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From Revolutionary Comrades to Gendered Partners

Marital Construction of Breadwinning in Post-Mao Urban China

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Drawing on gender construction theory, this study examines marital construction of breadwinning as both responsibility and privilege in urban China in the market reform (1978–). Data come from interviews with 39 married couples in Beijing in the summer of 1998. Husbands are found to be more devoted to paid work than are wives, although both spouses are active in the labor market. Moreover, both wives and husbands prefer the husband to be the main or obligatory provider and the wife to be a family-committed career seeker. The analysis shows that the persistence of the male provider role in urban China is mainly due to marital interactions on an everyday basis, the normative constraints of the breadwinning boundary to both genders, and the lack of an economic environment that provides wives with a sufficient number of self-fulfilling jobs and socialized domestic services.

Keywords: *breadwinning; women's employment; gender boundary; urban China; market reform*

One of the self-proclaimed victories of the Chinese Communist Party on its socialist transformation (1949-1977) was the achievement of gender equality in paid work in urban China. Unlike in many industrial countries, this gender equality was accomplished through a series of drastic administrative measures and political campaigns (Tan, 1993). However, the state-enforced gender equality practice and ideal have begun to crumble as the party-state has ceased to be the central institute for labor allocation during the recent market reform (1978–). An increasing pressure of unemployment has resulted in blatant gender discrimination in the labor market (Honig & Hershatter, 1988; Li, 1995; Woo, 1995). Some social scientists in the late 1980s even proposed to send women back home to alleviate the unemployment problem (Wang, 1998). In the meantime, the post-Mao era

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has also witnessed women's rejection of government-imposed gender equality practices. Women revolt against the legalized gender equality that held masculinity as the standard. Some women whose husbands' earnings could support the family have returned home voluntarily (Wang, 1998; Zheng, 1997).

The gap between women's employment and women's breadwinning in urban China, albeit following a different trajectory, reveals a similar pattern to that of Western and other non-Western countries; that is, despite women's increasing participation in paid employment, the gendered breadwinning structure has not been substantially altered. Among dual-earner couples, husbands are found to work longer hours than wives, wives' earnings tend to be considered as secondary, and husbands are still expected to be the main providers (Coltrane, 1996; Ferree, 1990; K. Gerson, 1993; Parish & Farrer, 2000; Potuchek, 1997; Zvonkovic, Greaves, Schmiede, & Hall, 1996).

The persistence of the male provider role challenges the assumption that women's paid employment is the equivalent of breadwinning (Hood, 1986). Women's paid work does not necessarily guarantee their position as providers or their commitment to breadwinning. This is because breadwinning, by definition, is more than just engaging in paid work; it includes the "day-to-day obligation to earn money for the financial support of the family" (Potuchek, 1997, p. 4). For a breadwinner, leaving the job, even on a temporary basis, is not an option. The question of who is and who should be the provider involves the allocation of responsibility. Therefore, paid work may be a necessary condition for breadwinning, but it is not a sufficient condition (Hood, 1986). Both responsibility and financial earnings must be present to qualify paid work as breadwinning.

But exactly how breadwinning as a responsibility is constructed to sustain traditional separate spheres—man being the provider and woman being the homemaker—is much understudied. Most research sees the male provider role as men's privilege to gain access to money, status, and power, with which men avoid household responsibility and maintain their dominance over women. However, merely emphasizing privilege in the analysis of breadwinning leaves many empirical questions unanswered—for example, why many working women who out-earn their husbands are no more, or even less, content with their own breadwinner status than the women of lower breadwinner status, and why many women around the world still favor the unequal gendered economic relations in the home (Coltrane, 1996; Hochschild, 1989; Honig & Hershatter, 1988; Kibria, 1998; Parish & Farrer, 2000; Potuchek, 1997; Pyke, 1996; Tichenor, 1999). The male-privilege-female-disadvantage argument overlooks the

fact that men's attempt to sustain male privileges through the provider role is confounded with their desire to be adequate breadwinners (Crowley, 1998). By the same token, women may actually have a stake in shying away from the provider role (Potuchek, 1997).

To fully understand gender dynamics in assessing the relationship between employment and breadwinning, we must conceive breadwinning as a family responsibility as well as a privilege. Because breadwinning is a gender boundary in the complex gender system involving practices, perceptions, beliefs, and negotiations, its analysis also requires a multidimensional approach to include behavioral, interpretive, normative, and interactional aspects (J. M. Gerson & Peiss, 1985). Finally, the conceptualization of breadwinning as both responsibility and privilege enables us to see more accurately gender dynamics in the marital process of negotiation and in the process of creating the breadwinning boundary that constrains both men and women.

Drawing on gender construction theory, the present study explores marital construction of breadwinning in market reform in urban China (1978–). The erosion of the government's role as welfare agency has left the material well-being of individuals primarily a family responsibility, making breadwinning a salient issue to all families. The changing labor market situation as a result of institutional changes has provided a valid context to examine gender construction of breadwinning in urban China in the post-Mao era.

GENDER CONSTRUCTION OF BREADWINNING— A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Emerging from the mid-1980s, gender construction theory sees gender as a system of social relations rather than as a variable of fixed attributes or personality traits merely obtained from childhood socialization. In this system, men and women “do gender” through everyday interactions (West & Zimmerman, 1987). As a system, gender has a normative feature. It sets boundaries for attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category. Individuals are held accountable for their behavior and will be called into question if they fail to follow culturally approved norms for each gender. In this sense, gender serves as a powerful ideological device that produces, reproduces, and legitimates sex-based behavior and activities (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Nevertheless, gender boundaries are neither timeless nor immutable entities but are susceptible to historical transformations and changing social circumstances (Connell, 1995). In this sense, gender

is a situated conduct emerging from various social arrangements and social structures. The construction of gender involves a contested order through negotiations and renegotiations between men and women and is subject to challenge under certain social arrangements (Ferree, 1990; Hood, 1986). The definition of manly or womanly conduct thus depends on specific social locations in which interaction takes place, and it is therefore constructed in institutional and cultural contexts. As a result, gender is a multifaceted social fabric interwoven by its behavioral, interactional, normative, and institutional dynamics.

In the complex web of the gender system, breadwinning is one social boundary that differentiates men and women who would otherwise be similar in performing family tasks (Ferree, 1990). By assigning the breadwinning responsibility to men, according to gender theory, the gender system creates gendered meaning for employment. Whereas men's market work is perceived as directly associated with the financial well-being of the family, women's is not (Hood, 1986; Thompson & Walker, 1989). The result is to minimize the importance of the wife's contributions to the family, to institutionalize male provider responsibility, to excuse men from the equal sharing of chores, and to help men hold economic power over women (Potuchek, 1997).

Nevertheless, gender theory envisions the breadwinning boundary as dynamic, fragmented, and full of contradictions and inconsistencies. The content of breadwinning is contested, shifting, and subject to continual challenge and negotiation. As a growing number of women have become *de facto* breadwinners through out-earning their husbands, the male provider status is beginning to erode. The magnitude of change toward egalitarian practice in breadwinning depends on opportunities and constraints both within and outside the household and on changing life experiences and circumstances (Hochschild, 1989; Potuchek, 1997).

The culturally based analytical framework and multidimensional approach of gender theory provide useful means in exploring the differences as well as interconnectedness between employment and breadwinning in urban China.

CHANGING BREADWINNING IN URBAN CHINA

BREADWINNING IN THE PREREFORM PERIOD (1949-1977)

Not until the recent implementation of market reform (1978–), breadwinning, the single most important male role in traditional Chinese

society, had lost its place in the wake of the Communist revolution in China (1949-1977) (Li, 1994). By eliminating private ownership and centralizing economic and political leadership, the party-state successfully undermined the male economic power in the urban area. The “low-wage-but-universal-employment” socialist policy coupled with the “same-job-same-pay” gender ideology turned both men and women into financial providers of the family in an economy of subsistence (Tan, 1993).

Nevertheless, during the era of tight state control, incomes earned by a married couple remained as minimum for meeting family needs. A much wider range of family welfare was not earned by the financial providers but was simply allocated by the state, who took control of the prices of most commodities and provided most noncash benefits for families through individuals’ work units (*danwei*), such as subsidized housing, day care services, the rationing of scarce durable goods, and so forth (Bian, 1994; Tan, 1996; Whyte & Parish, 1984). The family-like *danwei* system created a heavy dependency of the family on the work unit for survival. Consequently, the traditional male provider role was not only equally divided between the husband and wife but also rendered minimum under the state control.

Moreover, numerous top-down mass Communist ideological campaigns fundamentally transformed the meaning of work as well as work ethics. Work was no longer the means used to fulfill personal goals, career ambitions, or financial prosperity but, instead, a revolutionary mission every individual carried in the course of socialist construction. Individuals were asked to turn their family loyalty to the party-state (Whyte & Parish, 1984). As a result, both men and women were modeled into “state persons” (Tan, 1996); the husband and wife became revolutionary comrades for the greater good of the nation rather than merely providers for the family’s economic well-being. The state, in turn, looked after the families of its revolutionaries.

To working women at the time, there was an added meaning in work: to achieve gender equality and women’s liberation. The party-state asserted that women’s participation in social production was the final solution to women’s emancipation (Andors, 1983; Wang, 1998). It called on women to “do away with the thought of relying on men for support” (Tan, 1993, p. 342). Housewifery was viewed negatively and abandoned. Mao’s slogan—“Women can hold up half the sky”—galvanized millions of women to work alongside men to achieve gender equality. Through paid employment, women acquired a new identity of womanhood—a revolutionary.

BREADWINNING IN MARKET REFORM (1978–)

The post-Mao market reform (1978–) has turned the Chinese socialist economy upside down. The unleashed market forces increasingly take away the state's functioning as the family welfare provider while substantially weakening the state control over family life. The state's initiatives on privatization, decentralization, and open-door policy have led to the emergence of the private sector. The workers contract system in both public and private sectors gives individuals great incentives for job mobility with the trade-off that the state will no longer ensure the "iron-rice-bowel" job security. Getting a job in the private sector means a much higher income and yet with a possible loss of benefits normally available for state employees, such as housing, health care, pensions, and so forth.

The rapid economic growth and rising per capita income since the late 1980s have created many new jobs for both men and women. However, the volatile labor market, the decline of the vast majority of state enterprises, and excessive labor supply make it difficult for many to find or retain a job. This is especially true for older, ill-educated, unskilled, and female workers. The poor performance of state enterprises poses an especially serious problem in that it not only fails to continually provide the same benefits to workers as they did before but also launches massive layoffs (Lee, 1999; Yang, 1997). The post-1978 reforms, thus, turn breadwinning into a salient gender issue as well as a pressing economic problem for the urban family.

The present study examines three aspects of breadwinning—behavioral, normative, and interactional in the institutional context of urban China. The behavioral aspect focuses on employment strategies and gender differentials in employment patterns between husbands and wives. The normative level deals with the perceptions of husbands' and wives' employment and gender beliefs about breadwinning. Finally, the interactional perspective looks at how breadwinning is constructed through interactions between the spouses and between individuals and society.

INTERVIEWS WITH MARRIED COUPLES IN BEIJING

Because the main purpose of this study is to explore the meanings, interpretations, and subjective experiences of married couples, I use a qualitative method that provides rich information on this kind of research issue. From May to August of 1998, I did in-depth interviews with 39 married

couples in the city of Beijing. To get information on decision making in job involvement, I limited the sample to those couples under 55 years of age, the official age for female retirement in urban China (men retire at age 60). A snowball sampling technique was employed through word-of-mouth referrals with the assistance of All-China Women's Federation; a good number of interviews were also secured through friends and acquaintances. In a qualitative study, the sample will be comparable to the larger target population if diversity is emphasized in sample selection (Daly, 1992). To increase the diversity of family types, snowball sampling was supplemented by the sampling method that attempts to maximize range (Weiss, 1994).

The married couples I interviewed are a heterogeneous group, covering a wide spectrum of demographic, social, and economic characteristics of families in Beijing. The wives' ages ranged from 25 to 49 (average of 38) and the husbands' from 30 to 52 (average of 40). The median length of marriage was 13 years. Educational achievement varied widely among both genders—from elementary school to Ph.D for wives and to master's for husbands. Wives' median education was somewhere between high school and the 3-year college degree, and husbands' median education was a high school degree. The sample covers a wide range of occupations of respondents from both the public and private sectors. The earnings also spanned a wide range—from the lowest family monthly income of 500 yuan to the highest of 810,000 yuan. The median family income was 2,600 yuan. Of all the couples, 36 were dual-job couples; in one couple, the wife stayed home but made money through trading stocks. There were only two couples in which the wife was a full-time homemaker with no income. Although, in general, husbands made more money than wives, there was a good minority of 13 families in which wives had higher earnings than that of their husbands.

The interviews began with a brief survey that asked about demographic and socioeconomic information of the interviewees with close-ended questions, followed by in-depth interviews on substantive issues concerning marital construction of breadwinning. A rough interview schedule was employed to conduct in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Chinese; the portion of the data that are cited in this report was then translated into English. Most interviews were separate for husbands and wives. When, due to time and space constraints, both spouses were present for the first interview, a separate follow-up interview was conducted for each spouse. Interview locations were chosen for interviewees' convenience; most were in their homes or offices, but a few were in public places such as restaurants. A typical interview lasted about 1.5

TABLE 1
Job Changes of Married Couples in Beijing (N = 39 Couples)

<i>Sectors</i>	<i>Couples (%)</i>	<i>Husbands (%)</i>	<i>Wives (%)</i>
One spouse moves to the private sector	22 (56)		
Both are in the private sector	6 (15)		
Both remain in the public sector	8 (21)		
Both are laid off, but at least one spouse found a job	3 (8)		
Total	39 (100)		
Job changes and work status			
Job change at least once to the private sector		20 (51)	9 (23)
First job found in the private sector		2 (5)	1 (3)
Moonlighting		5 (13)	2 (5)
No change in job status		7 (18)	16 (41)
Laid off but found one		4 (10)	4 (10)
Laid off but could not find one		1 (3)	3 (8)
Return to the home voluntarily		0 (0)	3 (8)
Not applicable		0 (0)	1 (3)
Total		39 (100)	39 (100)

hours. When permitted by the interviewee, a tape recorder was used and supplemented by note taking.

RESULTS

LABOR MARKET COPING STRATEGY: ONE FAMILY, TWO SYSTEMS

When asked about family decision making on employment, a common response from the interviewees is "one family, two systems," meaning one spouse "go down to the sea" (*xiahai*) of the private sector to generate higher income, and the other remains in the public sector to secure the job and noncash benefits. As the public sector, especially state-owned enterprises, has been increasingly losing its safety net, this popular phrase merely delineates Beijing citizens' employment strategy of maximizing benefits and, at the same time, minimizing risks through husband-wife cooperations.

The study results, summarized in Table 1, reflect the outcomes of the benefit-maximizing strategies used by married couples in Beijing. Of all 39 couples interviewed in the present study, 22 had one spouse move from

the public to the private sector. In an additional 6 couples, both were in the sea of the private sector. There were only 8 couples in which both spouses remained in the state industry. In the meantime, 3 couples from state-owned factories became unemployed and were forced into low-pay part-time jobs in the labor market. Also shown in Table 1 is the fact that both wives and husbands were active in the labor market since the market transition. Twenty husbands and 9 wives changed their jobs at least once since married for a more prosperous occupation in the private sector. Two fresh male and female college graduates each found a high-paying job in a foreign firm right away. Among the remaining individuals who had not changed their jobs at the time of the interview, 5 husbands and 2 wives either took on a second job or made additional income from other sources. Among all the unemployed, both husbands and wives were actively seeking another job.

Despite an individual effort of seeking the best job possible, the married couples also took into account the risks that the family ran when one spouse had already ventured into the private sector. One young woman who worked for a government agency was reluctant to step into the sea even though she did not like her current job. "I'd like to keep my current job, for my husband is already in the private business. If I joined him, we both might 'get drowned' when his business turned sour." Two other women and one man remained in the public sector for the same reason.

Although the present study seems to suggest gender-neutral labor-market coping strategies by the married couples, gender differentials in outcomes still exist, as evidenced in Table 1. There were far more husbands than wives entering the private sector to seek higher earnings. Husbands were more likely than wives to moonlight. Wives were more likely to sacrifice their own career in support of that of their husbands than the other way round. More wives than husbands became unemployed workers. Of the unemployed workers, husbands tended to obtain another job more often than wives. Wives were more likely than husbands to quit the job in the situation in which one spouse's income alone could sufficiently support the family. The above patterns resembled the general trend in Beijing and urban China (Shen & Yang, 1995).

Apparently, institutional changes in the economy and labor market are important in shaping similar but also different behavioral patterns among the husbands and wives. However, merely studying behavioral patterns offers little insight into the ways in which the patterned behavior is formed, perceived, or negotiated between the spouses. It is not clear whether job retention or change means the same to both husbands and wives and whether the gendered pattern observed in the labor market is

TABLE 2
Husbands' and Wives' Attitudes
Toward Family Roles (N = 39 Couples)

<i>Attitudes Toward Family Roles</i>	<i>Husbands (%)</i>	<i>Wives (%)</i>
Husband's role		
Husband as the main breadwinner	7 (18)	29 (74)
Husband as the obligatory breadwinner	31 (79)	6 (15)
Husband can be the primary homemaker	2 (3)	4 (11)
Total	39 (100)	39 (100)
Wife's role		
Wife as the employed primary homemaker	34 (87)	34 (87)
Wife as the sole homemaker	2 (5)	1 (3)
Wife can seek career at the expense of her domestic responsibilities	3 (8)	3 (8)
Wife can return home but must maintain own career pursuit	0 (0)	1 (3)
Total	39 (100)	39 (101)
Identifying with domestic role		
Whether husband wants (or wife allows him) to return home if wife can support the family	4 (10)	4 (10)
Whether wife wants (or husband allows her) to return home if husband can support the family	34 (87)	8 (21)

solely due to market opportunities and constraints. To gain insight into the above issues, the present study next explores the ways in which husbands and wives draw the breadwinning boundary at the normative level.

CONSTRUCTING THE GENDER BOUNDARY OF BREADWINNING: MALE BREADWINNERS AND FEMALE FAMILY-COMMITTED CAREER SEEKERS

Similar to the prereform era, dual-earner couples in the present study all felt that both spouses needed to hold jobs and both of their incomes were vital for the family well-being. Yet husbands and wives did not necessarily give the same reason for maintaining their work status, nor did they feel the same about working outside the family. Moreover, both husbands and wives shared the similar ideal about breadwinning and used it as a gender boundary in dividing family responsibilities. Whereas neither expected the wife to relinquish her work role, both believed that the husband should be the obligatory provider and the wife should combine work with household responsibilities. The results are presented in Table 2.

**THE MAN AS THE OBLIGATORY BREADWINNER—
HUSBANDS' POINT OF VIEW**

As Table 2 shows, few men in the sample expressed the desire to be the primary breadwinners; most of them rejected the idea. The reason was simple: It was just unattainable. A common sentiment shared by men was “from each according to the ability”; whoever in the family was capable of bringing in good earnings should do so. Of those who had a lower income relative to their wives', few took their wives' higher earnings as a threat to their manhood. The absence of resentment toward the wife's higher earning capacity, however, does not mean that men had relinquished the male provider role. The answers from the male interviewees were remarkably consistent (31 out of 39): We will work and provide for the family no matter what. Men felt that it did not matter how much money their wives made; it was still *their* responsibility to support the family. As one man said: “If I lost my job whereas she had one, I would be depressed, not because she had a stronger earning ability but because I had failed to fulfill *my* responsibility. I feel I must shoulder at least half of the financial responsibility to the family.”

This sentiment was shared even among those whose incomes were too low to support the family. Because of the high level of homogamy in marriage, many male unemployed workers' wives were also unemployed or were holding low-paying jobs. This constantly reminded men of breadwinning as their family responsibility. Men became frustrated when they were unable to provide. Moreover, most men in the present study expressed their unwillingness to quit working even if their wives' incomes could sufficiently support the family. Only two identified themselves with domestic roles. Their rationale was that they were physically stronger without the burden of childbearing and therefore should contribute more to breadwinning.

**THE MAN AS THE MAIN BREADWINNER—
WIVES' POINT OF VIEW**

Men's ideal to provide was widely agreed on by their wives in the sample. The majority of wives (29 out of 39) went even further as to believe that the man should be the *main* breadwinner, although they said that they would be happy to share the financial burden. Their rationale was that women already shouldered a double burden—work and the family—and therefore had no energy left to carry on the breadwinning role. Several wives expressed their wish of not having to juggle work and household re-

sponsibilities. They would rather take on more housework and child care and be supportive of their husbands' career pursuits.

Many wives associated manhood directly with the provider role: A real man should be ambitious, competent, hardworking, and able to support the family. A large majority of women preferred their husbands to make more money than they did, and they said it felt right. Women whose husbands managed to maintain a higher income than theirs, or had a more successful career, showed their content. Some women would reveal their discontent when their husbands did not fulfill their career ambition. As one business woman complained, "Of course I wish he had his own business, . . . do something to make us proud. . . . It doesn't feel quite right that he has neither money nor social standing."

Some successful career women with high-paying jobs in a lucrative business abandoned the male provider model by not expecting their husbands to make more money than they did. However, they desired their husbands to advance their careers in other directions. One female lawyer praised her husband, a journalist, for taking over most household and child care responsibilities. And yet she expressed her discontent with the fact that he did not try hard enough to reach his full potential in his career: "I do not expect him to make the same kind of money as I do, but he could have shown more ambition by publishing a book or something of that sort to demonstrate his achievement."

Notwithstanding women's expectations of men as the main providers, women, especially older working-class women, also had ambivalent feelings toward this ideal. One middle-aged female shop assistant commented that "I don't think men have to make a lot of money. . . . The man may leave you for a younger woman when he becomes rich. There is now a popular saying: 'Men turn bad when they become rich, and women become rich when they turn bad.'"

THE WOMAN AS THE FAMILY-COMMITTED CAREER SEEKER—WIVES' POINT OF VIEW

Despite an overwhelming consensus reached by female interviewees about the husband's provider role as essential to the male identity, none of the employed women had any intention of giving up their own work role. Women, particularly working-class women, were fully aware of the importance of their income to the financial well-being of the family and were willing to share the financial burden with their husbands. But beyond the financial reason, women also found their jobs enjoyable and fulfilling.

Many women held negative attitudes toward the label of "housewife" (*jia fu*). To them, *jia fu* means jobless, ill-educated, ignorant, narrow-minded, nagging, isolated, chained-to-the-stove, and so forth. As a result, they developed a high attachment to work outside the home and identified qualities such as intelligence, education, and employment/career involvement as part of womanhood.

When asked whether they would want to return home once their husbands' incomes were sufficient to support the family, the majority of working wives (28 out of 36) said no. To them, paid employment also meant social participation that enabled them to make their lives fuller and more meaningful. This was true even for working-class women who were predominantly unskilled workers with little education. Those working-class women worked in the state-owned factories or stores that provided them with economic benefits, social standing, and connections, as well as a sense of belonging.

Women who were forced out of labor all showed a sense of loss and of desertion. One unemployed factory employee burst into tears while telling her story. She was a woman with a physical disability. In the 22 years of her employment in a factory, she earned a reputation as an outstanding worker and received several honorable awards. "Now I am nobody," she said sadly, "no job wants me. . . . I am afraid of going out to face my neighbors and friends."

Nevertheless, women did not necessarily hold the same view as men did with respect to their paid work. Whereas men saw career/employment pursuit as mainly an obligation to fulfill their male provider role, women saw it more as an opportunity to extend their womanhood. My data show that although most women worked to support the family, they did not want to be bound by the provider role. These women placed a high social rather than economic value to their work. The main source of satisfaction from their work role was a sense of accomplishment, self-realization, and economic independence. As some women said, "I always want to do a good job at workplace, not for money but for my career." "I engage in my business not for the purpose of supporting my family but for the pursuit of self-realization—a complete and independent self." Most women in the sample were not willing to pursue employment/career at the expense of their family role. This is because women identify their primary family responsibility with domestic work. As one college instructor said, "Women should be more devoted to the family. This is the tradition. I am not a career-oriented woman. . . . There are so many aspects of my life to enjoy, not just work."

One might expect a strong job attachment by professional women given their high level of education. However, this was not consistently found in the present study. Although professional women did not necessarily work for money, money did make a difference when it came to decisions about labor force participation. In the present study, those educated women with a high-paying professional job or in a lucrative business all expressed their desire to stay in the labor force even if their husbands could support the family. A young woman who made 10,000 yuan a month as a trainer in a foreign firm was 8 months pregnant at the time of the interview. She expected herself to return to work as soon as she completed the 3-month maternity leave even though her husband's income alone could support the family. She felt that there was too much to lose if she quit her job: her social status as a professional woman, her established social circle, and most of all, the respect and social recognition achieved through teaching. As she said, "Whenever I teach the clients of our firm, I enjoy passing the knowledge to them and a respect shown on their faces. You can never get the same kind of feeling through whatever the work you do at home."

By contrast, professional women with low income, little intrinsic benefits, and long work hours all expressed their desire to return home provided that their husbands were able to support them. One female administrator from a municipal government agency worked practically 6 days a week given the fact that as a deputy division chief, she was required to be on duty throughout the night every 6 days in addition to her normal 5-day workload. In the event of special occasions, she had to work around the clock. There was no monetary compensation for the extra hours she put into her work, and her monthly salary was less than 1,000 yuan. She found it hard to juggle work and the family but she had to work to support the family, for her husband's income was not much higher than hers. She said that she would not mind returning to the home once her husband could provide for the family.

Some educated women never felt that they gained through paid employment, for it was not the choice they made. One recent college graduate did not like her current job as a translator in a college because of low pay, long work hours, and little control over what she wanted to do. She commented that "in China all women must work. As a college graduate, you must hold a job no matter whether it is a desirable one or not; otherwise, you would be criticized. You do not really have a choice." Then, the questions are how women with a good education justify their "housewife" status, which they say they have abandoned, and how they validate their womanhood in the contemporary era without paid employment.

Those professional women who wanted to return to the home said that they did not think that they would reduce themselves to a traditional housewife because they had so many things to do with their education and free time other than just housework. The same female administrator said that with her law degree, she could serve as a legal consultant or study property rights as a scholar. The same young college translator said that she would not lose the sense of herself or be looked down on once she returned home. That was because she had a college degree and was able to reenter the labor force at any time. For these women, the bottom line is that they did not want their career to be tightly bound by paid work that did not offer satisfying extrinsic or intrinsic benefits. Additionally, because they had good education with skills, they wanted the freedom to choose between work and the family.

THE WOMAN AS THE FAMILY-COMMITTED CAREER SEEKER— HUSBANDS' POINT OF VIEW

The husbands shared similar opinions to those of the wives with respect to wives' family roles. An overwhelming majority of men firmly supported the wife's employment (37 out of 39). Men not only welcomed their wives' employment but also cherished it when their wives made significant financial contributions to the family. The 40 years of gender-equality education and practice have instilled in men, as well as in women, egalitarian beliefs about women's work role. Women's employment and career also benefit men and the family in multiple ways. Women's paid work not only double the income but also double the opportunities for the family. In the present study, one young male administrator with a master's degree married a female high school teacher who held a bachelor's degree. The man was preparing to pursue a Ph.D. degree and also encouraged his wife to take the entrance exams for graduate school. He said that he wanted his wife to be equally successful to expand career opportunities for the family. He believed that they both would mutually benefit from each other's success.

In addition to financial security and career opportunities, men also believed their wives' job compatibility would facilitate marital communication and enhance marital happiness. A few middle-class men expressed their regret over the fact that their wives did not have a job or were not career oriented. One scholar, who married a staff member from a research institute, reported that "I thought that we would have something more in common had she had a career of her own."

When asked whether they would want their wives to continue their employment in the workforce once their own income could support the family, 34 out of 36 said that it would be up to their wives. Many men preferred their wives to continue their job commitment. They thought that a compatible marital relationship would be good for both husband and wife. As a young business man said,

When my wife told me that she wanted to quit her job, I said to her that she might lose the sense of herself in that way. I learned this through observing my parents' relations. My mother made many concessions in her life in order to support my father's career. She ended up achieving much less than my father did which led to her unequal relationship with my father. This made her very upset and always complained that my father did not give her a fair chance. It is not good for the husband and wife to be in an unequal relationship.

Notwithstanding men's positive attitudes toward wives' job/career pursuits, most men had no expectation of their wives' being committed breadwinners. What men expected of their wives was to combine their career with household responsibilities. A comment from one factory worker: "As long as she [wife] takes good care of the family work she can do whatever she wants." The data show that in spite of the fact that 90% of wives held a full-time job, 70% of them shouldered more household responsibilities than their husbands did (Zuo & Bian, 2001).

The above analysis reveals two patterns. First, husbands and wives held similar beliefs about breadwinning, with wives being somewhat more traditional. Second, the couples were moving away from gender-neutral comradeship to gendered partners. To understand these patterns, it is imperative to examine how breadwinning was negotiated and contested through everyday interaction between the spouses and between individuals and the society, to which it now turns.

CONSTRUCTING BREADWINNING THROUGH INTERACTIONS

It was found in the present study that husbands' and wives' perceptions of why they worked are hardly their personal preferences or merely dependent on their own work experience but rather on how they defined themselves to be a man or a woman in the eyes of others. Moreover, unlike what was suggested by previous research, women were just as active as men in creating the breadwinning boundary. This section will mainly focus on marital interaction and interactions of individuals with society.

CONSTRUCTING BREADWINNING THROUGH MARITAL INTERACTION

Many men wanted to be successful because that was what their wives wanted them to be. Many wives said that it felt right when a man had a higher achievement than did his wife. One man knew before marriage that his wife loved him for his intelligence, competence, and career ambition. He had worked hard to live up to her expectation and finally moved up to a high-ranking position in a central government agency before he reached the age of 40. His wife said, "He knows that he has to keep making progress in his career to make me happy. He is a little concerned that I might leave him if he failed to do so."

A business man insisted that he take on the provider role for fear of being demoralized. He said that men would be looked down on by their wives if they failed to provide. His wife replied to the issue by saying, "I can understand it if his career suffers due to uncontrollable forces, but I won't forgive him if he has no career ambition or overly devotes himself to domestic work."

By contrast, those male "underachievers" whose wives accepted the "reversed" unequal achievements as given did not have the feeling of being threatened. They were not only actively involved in family work, but they did so willingly. One cleaning lady, a laid-off factory worker, said in the interview that since she took the job, her unemployed husband assumed most housework. The husband was very grateful to his wife for shouldering the main provider role at the expense of her health: "She spends two hours on the road by bike; she did heavy manual labor, and she sweats all over when she gets home, all done at the expense of her health."

When asked whether they would feel intimidated if their wives made a higher income, a typical answer from men who currently earned more than their wives was that not as long as their wives would not look down on them.

Similarly, women's emphasis on combining employment/career with their domestic role partly came from their husbands' attitudes toward the wife's role. A young woman expressed her unwillingness to return to the home even if her husband could support her: "He would not like it because me being a housewife would let him down."

In the meantime, some other women refused to be "overly" committed to career pursuit for fear of crossing the breadwinning boundary. Several women stated that they passed up a few job opportunities in support of their husbands' career. They did so to not hurt their husbands' feelings and to maintain the harmony of their marital relationships.

A business woman took on a double shift reluctantly, for her husband lacked an initiative to share chores equally. Her husband's opinion: "Housework is mainly her job. She can do whatever she wants as long as she takes a good care of our household." Although she complained about it, she, nevertheless, believed that it was mainly her responsibility as the wife.

Attempts made by individuals to seek approval of their spouses concerning their family roles did not preclude disputes between marriage partners. In fact, it is not uncommon that the spouses reached agreements through negotiations in everyday life. One female factory clerk with a noticeable disability offered her story:

I was very nervous as I was close to giving the birth of our son five years ago. I was afraid that I would not be physically strong enough to take care of him. Then my husband made a decision to quit his job to take care of our son. At that time, his income was one third of mine, less than the cost of hiring a nanny. In the beginning, I was not quite happy with his decision. But I finally agreed out of practical considerations. Looking at it retrospectively, I am relieved as I see him do such a nice job raising our son and doing all the chores.

As a result, she no longer expected her husband to be the breadwinner.

CONSTRUCTING BREADWINNING THROUGH INTERACTIONS WITH LARGER SOCIETY

On the macro level, gender boundaries were also shaped by a larger social context in which interpersonal interactions take place. Just as labor market forces dictated husbands' and wives' employment strategies, societal norms tended to hold individuals accountable for what they do as a man or a woman (Ferree, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Despite mass ideological campaigns for gender equality and massive women's labor force participation during the prereform era, the traditional gender norm still somewhat governed the lives of individuals. Women were still perceived as a weaker sex concerning breadwinning, and men were expected to be the main providers. Labor market constraints for women and the fact that there were far more men than women in lucrative business and administrative positions further led to the belief that women are not as competitive workers. Men, on the other hand, were compelled to perform the provider role:

I would not mind returning to the home if my wife could support the family. Who would like to commute by bike 12 hours a day to purchase train tickets for customers? You would be harassed a lot when you do this kind of sales work. I'd like to stay home enjoying the family life. But I could not afford the pressure from the society that would look down upon you and make you feel depressed. (a hotel salesman)

Role reversal is viewed negatively. Several interviewees told stories about how friends, coworkers, or celebrities were divorced because the wife was too "strong" and the husband was too "weak" in career achievements:

Our society accepts a higher job status for husband and lower status for wife but not the other way round. For example, an anchor-woman from a commune broadcast station married a technician with a college degree from our factory. A few years later, she was chosen by the national TV station and sometimes visited abroad with top ranking officials of our country. She became more famous but less available for her family. The family lost its balance and she finally divorced her husband. (a male shop-floor manager)

CONSEQUENCES OF BREACHING THE BREADWINNING BOUNDARY

The present study finds that the normative nature of the breadwinning boundary rewarded those who confined themselves within the gender boundary and penalized others who did not through the double standards it created for evaluating men's and women's paid work. Because men's involvement in paid work was directly designated to their family role, successful men would receive positive feedback from their spouses, relatives, friends, and society even if their primary motivation of work was no different from some of their successful female counterparts, such as self-fulfillment or sense of accomplishment. Indeed, a good majority of successful husbands in the sample not only failed to share household responsibilities equally but also received positive reactions from their wives. Almost all the wives of male high achievers in the present study showed their satisfaction with their husbands' success, and none of those whose husbands failed to share chores equally expressed discontent (Zuo & Bian, 2001).

By contrast, successful career women tended to be portrayed as someone selfish even though her income also significantly contributed to the family income. A career woman would get admired only if she could successfully combine her career with family work. None but two of the career women in the present study were totally relieved of their household responsibilities while pursuing a career.

The double standard went both ways. The wives who put their husbands' career ahead of theirs tended to be praised by society. The wife of a prominent social scientist said proudly, "When people learn about my husband's new academic achievements, they would praise me for my dearly support of his work."

However, it was not quite acceptable for a husband to put his wife's career ahead of his. They would be seen as the ones who are unmasculine, not ambitious, and incapable. The men of "failed aspirations" could not easily compensate for their failure with greater sharing of household responsibility. In the present study, when men's job/career achievements fell short of their wives' expectations, few were able to use an increased involvement in domestic tasks as a substitute for their career loss. This was because they breached the breadwinning boundary. Three male interviewees of failed aspirations often received criticism from their wives for not doing a good job in chores or child care while the true source of their wives' dissatisfaction was the fact that they did not earn enough money for the family. A male unemployed worker finally found a contract job with a total income of less than one quarter of his wife's. He said,

My wife always complains about my lack of initiative in doing chores. This was the case even when I did most family work during the year I was jobless. She likes to blame me for the things that have gone wrong in the home. I know this is because I don't have a good job. I am sure she will still be in charge of housework when I find a good job. But she will treat me more respectfully.

The wife expressed the same opinion in the interview—that her husband should be more vigorous in market work unless he was capable of managing family work. But she did not believe that her husband was a capable housekeeper or a qualified educator of their child. By complaining that the husband did not do well in chores, the wife used both breadwinning and housekeeping as gender boundaries to distinguish *his* responsibility from that of *hers*.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

My data show that as the Chinese urban economy becomes increasingly privatized, the gender-neutral comradeship between the wife and husband gives rise to the economic partnership. Married couples in Beijing develop coping strategies in given labor market conditions. In

most families, both the husband and wife are active in the labor force to meet financial needs of the family, and the incomes of both spouses are considered essential for the family well-being.

Nevertheless, the economic partnership is by no means the equal sharing of the provider role. Women are found less devoted than men to the provider role. This is because the transformation from revolutionary comrades to economic partners, as a result of institutional changes, involves individuals' reassessment of the meaning of work to themselves and to their spouses and the redefining of breadwinning responsibility. Although both genders make significant financial contributions to the family, only the husband's paid work is tied completely to breadwinning. Women's paid work, on the other hand, is viewed as the sharing of financial burden without being tightly bound by the breadwinning responsibility. This is more so among well-to-do families than among poor families. As a result, despite the increasing difficulty in fulfilling the provider role, men insist that breadwinning be their inescapable family responsibility. Similarly, women refuse to assume the equal breadwinning role even if they are fully capable of doing so, because both husbands and wives believe that the wife's primary responsibility lies in the domestic sphere. Therefore, male breadwinning privileges men who meet their responsibility from the equal participation in housework. It also spares women who successfully combine work with the family from the equal sharing of breadwinning. Neither men of failed aspirations nor women with excessive career orientations were socially acceptable. This reflects the dual role of the breadwinning boundary that assigns privileges and responsibilities to both men and women. The dual role of breadwinning also explains why in urban China the majority of men still insist on being a provider and women are reluctant to be a primary or an equal breadwinner.

The existing breadwinning boundary in urban China may be rooted in physical constraints for women in paid work that the party-state has failed to remove due to lacking technological development in manufacturing and service industries. Inflexibility of the workplace to accommodate family needs and a lack of socialized domestic services and child care add another constraint to women in their pursuit of paid employment. Moreover, implications go beyond women's disadvantage in the labor market. Unlike some economically more advanced Western countries where paid employment has become increasingly enjoyable, honored, and self-fulfilling (Hochschild, 1997), work in China is still quite a grudge (Andors, 1983; Stacey, 1983; Wolf, 1985). Therefore, paid work with little extrinsic and intrinsic rewards does not necessarily devalue housework. Moreover, the enforced female labor force participation takes away

women's freedom to choose and makes women resentful of the government's imposition on women's employment. Consequently, women are likely to choose household work over breadwinning as their primary family responsibility.

In addition to normative and institutional factors, my data also suggest that women's and men's beliefs or behaviors concerning breadwinning are neither formed in isolation from each other nor drawn on their childhood socialization; instead, they are constructed through ongoing spousal interactions on a daily basis. Women's insistence on their domestic responsibility and the combining of work with the family are certainly influenced by similar attitudes from their husbands. Likewise, men's insistence on obligatory breadwinning is largely a reflection of their wives' men-as-the-provider belief. Therefore, both genders are equally active agents in constructing the breadwinning boundary.

To conclude, the conceptualization of breadwinning as responsibility helps clarify why so many men hold onto it and why so many women, including high-earning career women, are reluctant to be committed to the provider role in urban China. Although male breadwinning does bring men the privilege of avoiding chores, it also holds men accountable for financial support of the family. Because breadwinning is a family responsibility, women's paid work participation does not necessarily suggest their commitment to the role sharing. Therefore, women's shying away from the equal breadwinning role reflects their privilege of not having to provide, which partially contributes to the devaluation of their financial contributions. Additionally, the current form of the breadwinning boundary mirrors the continual existence of the housekeeping boundary (Potuchek, 1997). Whereas women's involvement in breadwinning is limited by their commitment to household responsibility, men's provider role prevents men from equal engagement in a domestic role. It seems, though, that the male breadwinning boundary is presently more permeable than female homemaking in urban China. This may be because the Chinese labor market constrains men more than the domestic sphere does women. However, as long as the domestic sphere is still defined as women's territory, it will be difficult for men to totally relinquish the provider role that, in turn, will affect women's willingness to fully share the provider role.

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