable data is available, namely between outmigrants' wives and farmers' wives. A comparison of the wives' marital division of labor and the perception of it is used to test the fairness question. Then an OLS multiple regression is employed to test the hypothesis that a wife's favorable attitude toward the husband's nonfarm job or toward the male-provider role is associated with a sense of fairness.

The qualitative data is used to explore more fully the meanings and perceptions that male outmigrants and their spouses associate with off-farm employment and with agricultural and household labor, and the degree to which they view the gendered marital division of labor as fair.

Findings

Quantitative Analysis

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of all the variables employed in the statistical analyses, using the quantitative data collected from 114 wives. It shows that 67 percent of the couples had the husband engaged in off-farm work and the wife engaged in agriculture. Wives took on a larger share of agricultural production (mean = 9.46, *s* = 2.66), as well as almost all the sideline and household work (mean = 10.69, *s* = 3.54). In addition, wives' average relative income was only 70 percent of their

³ Although animal feeding is part of routine housework, only 69 couples owned large animals. Therefore, this item was dropped when the routine housework scale was constructed.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables (N = 114 Wives)

Variable Name	Mean	SD	%
Percent of husbands in nonagricultural sector (0 = agriculture, 1 = nonagriculture)			67
Agriculture production (6 = mainly wife, 18 = mainly husband)	9.46	2.66	
Routine household work (6 = wife only, 30 = husband only)	10.69	3.54	
Percent of wives believe current division of labor benefits family			98
Husband's relative cash income	0.70	0.24	
Percent of wives who support male urban jobs			96
Percent of wives who support male providing			91
Wife's satisfaction with husband's care about her (1 = not satisfied, 5 = very satisfied)	4.13	0.91	
Wife's perceived fairness regarding domestic work			
Husband works harder (score 1-5)			13
equally shared (score 5.5)			20
wife works harder (score 6-10)			67
Wife's perceived fairness regarding male providing			
Husband works harder (score 1-5)			62
equally shared (score 5.5)			29
wife works harder (score 6-10)			9
Wife's perceived fairness on combined scale	10.38	2.53	

husbands'. Nevertheless, few wives perceived the unequal division of labor as unfair. Although the majority of the wives considered themselves to work harder than their husbands in their culturally prescribed roles, they similarly believed that their husbands worked more diligently within their own area of responsibility. When examining the scales of financial provider and household-based work separately, our data show that among the wives, 62 percent thought that their husbands took on greater responsibility in the provider role, 29 percent felt that both shared the provider role equally, and only 9 percent believed that they themselves shouldered a greater provider role than their husband did. A combined fairness scale of the two original items show that the wives' overall evaluation of the fairness was slightly leaning toward husbands working harder, evident by the mean of 10.38 ($s = 2.53$, $Z(t) = -2.62$, $p < .005$, two-tailed), less than the center of 11 points.

Although not included in Table 2 due to a somewhat biased sample, the data collected from the 73 husbands nevertheless show that 57 percent felt that their wives did more domestic work than they did, 27 percent thought they shared the work equally, and the remaining 16 percent believed that they worked harder than their wives did on domestic work. The percentage of men believing that their wives did more

domestic work than they themselves did might have been higher had those 41 absent outmigrant husbands participated in the survey, since they were undoubtedly among those who left domestic responsibilities completely to their wives during their long period away from home. The average score for the husbands was 10.89 ($s=2.12$, $t=-.14$, $p > .10$, two-tailed) when both fairness scales were combined into one item, indicating a balanced evaluation. This part of the findings supports the hypothesis that wives and husbands perceive their division of labor as fair or more than fair.

While the additional two t test results reveal that nonfarmers' wives shouldered significantly heavier workloads in both farming (mean difference = 1.55, $t = 3.02$, $p < .005$) and domestic work (mean difference = 1.40, $t = 2.0$, $p < .0025$), the one on perceived fairness shows no significant difference between nonfarmers' and farmers' wives (mean difference = -0.74 , $t = 1.47$, $p < 0.10$). This means that male outmigrants' wives did not feel more unjustly treated than did farmers' wives, despite their heavier multitask burdens. This makes sense once we see that 98.2 percent of the female respondents indicated that their current division of labor was formed primarily for family well-being—a collective survival strategy used in both types of families.

Finally, the OLS regression results show significant effects of both attitude variables on perceived fairness, but, interestingly, in opposite directions. While the wives who supported male urban employment tended to perceive the current division of labor as fair ($\beta = 0.269$, $p < 0.005$), those who supported the male provider role were less likely to hold the same perception ($\beta = -0.261$, $p < 0.005$). This may be because male urban employment could mean job advancement either for the individual worker or for the family as a whole. Therefore, wives would consider their husbands to be hardworking only when they held positive attitudes toward male urban employment. By contrast, the male provider role is exclusively associated with traditional ideas about family responsibility. Those wives who did not believe that men should be tightly bound by the traditional provider role might value their husbands' financial contributions to the family even more. The latter finding seems at odds with Western gender theories, which tend to view the provider role as a male privilege, such that egalitarian women define equality in terms of their ability to share more equally the provider role with their husbands (e.g., Perry-Jenkins 1994). It is possible, however, that in the Chinese case, gender-based exchange of obligations may render male financial support more of a family responsibility than a male privilege.

As predicted by the relational exchange perspective, the husband's relative cash income had no impact on wife's perceived fairness of the

Table 3. Ordinary Least Square Regression of Perceived Fairness for Wives (N = 114 Wives)

Independent Variable	Unstandardized b	Standardized β
Husband's relative income	-0.756	-0.072
Wife's attitudes toward male urban jobs	0.901**	0.269
Wife's attitudes toward male breadwinning	-0.762**	-0.261
Wife's share of agricultural production	-0.128	-0.136
Wife's share of routine household work	-0.013	-0.019
Wife's satisfaction with husband's care about her	-0.558*	-0.168
Husband's occupational status	0.739	0.138
Intercept	8.501**	
Adjusted R^2	0.120**	

** $p < .005$, one tailed; * $p < .05$, one tailed.

division of labor. In addition, wives who were satisfied with the amount of care (*titie*) received from their husbands tended to have a stronger sense that the division of labor was fair ($\beta = -0.168$, $p < 0.05$), a finding consistent with previous research (Grote and Clark 2001). The overall results lend support to the relational exchange perspective. That is, it is female farmers' commitment to cultural norms regarding the male role, rather than a husband's personal economic resources, that determine a wife's sense of fairness.

Qualitative Analysis

Our prior qualitative data reveal patterns similar to those found in our quantitative analyses, together with much richer detail. Of the 19 male-outmigrant couples we interviewed in Village G, almost all of the wives shouldered more than 80 percent of agricultural production and 90 percent of the family sideline production and housework. The husbands helped with farming only in busy agricultural seasons. For those women whose husbands visited home only once or twice a year because of distant employment, wives' share of the above tasks was even larger. Moreover, male outmigration led to an increased gap in cash income between the husband and wife. According to our data, the husband's average income was 4,600 yuan ($s = 3,200$), compared to 2,000 yuan ($s = 2,100$) earned by the wife, which amounted to an average of 76 percent of the couple's total combined income. Our qualitative data provide answers to questions about how decisions were made that led to this gendered division of labor and how outmigrants' wives perceive and evaluate its fairness.

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 of the factors that kept wives from sharing or switching their roles with

those of their husbands was that both spouses still identified with what was traditionally defined as men's and women's work with a slight modification. Now men's "outside" role has been redefined to include nonagricultural tasks, whereas women's "inside" role has extended to include agricultural production. This is illustrated by the following comments:

I run a business and my wife works in the field. I think this division of labor is reasonable. I would not trade my work with hers. I have a very tough job and often get up around 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning. I am a man and would not let my wife do the work like this (33-year-old male butcher).

I think that I should do household work. This is what women do. Men should be the financial providers (the butcher's 32-year-old wife).

I could seek a nonagricultural job, but I would worry about my husband's ability to take care of the household. Men are not as attentive as women, who are more suitable for childcare and household management (43-year-old female farmer).

As family tasks were allocated according to collective family interests, the gendered division of labor in the household was seen to reflect cooperation between husband and wife. Such cooperation provided little incentive for either spouse to pursue transactional equity following economic principles. Our informants had a hard time envisioning the meaning of "fairness" (*gong ping*) in the sense of transactional equity. Although frequently used in scholarly writing in gender studies, the notion of "negotiations" for an equitable distribution of family tasks was not quite conceivable by our informants, who interpreted it negatively as "haggling" (*jin jin ji jiao*) (cf. Treas 1993). To them, the husband and wife were parts of one family, and each should work conscientiously (*zi jue*) for the common good of the family. Despite women's larger share of both field and domestic work, only one wife complained about it. The rest believed that this work was what they should be doing. They also felt that their husbands' nonfarming jobs were equally challenging. When we commented: "You work very hard," common responses from our female informants were: "My husband works even harder," or "my husband's job is not easy, either." One 40-year-old woman's husband worked as an ore miner in a distant city and could only afford to come home twice a year. The woman not only shouldered the tasks of farming, childcare, and the care of her paralyzed father, but she also ran a *tofu* business. She made *tofu* by herself and sold it at a local farmers' market three times a week. Her *tofu* business brought her an annual cash income of 2,000 *yuan*.

Still she thought her husband worked equally hard: "He works hard, too. His job is to carry heavy ore onto a truck, and he often works overtime. Sometimes, he has to put up with scolding from his supervisors. I have more freedom at home."

Similarly, most of the husbands recognized their wives' industriousness in contributing to the family well-being. A middle-aged businessman expressed his appreciation for his wife's hard work at home: "She is the one who does most of the farming and the care of my parents and our kids. I only help in busy seasons. . . . When I am home, I would try to do as much as possible of the housework, such as feeding pigs, cooking around 4 o'clock in the morning, doing heavy labor . . . so as to reduce her burden a little bit. . . . We should care about each other." His wife responded in the same way: "He [husband] trusts me, cares about me . . . he often says that I work hard (*xinku*). He helps me with fieldwork and household chores whenever he can."

To reciprocate their wives' contributions to the family, men also tried hard to fulfill their family obligations. One young coal miner said: "I wish I could eat better, who wouldn't? But I can't; if I did so, then my family would go hungry." His wife proudly pointed to a small new dining table set, telling us that now they not only ate better but also were able to purchase new furniture with the money her husband had earned.

Our qualitative data also indicate that individuals would feel unfairly treated only when spouses failed to fulfill their obligations to the family. Moreover, this was often described as evidence of one spouse's lack of care (*titie*) for the other. We observed one couple in which the 37-year-old wife was unhappy that her husband never cared about her welfare. The couple constantly got into arguments. The wife complained about her husband shirking financial responsibility and his occasional violent behavior toward her and their child. As a result, the wife developed a strong sense of unfairness in their division of labor:

We often exchange words, mostly over money issues. . . . He makes some money but he seldom gives me any. He not only fails to support the family but also sometimes asks *me* for money. . . . I am the one who solely supports the expenses of our children's school. . . . He often goes out to drink and gets drunk. He would curse and hit me if I complain about his drinking. He sometimes hit our son as well. I would not mind doing more around the house had he treated me in a better way. . . . He never likes me or cares about me.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study investigates the discrepancy among male-outmigrant couples in rural Guangxi Province of China between the unequal

division of labor and their perceptions of fairness of these arrangements. Both the quantitative and qualitative data indicate that an overwhelming majority of the wives of male outmigrants consider the current gendered division of labor as fair, despite their increased burden of agricultural and domestic responsibilities, and the growing gap in cash income between themselves and their husbands.

This discrepancy is seen as the consequence of relational exchange based on cultural criteria for evaluating wives' and husbands' work that differ from those assumed by market exchange models. That is, instead of engaging in direct exchange using privatized economic resources, the Guangxi couples studied here pool family resources and reciprocate each other through their individual contributions to the well-being of the family. Contributions are measured in terms of adherence to culturally defined family roles for husbands and wives rather than by individual spouses' cash earnings. Therefore, wives' agricultural and household work is not only seen to be as valuable as husbands' paid employment, but it also serves as a measure of the degree to which wives can obligate their husbands to make equal or greater contributions to the family, albeit in a different way.

At the same time, local cultural norms valuing "giving," "conscientiousness," and "cooperation" discourage individuals from claiming their own contributions to the family as personal resources they can use to bargain with their spouses for advancing their own self-interests. Accordingly, the term of fairness (*gongping*) is viewed as illegitimate as is the claim of individual rights. Consequently, the relational exchange tends to generate appreciative feelings between spouses and shared views that the marital division of labor is fair (cf. Grote and Clark 2001; Treas 1993). As our data indicate, women not only recognize their own hard work for the well-being of the family, but they also give equal recognition to the efforts made by their husbands. A similar pattern is also observed among husbands. Our data show deviations from the above patterns only when one spouse fails to adhere to those norms.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that individual family members have no rights at all. Rather, they see their individual rights emerging from the fulfillment of their own obligations to others in family relationships, which entitle them to other family members' (including their spouses') services to them in return. This might be called the equal obligation principle. What is, in essence, exchanged between husband and wife guided by the equal obligation principle is a long-term commitment to maintaining the relationship instead of transactions of individual resources to achieve an equitable distribution of paid and unpaid family tasks (cf. Lin 2000).

To conclude, the present study underscores four important points.

First, the unequal marital division of labor in rural China is not merely a structural quality, but it is also an emerging property that reflects particular gender relations that evolve and are embedded in cultural, familial, and economic contexts. One can achieve a full understanding of marital inequality only by incorporating both processual and structural dimensions into one's analysis. Second, the male provider role should be seen both as a responsibility and as a privilege (Hood 1986). In marital role-bound relational exchange, for example, the responsibility of male financial providers becomes more salient than privilege because husbands and wives are primarily exchanging family obligations, not economic resources. Third, the operationalization of the variables concerning subjective assessment can never be assumed to be universal, but must always be grounded in given cultural context to ensure measurement validity. Finally, the relational model of marital exchange explored in the present study deserves further research in a broader spectrum of rural China.

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Appendix. Demographic and Socioeconomic Data of China, Guangxi Province and Mashan County

Category	National	GX	Mashan*
Population	1,295,330,000	44,890,000	412,628
Rural	807,390,000	3,225,000	371,000
% Rural	63.9	71.9	N/A
% Agricultural	73.9	82.5	90
Crude Birth Rate (%)	15.2	15	12.7
Crude Death Rate (%)	6.5	6.9	6
Natural Growth Rate (%)	8.8	8	6.6
Sex Ratio	106.7	112.6	108.1
Dependency Ratio	0.49	0.56	0.54
Education (%) (including urban, rural & unmarried)			
Illiterate/Semi	9.4	6.2	7.2
Elementary	38.3	45.8	51.8
Junior High	36.5	35.1	33
Vocational/Senior High	12	10.4	7
Higher Education	3.9	2.6	1
Ethnicity (%) (including rural & urban)			
Zhuang	1.4	33	71
Yao	0.2	3	11
Others	6.8	3	1.4
Han	91.6	61	16.6
Rural Family			
Size (persons)	3.65	4.03	4.05
Per capita income (yuan)	3,088	1,865	N/A
Per capita land arable (acres)	0.29	0.13	N/A

* N/A means that the data is not available.

Sources: 2001 Almanac of China Population (CASS 2001); 2001 China Statistical Yearbook (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2001a); 2001 China Population Statistical Yearbook (National Bureau of Statistics China 2001b); 2000 China Ethnic Statistical Yearbook (National Bureau of Statistics China 2000) and Mashan Newspaper (2001).

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