

Wives as Breadwinners: A Study of Spousal Relations in Urban Northeast China

In the past decades a new social phenomenon worldwide attracts scholars' attention: wives make more money than husbands in the process of changing mode of production. It is a hot topic because it challenges the traditional gender stereotype that men are the main breadwinners of the household. The model of male breadwinner is accompanied by a series of arrangements in the household. For example, in nuclear family when husbands are the main money-makers, wives should take charge of housework, also, when husbands are the authority and main decision-makers, wives are submissive followers. However, all these arrangements are disturbed when wives become the main breadwinners of the family.

Chinese economic reform has brought drastic changes to Chinese families in the past thirty years. In urban Northeast China, the reform made many state-owned factories close down in mid-1990s. Therefore, a huge number of workers in these factories were unemployed. Because men and women have different expectations on jobs and salary, women found it easier to reemploy themselves, while men remained unemployed or semi-unemployed. Although some men also make money, their income is either less or inconsistent than their wives' income. In this scenario, wives become the main breadwinner of these families.

Previous studies have shown that the influences of women's work and income on marriage, gender relation and women's experience are complicated. On the one hand, women gain independence and power to a certain extent while their economic contribution to the household rises (Fei 1939; Yan 2006). And men have to compromise on housework when

they are not the main breadwinners (Sheba 2000; Gamburd 2008). On the other hand, many studies find finance is not a decisive factor in spousal relations. So although women's economic contribution rises, housework remains largely women's task (Hochschild 1990). And making more money brings pressure and trouble to marriage and women (Tichenor 2005). Women's condition in China seems not simple too. Although China is generally taken as a patriarchal society in which men are the masters and breadwinners of the family and women are housekeepers, Chinese women's roles and status are different from women in other countries. The Chinese Communist Party first gave women access to public sphere in the era of revolution in 1930s and then provided women the same opportunities to work as men during collectivism in 1950-70s. The series of policy has a far reaching influence on Chinese women and the gender hierarchy in China. How is Chinese women's experience different from women in other countries in this global phenomenon? How to understand the effects of women's increasing economic contribution to gender relations and to women? Taking female breadwinners as a perspective, this paper explores the effects of wives as breadwinners to spousal relations. It devotes to the description of the diversified behaviors and concepts in domestic division of labor and household authority in urban China.

This is a study based on three months' fieldwork in T town in Jilin Province, Northeast China. Using convenient and snowball sampling, this study mainly uses face-to-face interviews and focus group interviews to collect data. Participant observation is used as supplementary method. From June to August 2010, the data collected from interviews cover about twenty women and fifteen men. Most of the informants lost jobs from state-owned factories in late 1990s. Some of them were former workers, some of them were former

officials in the factories. Their age range from forties to fifties, and most of them have finished middle school.

On Domestic Division of Labor

Taking household as a unit of labor, scholars mainly divide labor into money-making and housekeeping. In a patriarchal society where men mainly take charge of making money, women are mainly responsible in caring children, cooking and washing. But this gender hierarchy is challenged in the families in T Town where wives become the breadwinners and husbands stay at home. Will the change of the couple's economic positions alter the traditional gender stereotype on domestic division of labor? How do men and women response during this change? Based on the data collected from T Town, in this part I will first explore the distribution of household in nuclear families, and then analyze people's perceptions towards the housework.

Although housework is often taken as women's task, this is not the case in T town today. Almost all men have started to cook and wash since the start of marriage because their wives worked too. So housework is basically distributed between the couple by necessity. "We did housework whoever had time to do." A woman told me. Both men and women believe women shouldn't be the only one who does housework since both of the couple works.

If women's ability of making money is the reason for men to do housework, will men do housework when they don't make money any more? Yes, men feel more obliged to do it. A male informant told me: "They (women) work hard all day and go home tiredly at night. Staying at home, at least we should make food ready. Otherwise it's too irresponsible." In some cases, men will take over housework when they stay at home and their wives make

money outside, such as Ms. Jin and her husband Mr. Zhang.

Mr. Zhang used to be a mechanic and Ms. Jin used to be a blue-collar worker in manufacturing plant, both of them are dismissed from their factories. At first Mr. Zhang organized several workers into an informal work group and took small projects for private business owners. But it is not easy to ask for salary from the employer after the project is finished. In this case, Mr. Zhang as the organizer had to pay the salary to the workers using his money. Soon Ms. Jin didn't want him to do this any more. "It was very difficult to find projects, and he worked really hard. We even had to put our money in, so I didn't want him to do it any more." Ms. Jin says. And then they had discussions and finally decided that Mr. Zhang stayed at home taking care of the domestic work, and Ms. Jin made money by running a stall in local market.

Actually, men are as good as women on housework if they want to. Mr. Qu is good at doing all kinds of housework now, he used to be a good baby-sitter of her daughter when his wife went to work. However, men are good at doing housework doesn't mean they are willing to do so. They do it more because they have to. Most of the people in this study moved out of the husband's natal family after the marriage and formed nuclear family. In this case, when wives are at work, nobody can replace men to do housework. Mr. Qu became skillful in housework because his wife worked in the train, she will leave home for three or four days on one shift. So Mr. Qu says, "I didn't want to do housework at that time, not at all. But if I didn't cook, my daughter and I had no food to eat. If I didn't wash, we had no clothes to wear."

When wives are the breadwinners, men feel more obliged to do housework. Since they are not the money-makers of the family any more, doing housework is a very important way

to show their responsibility to the family as a husband and as a man. Thus those who refuse to do housework are unforgivable. "As a man, he can't make money, neither can he do housework. How can he be so arrogant?"

If men feel responsible to do housework, can they take over all kinds of housework? Will the division of labor on housework shift when the economic positions shift between men and women? Not really. Men feel they should do housework doesn't mean they like doing it, so they are very picky on what kind of housework to do.

In the time of laid-off, all most all men say they cook frequently. It is not difficult to understand since men have started to cook when they got married. But men don't like washing, either washing clothes or dishes after dinner. Some men may wash clothes, but only their own. It is women who wash all the over family members' clothes and the covers used by all family members, such as bed sheets, table cloth, curtain, and couch covers. Therefore, although Ms. Jin is very satisfied with her husband when they shift the division of labor, she often gets upset when Mr. Zhang refuses to wash her clothes.

"Sometimes I will leave my coat on the couch in the morning before I go to the market (her stall), and tell him to wash it. But when I come back at night, it is still there. I will ask him why he doesn't wash it, then he will become unhappy and don't talk to me." Ms. Jin says, "So I will tell him again. Sometimes he will wash it after I say it several times."

In addition, although men have no problem on cooking, they hate washing dishes. "Every time I finish dinner, I will watch the dishes in the sink, extremely reluctant, I really hate washing those stuff." Mr. Wu told me.

Although there is discrepancy in men's attitudes and behavior on housework, women don't have much complaint on the division of it. When women become breadwinners, their expectation on men's contribution on housework will rise, just like Ms. Jin wants her husband to wash everything including her clothes. But this expectation is not difficult to be satisfied, because most men are willing to cook, and not many women wish men to do all the washing, because women think washing shouldn't be men's task at all. When asked why, women will say: "Those men are not good at the washing." "They can't make things clean. I don't trust him." Therefore, it is not rare to see women washing many things in their spare time or washing dishes after dinner while they go back home after one day's work.

Women's expectation on men's doing housework is not high, and it is very easy to be abandoned. Mr. Wan's income is very instable after he left the factory. He used to sell vegetables, deliver gas for a gas company, run pedal cabs and work as a mason. But all these jobs are short-term and the income is very instable. Comparing to him, his wife Ms. Chu makes more sustainable money. As a good tailor, she makes twice as much her husband does per month, although she gets totally exhausted everyday.

"Do you think your husband should do more housework since your work at home is so tiring?"

"No. since I stay at home, I don't depend on him on housework."

Although Ms. Chu makes more money than her husband, and she is busier than him most of the time, since she stays at home, and her husband works outside, she believes herself should be the one taking charge of daily cooking and washing.

Since P. R. China brought women into labor market in the Collective era in 1950s,

Chinese women had the equal opportunity to work as men. When people in this study got married in 1970-80s, men and women worked. Thus both men and women believe women shouldn't be the one taking all the housework since women are money-makers too. This concept remains and goes a little bit further when women become breadwinners. Thus on practice level domestic division of labor changed to a certain extent. However, economic position is not decisive to the shift of domestic division of labor on conceptual level. The traditional gender stereotype remains. Thus when women become the main financial contributors, both men and women don't think the housework should be shift too. So men refuse to take over all kinds of housework women used to do, and women still believe washing is women's work. If they can decide, women would prefer doing housework and their husbands go to work. After all, women should be the one staying at home and men should be the one working outside.

On Household Authority

Classic studies on patriarchy believe the control of economic resources is the source of male dominance and authority. If so, will men lose their authority in nuclear families when they are not the main money-makers? If money fails to bring women equality in housework, can it bring women the authoritative positions in the household? In this part I will elaborate this point by analyzing two cases: Mr. Wei and Ms. Yue.

The Case of Mr. Wei Mr. Wei is forty-eight years old. Both he and his wife Ms. Zhao were workers in the manufacturing plant before the laid-off. Now he works as a mason for a private building company, and his wife work for private business owners too. Mr. Wei's job is too heavy for him to bear that he often drinks much alcohol for relax and eats little food. For

this reason, he is very skinny and flagging, looking like sixties. He makes much money during summer months from this job, but has to find something else to do in winter because it is too cold so the building project will pause. Ms. Zhao controls family budget tightly, she will give Mr. Wei three hundred Yuan as pocket money per month, but nothing else. Mr. Wei always feels the money is not enough, but he dares not to say much about it, because he was almost abandoned by his wife when he was dismissed by the factory. They have a daughter who has a job and lives separately.

"Whenever my daughter comes back home, I feel like having a festival.

She will buy many things for me, such as wine, cigarettes, vegetable and meat, whatever I want."

Both Mr. Wei and his wife work very hard, but the family budget is still very tight. Half of their income will be used to pay for their social insurance. According to government policy, laid-off workers have to pay social insurance by themselves until the age of retirement: men sixty, women fifty-five. Mr. Wei and Ms. Zhao have a long way to go, for Mr. Wei, it's twelve years.

"Can you ask someone for help?"

"Who can help you? My relatives are in similar conditions. And you will feel uncomfortable to go out with your friends if they always pay for food. My connections to richer friends have faded away since the laid-off."

The case of Ms. Yue Ms. Yue is fifty-four years old. Before the laid-off, she was a worker in the manufacturing plant, and her husband Mr. Wu was an official at his factory. Mr. Wu cooks everyday and does washing sometimes when Ms. Yue goes out to work. After

working as the only money-maker of her family for ten years, Ms. Yue started a small grocery store with Mr. Wu's help. Ms. Yue thinks her husband is the one who makes decisions before and after the laid-off.

"Do you care about his staying at home?"

"No. Although he can't make money, he is a very warm-hearted and responsible man to families. When he is in charge of serious family issues and speaks in front of many people, I feel very proud. Not everyone can do this. He is also very capable. His father and my parents' funerals went very smoothly under his operation. "

Ms. Yue never feels money is a problem in her family, except the years when their child was in college. But whenever they need money, her husband can find someone to borrow, mostly his relatives.

"Do you want to be decisive in the family affairs since you make more money than him?"

"Not much." Ms. Yue replies after a pause, "He is good at dealing with everything. Men are more strong and decisive. I didn't care about those things since we married."

Comparing the two cases, it is not difficult to see money-making is not always decisive to household authority, the social capital the couple can manage is important too. For the couple in working class, the social capital husband and wife possess are almost the same. In this case, a man will lose his status and authority in front of his wife very easily when he is not the main money-maker any more. While in the family where the wife is in working class

and the husband is in a higher social class, the man has the social capital that the wife doesn't have to preserve his authority. The social capital is diversified, it can be his abilities to gain faces among relatives and friends, the strategy to negotiate with local government officials for running private business, or his rich extended family members who he can borrow money from.

However, this doesn't mean the gender stereotype on division of labor is shifted. Actually, both men and women still believe money-making is mainly men's task, and house work should be left to women. Men are deeply fettered by this stereotype of male breadwinners. Even though men still make decisions when their wives are breadwinners, they all admit that they have less self-confidence and more pressure from wives and society. According to men, the pressure is so heavy that sometimes they even want to divorce for getting rid of it. Therefore, they tend to be more cooperative and ask their wives' advice more in decision-making.

Women sense men's pressure too. A female informant told me: "On the day he (her husband) brings money back, he will talk loudly, when he doesn't bring money back, he tends to be quiet." To release this pressure, many women will try to let others know that they respect their husbands very much. So they will praise their husbands deliberately in front of others to raise husbands' faces. When others points out that their husbands are not capable in making money, women will say much to defend for men. When I ask about husbands' conditions of being househusbands, women will try to let me know that their husbands do many things at home, and even refuse me to interview men politely.

Conclusion

Being money-makers is influential in affecting people's behaviors and spousal relations. When women are breadwinners, they hope men can do more housework and they will be more decisive than before either consciously or unconsciously. While men will lose confidence in front of women, so they would like to do more housework and they tend to be more cooperative in decision-makings.

However, economic resource is not decisive to the change of gender stereotype on male breadwinners. People adjust their behavior on practical level doesn't mean they can accept the change on conceptual level. Both men and women still believe men should be the breadwinners and authority of household, while women should take charge of housework. Some women still believe they are less capable than men in dealing with big issues and making decisions.

Nor economic resource is decisive to the power relations between husband and wife. Men and women's experience and feeling are different in this change. Although women feel more comfortable to accept the fact that they make money, and their husbands stay at home doing housework, men feel much more difficult than women to accept this change. Men live in heavy mental pressure everyday. In this case, women will try to protect men's face by raising men in front of other people. This is a way for women to "protect" their husbands, so that they can preserve the harmony of marriage. Therefore, economic, political and emotional aspects of marriages are interconnected and interactional. They collectively affect the couple's relations and the path of marriage.

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