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# “Full-time wife” and the change of gender order in the Chinese City

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## Abstract

Work and family are the most critical of the contested terrains that determine the status of women in the gender order, the differing pattern of inequality between men and women. “Full-time wife” is a relatively new label in China, emerging only in the late twentieth century. It corresponds to the term “housewife” used in the 1950s and 1960s. Based on 59 in-depth interviews carried out between 2006 and 2007 in Guangzhou City, this article focuses on “full-time wives” and the dilemma they face in the conflict between family and work, an issue that is essential to an understanding of changing gender relations in China. The paper argues that a combination of the traditional Chinese gender order, improving wages of the family under the “socialist” market economy, and the rolling back of state protection was a key reason for the emergence of the full-time wife phenomenon. The analysis of the position of the full-time wife demonstrates how rolling back state protection affected women and specifically how it undermined the admittedly inconsistent advances in gender equality made in the previous era. For example, women now experience many new kinds of subordination, both in the labor market and the family. China’s market economy requires social policies that aim to improve the work-family balance in order to prevent or mitigate the further development of the market-constructed gender order.

**Keywords:** Full-time wife; Gender order; Work-family balance

## Background

Reconciling family life and paid work is one of the most important issues in feminist theory. With the development of capitalism, large-scale production was separated from the family. Women were expected to stay at home to take care of family members while men’s primary duty was to enter the labor market to make money and support their families (Crompton 2006). This model of the family emerged in Western societies in the nineteenth century; it was initially a middle-class phenomenon and only became widespread among the working classes after the Second World War (Stacey 1996; Nicholson 1997). This division of labor meant that women were confined to the private sphere of the family with little or no opportunity to develop their talents and abilities in the public domain. During the course of the twentieth century, the male breadwinner model was accompanied by institutional developments that reflected its basic assumptions in areas such as schooling, pensions, and the delivery of health and welfare services (Sainsbury 1999).

Liberal feminists argued that this situation made women into adjuncts of men rather than persons in their own right, while radical feminists claimed that the family was a site of patriarchal control (Millett 1999). In order to overcome “the nameless confusion” advanced by Friedan (2005), it was argued that women should have the chance to engage in the public domain of work instead of staying at home. Friedan saw that her daughter’s generation was exhausted because they wanted to simultaneously pursue a full-time career and the family role of mother and wife. She argues that it is as important for men to develop their private and family selves as it is for women to develop their public and social selves (Friedan 2004).

Paid employment is a right that women have fought for. The control of women’s access to paid work is maintained primarily by patriarchal relations in the workplace and in the household (Walby 1986). Women still face a series of problems after entering the labor market. First, it is difficult to balance the pressures of work and family. Hardworking men usually have a wife to take care of the family, yet it is still rare to find a man supporting a working woman. Having a paid job is both time-consuming and physically challenging for women. Especially when their children are very young, mothers face the dilemma of whether to engage in paid work or provide full-time care at home (Brannen 1999). Second, women face the problem of occupational segregation (Giddens 2003), which operates along both vertical and horizontal lines. On average, in the UK, women’s wages are 70 % of men’s in the same jobs—the so-called Female Forfeit (Rake 2000). Although slightly diminished by globalization today, occupational segregation is still the leading determinant of gender inequality in terms of earnings (Guachat 2012). Third, women need to rotate constantly between meeting formal job requirements and demonstrating femininity. Women in paid work are expected to be brisk and efficient, in contrast to the feminine characteristics of warmth, empathy, and tenderness. With the globally increasing rate of women with paid employment and dual-earner families, the dominant male breadwinner social policy no longer fits. Feminists thus proposed the family-work balance model to replace the present unequal one (Crompton 2006).

Work and family are the most important domains that determine the status of women in the gender order. This family-employment nexus underscores the socioeconomic security and social status of women and has therefore always been one of the central issues in feminism (Robila 2012; Fischlmayr and Kollinger 2010; Wattisa et al. 2013; Marian 2011; Trefalt et al. 2013). In the 1980s, research in developed countries focused on the conflict between family and work faced by career women (Friedan 1981; Jeffrey 1985). From the 1990s onward, social policies that supported both women and men in achieving a better balance between work and life were introduced in the UK and other European countries. These included childcare services, the promotion of flexible working time, and parental leave, all of which have become common in these countries (Han et al. 2007; Philips and Evans 1987; Bastian 1994).

In China, the trend is different because of the state’s strong intervention from 1949 to 1979 and the rolling back of such intervention in the economic reform period after 1979. From 1949 to 1979, the rate of employment among women increased to over 70 %, compared to 56.7 % as the average in other countries classified by the UN as having a medium level of human development and 51.5 % for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (Jiang 2003). Employment meant

socialist construction since the private sector virtually disappeared in the early 1950s. For urban women growing up in the Maoist era, employment was taken for granted as an important component of a woman's life (Wang 2003). Day nurseries became part of the workplace benefits in any urban work unit of significant size (Walker and Wong 2009). Such family-friendly support prevented many family-work conflicts. In contrast, after 1979, the reduction of state support was rapid, and today, even the protection of women's basic maternity rights are not completely enforced, especially in private companies. Some Chinese women choose to be a full-time wife to avoid the increasing conflict between work and family. This demonstrates the state's power in opening up or closing down choices and opportunities during women's life course (Daly and Rake 2003).

### The gender order

Giddens (2003) advanced the concept of gender order but did not offer a precise definition. It is clearly related to concepts such as gender relations, gender inequality, gender differences, gender socialization, and masculinity and femininity. Based on these concepts, gender order may be defined as the different characters, roles, and modes of action for men and women that are specified by culture, customs, political economy, and the social structure, including social policy. In this paper, the term "gender order" is used specifically to highlight the female roles formed by culture, regulation, and access to resources. Four types of gender order are discussed in this paper: 1) traditional gender order, also called private patriarchy and constructed with reference to Confucianism, that advocates "man responsible for the outside, woman responsible for the inside" (*Nan zhu wai, niu zhu nei*, 男主外,女主内); 2) state-constructed gender order, also called state patriarchy, that advocates "woman exactly like man in public areas"; 3) market-constructed gender order, also called capitalist patriarchy, that is characterized by discrimination against women in paid employment; and 4) modern equal-gender order or equality based on woman's subjectivity and constructed in terms of equality with difference. Thus, although similar to terms such as "gender inequality" and "gender hierarchy," "gender order" comprises a multidimensional framework that identifies different social constructions of the role of women in relation to men.

### From "housewife" to "full-time wife"

Under the traditional Chinese gender order of "man responsible for the outside, woman responsible for the inside" (*Nan zhu wai, niu zhu nei*, 男主外,女主内), women were required to be good wives and loving mothers in the family. In the context of the traditional Confucian culture, a woman had to "comply with her father, her husband, and her son." A woman's position and duties were defined by this gender order.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the state established a different gender order—"woman exactly like man in public areas," and in the sphere of work, most urban women entered into paid employment. At the same time, the employment-based urban welfare system (*Danwei* welfare) built up kindergartens and canteens to reduce the burden of domestic labor. Moreover, family life was suppressed under the ideology of "giving up the small family, working for the big family" (*She xiao jia, wei da jia*, 舍小家,为大家) (Zuo 2005). As a result, the conflict between unpaid and paid labor was mitigated to some extent (Zuo and Jiang 2009). The state was important both because

women had entered the labor market, often as state employees, and also because the extension of state services was necessary for their transition from housework to the labor market. This change undoubtedly weakened the status of many Chinese men in relation to their wives. However, although their dependence on their husbands was reduced, women had become more dependent on the state (Walby 1990). The liberational path of both women and men “being national, bearing responsibility” (*Tong wei guo min, tong dang ze ren*, 同为国民,同担责任) was based on state demands, and in practice, the interests of women were subsumed into state discourses and state interests (Song 2005). As a result, not all women experienced a sense of liberation from participating in social production (Wang 2000). Influenced by the slogan “Woman holds up half the sky” (*Fu niu neng ding ban bian tian*, 妇女能顶半边天), images in newspapers and journals portrayed female warriors, weavers, electricians, and other labor models. The difference between men and women was erased in the public sphere through the erasure of gender and sexuality (Wang 2003). The social value of women’s employment received full official affirmation and praise. In contrast, a woman who stayed at home was criticized as a lazy housewife and shameful, decadent, bourgeois wife (Tong 2005). In the context of state socialism, the liberation of women embodied the legality of the state. Women were granted equal political, economic, educational, employment, and marriage rights within a short period of time, whereas Western women had to undertake a long battle for such rights. The main problem with this social progress was that women had no choice but to adapt to it and no time to consider its consequences. Thus women’s subjectivity and identity did not develop along with their labor market liberation. This is not to suggest that gender equality was achieved in the pre-reform era; it remained unfulfilled and problematic. For example, although women were pulled out of the family to participate in the labor force, job allocation and promotion were still gendered. Men were more likely to be assigned to managerial and technical posts and women to auxiliary ones. Moreover, the provision of public childcare in large urban units did not prevent the primary burden of household chores from falling on women (Wang 2003). Feminism in China must address this particular legacy (Yang 1999).

Beginning with the economic reform, guided by the market rationale of “efficiency first,” everyone was encouraged to put more time and energy into paid work. Women began to occupy inferior positions in the job market and to face discrimination based on age and gender because of the cost to employers of maternity leave. Mothers are more likely to leave male-dominated occupations when they work 50 h or more per week, but the same effect is not found for men or childless women. Also, overworked mothers are more likely to exit the labor force entirely, typically in male-dominated occupations (Cha 2013).

With economic development, the state released more space for the development of culture and ideas. Women’s value in the family, which in the traditional culture was previously confined, regained public interest. On one hand, the one-child policy strengthened the requirement to be a good mother; on the other hand, with the increase in living standards and the rise of individualism, a better family life was seen as a right by more and more people. However, because many families were still under the influence of the traditional gender order, women had to be more focused on domestic labor than men. In Chinese cities today, women’s attitude toward housework is divided: the traditional perspective argues that the woman should be responsible for it, while the modern view states that couples should share it equally. A possible third approach

in which men should be solely responsible for housework has not yet emerged (Fang 2011). The equal balance between paid work and the family has become the “life politics” of many women in urban China today.

Women are no longer asked to obey only one prescribed gender order; each person must choose according to their specific resources and situation. For example, concerning the issue of how to deal with housework, there are multiple choices available to women: giving it priority, seeking support from parents, seeking support from domestic workers, or asking men to seek support from their parents (Fang 2011). The full-time wife gives up paid employment and returns home to satisfy the requirements of the traditional gender order by striving to be a good wife and loving mother within the family. This avoids the pressure to balance paid work and unpaid domestic labor. She is responsible for all housework chores and often strives to improve the standard in order to gain a sense of achievement in satisfying their families (Fang 2011).

“Full-time wife” is a new term that emerged in the late twentieth century that corresponds to the 1950s and 1960s term “housewife.” These two types of women do not take part in paid employment, but are portrayed with completely different images in different historical and political contexts.

The core issue discussed in the literature is how to balance work and family. The literature review is organized along two lines: one is the experience in Western countries, the other is the experience of Chinese women from 1949 to the economic transformation period. Using the core conception of gender order, the rest of this article examines the impact on women of social policy in China from the Maoist era to the market transformation. In the Maoist period, the state brought greatly improved equality to the public gender order, but the state’s strong intervention affected women’s choices and freedom. In the post-Maoist period, the state rolled back too many regulations that ensured gender fairness, which created difficulties for women in balancing work and family. This work presents the full-time wife’s situation in the context of gender order change and especially the reasons behind the choice. Based on an empirical study of the changes in gender order in present-day China, we argue that instead of holding back the policies that ensure gender equality, the state should remain the key guarantor of equality in the gender order. The question of how to reconcile family and paid work should be reconsidered in China. Lessons can be drawn from both the *danwei* system and family policies in Western countries.

## Methods

The primary data were derived from 59 in-depth interviews carried out between 2006 and 2007 in Guangzhou, southern China. The lead author conducted 40 interviews, and the rest were carried out by undergraduate students under her supervision. The women interviewed had all lived in Guangzhou for 3 years or more and were between 22 and 55 years in age. Women of this age group generally experience the most intense energy and time conflicts between family and work. The sample included three types of women: single, full-time wives, and those balancing both work and family. Only the full-time wives are discussed in this paper. According to the abstract sampling standard, the lead author interviewed two women in each of the three types. Women of different age, career, and educational levels were then chosen according to

the need for theory development. For example, by analyzing the first round of interviews, the lead author realized that it was important whether the full-time wife's job had a comparative advantage to that of her husband's before her resignation. Thus, purposive sampling was used to choose women who formed four types based on patterns of comparison between their former jobs and those of their husbands.

The interviews usually lasted around 2 h using a semistructured approach. All were audio recorded. Transcriptions were sent to each interviewee to confirm their accuracy. Follow-up telephone calls were made to seek additional information. Besides the in-depth interviews, group discussion and family joint narratives were used to increase the reliability and validity of the data. In the group discussion, several women debated the topic at the same time, which stimulated each other's thinking and corrected the more uncommon and extreme views. In the family joint narratives, the voices of wife and husband could be heard at the same time, expressing different opinions that reflected the pressure of the gender order women faced in reality. Several male interviewees took part in family joint narratives, which was helpful in determining whether a specific opinion was held only by women, possibly due to the influence of the gender order. For example, the question "Which do you think is more important, work or family?" was initially designed to tap women's attitudes to family and work, but it proved to be of little value since, being Chinese, both men and women chose the family as the more important factor. In addition to the primary data collected in the present reform era, secondary data covering women in the Maoist era are cited principally from Zuo (2005), whose data come from in-depth interviews of 80 elderly married individuals in Beijing in the summer of 2000 and 2003. Clearly, a longitudinal or matched sample design would have suited the comparative needs of this research but, for various practical reasons, this was not possible. The unmatched comparison provides a valid second-best approach when the ideal is not available.

## Results and discussion

### The housewife in Mao's era

In Mao's era, the government called on Chinese women to engage in paid employment, and they played important roles in a variety of industries. Compared to the 1950s, the proportion of women remaining at home dropped from 90 to 10 % and the proportion of working women rose from 10 to 80–90 % (Li 2005). By establishing a number of "Female Worker Models" (*Niu lao mo*, 女劳模) and "38 Red-banner Pacesetters" (*San ba hong qi shou*, 三八红旗手),<sup>1</sup> women engaging in paid employment were projected as glorious contributors to the collective and the country. In contrast, women who stayed at home as housewives were regarded as lazy. Discourses calling for women to work stated, "We also have hands, we should not stay at home to be fed by others" (*Wo men ye you yi shuang shou, bu zai jia li chi xian fan*, 我们也有一双手,不在家里吃闲饭) (Zuo 2005). Housewives were viewed as lesser beings with no desire or conscience to make contributions to national construction.

In such a situation, most women were willing to engage in work rather than stay at home as housewives, even if the work was hard and they received low wages. They were also willing to work in response to calls from the government. One housewife in Zuo's earlier research, Ms. Wu (a pseudonym), talked about her experience (cited in Zuo 2005):

Grandma was paralyzed in bed for three years; I took care of her. After she died in 1958, I participated in work as called for by the street government. I wanted to work, on one hand to supplement the family income, on the other hand to get out of the family to liberate myself. At that time, no one wanted to be a domestic woman to be fed by others. If you get a salary you will be freer to use money. Firstly, I worked in a nursery school for a year. Then I worked in a picture factory for three years. But the job was too tiring and I earned little money. Every morning I got up at four or five o'clock to wash clothes and do cooking after work every day. In addition, I was afraid of my children learning badly because of me lacking time to take care of them. Then I quit my job. But I have many children and life was difficult, so I got some work to do at home and earned money to buy clothes for the children.<sup>2</sup>

Another respondent, Ms. Chan (cited in Zuo 2005), focused on how the state persuaded women to leave the family and join the labor market:

Just because I am from a cadre family, they asked me to work in the neighborhood as a model. ...Then my family moved to Huaihai Road. The local neighborhood came to persuade me again. There was no other way. I had to work again. I like to stay at home and feel good, but it was not so good to quit work because I am from a cadre family, so I went to work.<sup>3</sup>

This respondent did not take paid employment for economic reasons, but because of the political pressure on a cadre family to provide a role model. In the era that divided people according to their political views, the housewife was considered to have low political consciousness and low social status. Corresponding to the historical situation, the traditional gender order in the family was suppressed in favor of making a contribution to the common good. Women felt honored to be workers, while much of the housework, such as cooking lunch and taking care of children, was carried out by the canteens and nurseries provided by *danwei*. In the 1970s, the national total fertility rate was 5.8 children per couple (Cao 2009); thus, it was common for a woman to have around five or six children. Without support from *danwei*, it was impossible for them to take full-time jobs and provide family care at the same time. As Hernes (1984) argues, women reduced their dependence on their husband (private patriarchy) but increased their dependence on the welfare state both as employees of the state and as clients receiving state services (public patriarchy).

Since the *danwei* system provided employment and basic life protection to male and female residents, the mutual rights and obligations between the state and people was established, and a prominent phenomenon emerged in the city in which the worker was expected to “work for the country, not for the family” (*She xiao jia, wei guo jia*, 舍小家,为国家) (Zuo 2005). Both men and women began to depend on the state to arrange their jobs, welfare, and lives and they lost the freedom to choose for themselves.

#### **The full-time wife in the market transformation era**

What is the sociological difference between the Chinese housewife and the full-time wife? The image of the former is of low cultural quality: a woman who does housework at home pays no attention to her image and has limited interests. The image of the

latter is dressed up as a desirable status: she has the ability and experience of working but chooses to be at home to take care of her family. The two labels appeared at different times: the former refers to women who did not take part in work after 1949, while the latter refers to women who chose to return home from employment from the end of the twentieth century onward. The two different labels are marked with a deep sense of their times: housewife represented a form of social stigma against women who did not participate in paid work, while full-time wife indicates an unusual choice in the context of a changing socially constructed gender order. The former reflects the state's strong impact on personal life in the past, and the latter reflects the market-driven need to build a new image of middle-class women as beautiful, respectful, and with excellent consumer tastes. The latter can be seen in many Chinese commercial advertisements and represents a new major consumer model. Female body consumption has grown quickly and has become an important way of constructing self-identity (Fang 2006). This leads to the question: in present-day China, why do some women choose to be full-time wives?

#### **The full-time wife who quits her job due to the traditional gender order**

According to the second phase of a national investigation in 2000, the previously weakened traditional gender order—"man responsible for the outside, woman responsible for the inside" (*Nan zhu wai, niu zhu nei*, 男主外,女主内) revealed a new enhanced tendency in Guangdong province, which ironically began promarket transformations earlier than most of the other Chinese provinces. Three quarters of the women agreed with the statement "Even if the spouse's income is high enough, or there is a lot of money at home, she will continue to work." One quarter of female respondents believed that if economic conditions permitted, they would be willing to quit their jobs and return to the family. The ratio is nearly 13 percentage points higher than the national average. It is the combination of the traditional Chinese gender order and the improving market-driven wages of the family that is making the emergence of the full-time wife possible. According to the third phase of the national investigation in 2010, there has been a slow reduction in the rate of employment for women, which indicates the increasing trend of full-time wife (Wu 2014). Forty percent of mothers feel torn between work and child rearing and are likely to quit their jobs, compared to 20 % of fathers. One important reason is lack of professional childcare (He and Jiang 2012).

Through analysis of the in-depth interview data, we now explore why Chinese women say they will give up paid work in favor of domestic labor. Women were divided into four types according to their situation in the job market and in comparison with their husband's jobs. Income levels and career development opportunities were also taken into account (Fang Ying 2009).

#### **Women who are disadvantaged both in the job market and at home**

This type of female status took the form of a low-grade job that was apparently disadvantaged in relation to the husband's job. This meant the women earned a much lower income and had fewer career development opportunities. They were the most affected by patriarchy in both the job market and the family, and many had been full-time wives for a long period. They faced segregation in both occupational type and occupational status.



Also, any sense of achievement and personal income gained from the job were limited. As a result, remaining in the job was not an attractive option when the family's circumstances permitted a choice to be made. These women's jobs were in a disadvantaged position compared to their husband's. Their husband's more-advantageous job provided them with the economic possibility of returning home; on the other hand, their husbands needed to invest more energy and time into their job and therefore had even less time to devote to family affairs. The gender order in the family placed higher expectations on the women than their spouses, and the woman's resignation from employment further met the patriarchal expectation that the man should devote himself to paid work instead of the family.

As one respondent observed, "When we were preparing to get married, there were a lot of things to do. My husband went to work, and I went to do all kinds of things and felt embarrassed by my regular absence, so I quit the job" (Mrs. Ping).<sup>4</sup> Mrs. Ping's qualification was of the secondary school level. Before marriage, she was an accountant in a nursery, while her husband had founded a small advertising company. Her daughter was 4 years old, and she had held no job after marriage. Mrs. Ping's reasoning appeared to contain this message: her job was not important to her while marriage was very important, so she felt she should quit her job to prepare for her marriage. Why did she consider her job unimportant? First, compared to her husband's salary, her income was minimal; second, the job gave her no satisfaction in terms of stability and sense of achievement. It was a low-end job in which she could be replaced easily, and she was at a disadvantaged position in the labor market. In contrast, her husband had a much higher income and better career prospects. When she made the choice to leave her position, she expected it to bring great benefits and make her life happier. Gender discrimination in the job market pushed her and the traditional gender order in the family pulled her at the same time. Thus, her resignation from paid work was a response to these two restraints of gender order.

The resignation of another respondent, Mrs. Zhen, came in response to her husband's job-changing trajectory. When they were married, her husband worked in a large state factory but then quit that position. After 2 years, he was employed by a large foreign-owned enterprise and was sent to work in another city. Mrs. Zhen's job changed due to her husband's move. She was a teacher in a kindergarten before her daughter was 5 years old and was the only wage earner in the family during the period her husband was looking for employment. When her husband was sent to work in another city, she resigned and transferred to take care of the family.

There was no change to Mrs. Zhen's relative position in the labor market; the change was in her husband's income. When the income gap between them became larger, her income became less important to the family, and market gender discrimination and traditional gender order led her to quit her job and carry out female domestic duties. This was in support of her husband's career and the fact that the couple believed that, as a family, they could benefit more from her resignation. This choice was very different from that available to a housewife in the Maoist era.

#### **Women with an advantage in the labor market, but a comparative disadvantage in the family**

This type of female status consists of having a good job, but one still inferior to that of her husband. The wife was thus expected to become a full-time wife. If her husband

had supported her employment, she might have had good career prospects, but her husband felt that she should support his work instead. He regarded sharing the domestic responsibilities as an impossible option, so the woman had to do them. In this situation, women could achieve affluent material lives but at the expense of a formal career and the self-fulfillment that came with it. However, most of them viewed their husband's and children's achievements as compensation. One respondent, Mrs. Chen, stated:

I only worked for a few years.

Interviewer: Is it because you had a baby?

No, it is not difficult to find a job, but I needed to pick up my child from school. In 1997 Hong Kong returned, foreign business wanted to open plants within the mainland. I did very well at the beginning, then I couldn't continue [because of the need to take care of the child].

Interviewer: Did you feel sorry?

I felt a little sense of loss, at the beginning. I felt relaxed because you needn't go to work everyday, then I felt a bit of loss. I managed to lessen the feeling of loss through my child. My job was easy and I had a good salary.

Mrs. Chen was 43 years old, and her only child had been to university. She became a full-time wife when the child was very young. Her husband is a successful businessman and she had an affluent life. She had a good job as a secretary but because of its lower status compared with her husband's position, she exchanged it for the domestic role. Mrs. Chen also mentioned that she wanted to do something in her husband's company after she left her own job, but her husband did not agree to this.

When I was young I wanted to do something, such as take part in his company, but I felt a man would suppress the woman somewhat. He said that I could do it, you just need to stay at home and enjoy life. I think I have this problem [the lack of opportunity outside the family].

Mrs. Chen was clearly affected by the traditional gender order, and her unfulfilled willingness to take part in her husband's company was also controlled by this gender order.

Another respondent stated that "suppression of myself is the greatest impact brought by marriage. That is, sometimes you will transform your role slowly, feel you are a woman behind a man" (Ms. Liu). The disadvantaged role of women in the traditional gender order does not change because of improved economic conditions since women may no longer be disadvantaged in terms of material living standards (depending on the distribution of resources within the family), but are still inferior in terms of self-fulfillment. Women's suppression resulting from the traditional gender order occurs independently of economic factors, and in the background of market transformation,

economic factors sometimes become a powerful support of the traditional gender order.

#### **Women who hold a position in the labor market that is equal to her husband's**

When a woman has a position in the labor market that matches that of her husband, what impact does the traditional gender order have on her job prospects? This type of forced resignation reflects the reemergence of the traditional gender order in the period of market transformation. Strong pressure is put on the woman to abandon her commitment to employment through a combination of complaints from her husband and her own feelings of guilt and anxiety. The result is that she gives up the pursuit of a career and submits to her family's requirements. The woman's employment-related goals are subordinated to the traditional gender order in the family.

Mrs. Hu was 33 years old, married, and with a child in primary school. She was a well-known enterprise's departmental manager when she quit her job because of the tension between the job and her family. She was studying for a doctorate degree and hoping to be a lecturer in a university because she believed this job would be easier to balance with her family responsibilities. Her husband is a professor at a well-known university. Her previous job had a very good salary and excellent prospects, which matched her husband's position in terms of salary and status. Mrs. Hu observed, "I felt it was best to do the job, but there was a lot of stress coming from my child and family. I found that I only used my basic logic and judgment to do my job well. It gave me a kind of intellectual certainty."<sup>5</sup> Mrs. Hu liked her job very much and received high satisfaction from it, so why did she give up this work?

Originally, [the husband] always complained when I came back late because of the busy job, He said that making money was for improving quality of life for someone else, but our family was not like a family at all [because there was no one to take care of the family]; I could not tolerate his complaints any more, so I had to give up the job to take care of my family. Generally, it is rare for a wife to complain that her husband is so busy at work. ... At that time, I couldn't go to Sing K [a kind of singing party], he [her son] was too young, his study was very important—the most important thing in our family. Sometimes I needed to go out for a while, I needed to ask my mother to help me to look after my son. I couldn't leave them [son and husband] together at home, because my husband didn't want to look after our son except when I went out for only a few minutes, not more than half an hour. If I went out of the university, I needed to take my son with me or ask someone to look after my son or let my son go play at his friends' home. It was impossible to let them stay at home together. I think there are others like me. First, the man is macho; second, I think he is very busy and I cannot make him busier because of housework.

Before resigning, Mrs. Hu worked in a high-pressure job while her husband's university job was more stable. If the husband had her job and the wife his, they would have been more balanced, a combination called the "two-track family."<sup>6</sup> This kind of family can enjoy the advantages of the state-owned sector and market sector at the same time, and it is in harmony with the traditional family gender order. However, Mrs. Hu's case did not equate to a two-track family type. Mrs. Hu's husband believed that her busy job should not affect

her care of the family and was unwilling to do anything more for the family himself, yet he complained that their “home is not like a home.” Behind his complaint lies the traditional gender order: it is the woman’s responsibility to take care of the family regardless of how challenging her work might be. Only after doing so is it allowable for the woman to pursue career development in paid employment.

Under the strong pressure of the traditional gender order, Mrs. Hu gave up her high-status job and hopes to find one that will allow her to take good care of her family: “Yes, I had a high salary at that period, but I thought it was not good for my family, especially given such machismo in my husband. I will take good care of my family, and I think I can spend less time on my son as he grows up” (Mrs. Hu). The traditional gender order created a paradox in this case: her husband was a university teacher but was unwilling to care for his family; however, she is expected to do so when she becomes a university teacher. It is likely that, even when both of them are university teachers, there will be different approaches to paid work because of the unequal gender order for men and women. The wife has to pay more attention to the family and give less attention to her job. This will create a barrier to women’s improvement in career terms and disadvantage women in the long term. The gender order in the labor market (capitalist patriarchy) was reinforced by traditional gender order in the family (private patriarchy).

#### **Women with superior status in both the labor market and the family**

This type of female status occurs when the woman has a good job and her income and career prospects are both superior to that of her husband. Out of rational considerations, the family could get maximum benefit if the man gave up his job to take care of the family or the couple shared housework equally. However, they make a very different choice: the wife gives up her better-quality job to become a full-time wife. From this choice, we can see the strong effect of the traditional gender order. The choice eases a woman’s guilt and anxiety about her lack of time for caring for the family, especially her child. She makes a major concession in her career for the sake of the family’s harmony and stability. It is a rational choice in emotional terms.

Mrs. Wang<sup>7</sup> was 30 years old and worked in the marketing department of a French design company. Her son was 4 years old, and her husband worked as an administrator at a university. After graduating from the university and before her child was born, she worked in a variety of foreign trade companies. When she stopped working, she received no compensation from the company. When she was asked why, she replied: “I was pregnant and couldn’t complete the work. Even if the company didn’t say ‘We’re letting you go,’ you have to go. It is impossible for the company to keep the empty seat waiting for you for several months, so I had to resign.” After the child was born, she held several temporary jobs until she found her last one in industrial design, a new industry in China. Led by her French boss, she rapidly improved her marketing ability. Her salary increased greatly with rising sales. She had to put increasing energy and time into the work and was upset by her lack of ability to care for her child. As a result, she resigned from the high-salary position.

In this case, external pressure coming from the gender order was not apparent. Mrs. Wang’s mother-in-law and husband took over the family duties when she was very busy, and she was relatively free to set work arrangements and priorities. The cause of

her action came more from the inner pressure produced by the traditional gender order. First, she did not have a strong desire for success at work, and when facing great pressure, she made the choice to give up the position. Second, she believed that she should take care of her family because “you get the feeling of home after caring for it yourself.” She had internalized the gender role that dictated that women should always prioritize the family. When external constraints disappear, internal discipline becomes a powerful tool for maintaining the traditional gender order.

Although all the full-time wife interviewees had children and were required by the traditional gender order to quit their jobs, it is also possible that there is a type of full-time wife without children who is motivated more by consumerism and hedonism. This type of relationship status was not encountered in this research but could be the topic of future sociological studies (Chong and Li 2010).

## Conclusions

### **The full-time wife as a product of the interaction between the traditional gender order and the market economy**

The contemporary form of patriarchy has invaded the public domain and increasingly so. Women have entered the public sphere in very large numbers yet still occupy subordinate positions (Cha 2012). Contemporary American society has a labor market based on public patriarchy and Western Europe a mixed state/labor market from public patriarchy. Each of these represents a change from the previous form of private patriarchy (Walby 1990).

Under China's patriarchal system in the Maoist era, women benefited from the strong role of the government and a variety of welfare services that removed much of the housework duties from the home. It was this welfare system that made it possible for most women in urban areas to take part in paid employment. The disadvantage of the state-constructed gender order was lack of individual freedom and choice, where women had to obey the requirements of the state or they would suffer societal pressure to conform (Wang 2003; Yang 1999). This was the direction of China's national policy on women from 1949 to 1978, and reflected the commitment of the Communist Party to gender equality. After the economic reforms beginning in 1978, the government paid greater attention to efficiency than to equality. As a result, social protection was not given to the women who worked in the private sector, including foreign-owned companies, which made it more difficult for women to balance work and family. This is why the status of full-time wife was more prevalent in the private sector and is thus common in Guangdong province where there is a high proportion of private enterprises.

From Mao's planned economy to the market reform era, the content and effect factors of gender order have changed. In Mao's era, the principle of “equality between men and women” was implemented through the urban work unit system. Strong political forces brought many Chinese women a high level of equal rights, equal opportunities, and equal pay. These were advances that Western women had fought to achieve for over 100 years. “Equality between men and women” (*Nan niu ping deng*, 男女平等) became a principle of legitimacy for the government and the Communist Party. Following the economic development of the market, efficiency replaced fairness and work

units began to avoid the burden of childcare, which was shifted back to women. As a result, women began to experience employment discrimination, which was reflected in occupational segregation and a widening wage gap. Inequalities between men and women in the job market became more and more apparent. According to the national investigation into women's status in 2000, the average annual income of women in cities was 70.1 % of men's, a decrease from 77.4 % in 1990 (Tong 2005).

After China's state control system weakened and market individualism strengthened, people felt that they wanted an individual family life rather than only contributing to the common good. In this context, women's role in the family regained attention. After the ideological liberation of the 1980s, the value of women to the family began to be generally recognized. This contrasted to the previous era in which women were asked to be the same as men and their value to the family was ignored, at least publicly.

The support system for families changed in response to ideological and related policy adjustments. In the planned economic era, the state implemented social services through the work unit system. Nurseries, kindergartens, schools, hospitals, and canteens in the unit shouldered a large part of the functions of the family. In the market economic era, the unit was no longer responsible for "housekeeping," and consequently, these functions had to be taken over by society in different ways, such as the fast-food industry, educational institutions, parental support, and, of course, the women in the family.

The development of social support systems provides people with more choices and improves the social standards of housework and children's upbringing. Taking children's upbringing as an example, the time and energy put in by mothers increase rapidly, from prenatal care, arts education, to early education. Mothers take on these new methods of childcare and practice them on their children, which strengthen the ethics of motherhood. After the gradual weakening of "national patriarchy" (public patriarchy), the role of women in the family became the focus of attention, which is a continuation of traditional private patriarchy.

By analyzing job resignations and the creation of full-time wives, we can see the push coming from the labor market in which women face occupational segregation, while at the same time, the traditional gender order pulls them toward the family. Some women resigned to ease this pressure. Most of these women were engaged in the private sector. The high-end job takes maximum benefit as its standard: the female employee needs to put her full energy and time into the job, and it is impossible to fulfill her domestic role in the family. In other words, either the woman is excluded from high-paying employment because of her gender, or once she is employed, she must work like a man, ignoring her maternal- and child-rearing needs and her role as mother and wife. This "selective obliterating of gender difference" makes it difficult for women to balance family and work. Mrs. Hu and Mrs. Wang faced this dilemma before choosing resignation. The women at the low end of the labor market experienced a lack of training and promotion possibilities, such as Mrs. Zhen who worked in a private kindergarten. The pay was much lower than that of a public kindergarten and lacked security. This is a blunt and calculating way to treat low-skilled workers in the labor market. These employers appear to think that the family should be the top priority, so resignation is a logical choice. This combination of market calculation and the traditional gender order produces a market-constructed gender order in

which gender difference is emphasized and results in obvious discrimination against women in the job market.

There is one significant factor that affected all of these women's resignations: their husbands were very busy. The husband's job brought a high income, but it also meant he not only had no time to help take care of the family but also expected the wife to provide all of the emotional and physical input. In other words, it was assumed that a woman was available to provide wholehearted support so that the man could work hard. The man insisted that the wife accept this subordinate role, and the woman believed it was reasonable. This ethic embodies the traditional gender expectation. It means that employers can maximize the efficiency of the husband's labor and indirectly push the wife to return to the family. Capitalist employers have no obligations to families. They are free to effectively marginalize all employees who have responsibility for family work (predominantly women) and demand long hours and increased effort from employees (predominantly men), who are viewed as not having these responsibilities (Crompton 2006).

The principle of "gender equality" was replaced by "gender difference" through the combination of the market economy's efficiency goal and the traditional gender order. The labor market is able to employ "high-efficiency" men only through the support of the full-time wife. However, this further excludes women from remaining in the labor market because it is difficult for these women to get the support they need from their husbands. If there is no effective external intervention, these two factors will mutually reinforce each other. In this case, women either work as high-efficiency women like men but usually with no man providing support or return to the home as a full-time wife. Thus, the status of full-time wife is a combination of market-economy discrimination and the traditional gender order, which can be called the market-constructed gender order. The only element of progress is that women can have some degree of choice rather than having to passively accept their status.

The move from housewife to full-time wife signals the changing gender order in China. Housewife was a stigmatized label in the Maoist era, which emphasized gender equality, and where women were expected to take part in work rather than stay at home to be fed by others. At that time, the traditional gender order in the family was neglected and repressed. The term full-time wife embodies an acceptance of the traditional gender order in the family and also the gender inequality in the labor market, which reflects a combination of the traditional gender order in the private sphere and the market-constructed gender order in the public sphere.

Compared to the Japanese housewife who has protections through social policies (Wang 2004), in China, full-time wives are a subgroup supported by a high family income. This group lacks social support and protections from national policies. It is an individual way of life in which women face significant risks because their economic and social status depends entirely on men. They face considerable psychological pressure about whether their marriage is stable. Thus, if a husband decides to divorce his wife in the future, the meaning and quality of her life will be seriously affected.

By analyzing the experience of the full-time wife, we see the Chinese state rolling back in terms of social protection for women and how this has affected equality between the sexes. The result is that women experience various kinds of subordination in both the market and the family. Social policy aiming to improve this situation should be introduced to intervene in the oppressive combination of public and private patriarchy. In China,

there are two sources of social policy knowledge concerning gender equality: one is the *danwei* system and the other is the new research and practical achievements in Western countries. The transformation in China moved from a redistributive system to a market economy (Sun 2008). After giving priority to efficiency in order to develop the economy for over 30 years, the Gini Coefficient in China has increased from 0.382 in 1988, 0.4 in 2000, to 0.52 in 2010 (Chong and Li 2010),<sup>8</sup> ranking the fourth highest (i.e., the most unequal) in the world. As a result, the issue of fairness has recently regained official attention. Concerning gender fairness, the *danwei* system provides many valuable examples of how to support female employees in balancing work and family. It is time to extend this experience to private companies.

At the same time, some new perspectives from Western countries on work-life balance are available for reference. Although the domain of paid work has evolved around male interests, women's place in employment has largely been determined by the male hegemonic model of industrial labor (Irving 2008). The situation is changing with the increasing rate of women's labor force participation. By 2011, family units with the male as the sole breadwinner had become a minority form in most European countries (Connolly 2013). Developed from debates around family-work reconciliation begun in the context of EU policy, and the concept of work-life balance has grown in importance for both women and men (Koslowski 2013; Speight 2013).

The question of reconciling the family and paid work should be reconsidered in China by learning from both *danwei* and family policies in Western countries, such as the working families agenda, statutory rights to request flexible work, and workplace arrangements to balance work and life (Fiksenbaum 2013; Jessop 2013; Kochan 2005; Marian 2011). If the state and workplace can enact a range of policies aimed at reducing work-family conflicts, more women can achieve a better work-life balance and even work-life enrichment (Trefalt et al. 2013; Skrypnek and Fast 1996), benefiting both women and men. For example, at-home fathers come to value their increased involvement in childcare in ways that reduce gender differences in parenting; this has the potential to change the company institution when they reenter the labor force. Also, at-home fathers generally appear to provide increased support for women's employment, which may reduce inequalities that stem from traditional gendered division in work/family responsibilities (Chesley 2011). The gender relationship becomes more diverse and flexible when men develop both their private and family identities and come together with women in developing their public and social roles.

The state did much to release Chinese women from the traditional gender order (kinship patriarchy) in the Maoist period, but women were pushed into the public sphere of labor and politics (Yang 1999). In the market transformation period, the state is still one of the most important sources of ensuring equality in the gender order. Instead of rolling back the state in this area, the state's responsibility should be reemphasized. In the future women's subjectivity, traditional culture, the state, and the market will further impact each other, and the state should be more active in constructing a new gender order.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>The number 38 refers to women in China since March 8 is the women's day established by the government.



<sup>2</sup>The interview cites from Zuo Ji-Ping (2005), "The Women's Emancipation and Gender Equality Duties in 1950s: The Experience and Feelings of Couples in Chinese Urban," *Society* 1, 20–30.

<sup>3</sup>The interview cites from Zuo Ji-Ping (2005), "The Women's Emancipation and Gender Equality Duties in 1950s: The Experience and Feelings of Couples in Chinese Urban," *Society* 1, 20–30.

<sup>4</sup>Interviews cited below in this article were conducted during my Ph.D. dissertation writing period between 2006 and 2007. I interviewed around 40 women, and the remaining interviews were conducted by my undergraduate students under my supervision. Each respondent was defined as: having lived and worked in Guangzhou for over 3 years and aged from 22 to 45. I divided the interviewees into "full-time wife," "single lady," and "balancing work and family." Only the full-time wives were analyzed in this paper.

<sup>5</sup>Mrs. Hu and Mrs. Wang are not typical full-time wives; they only became full-time wives for around 1 year. However, they are typical in that they gave up their favorite job to take care of their family. In the interview period, they should be regarded as "semi-full-time wives."

<sup>6</sup>In cases in which the spouse works in a state unit or market enterprises (usually, the wife in the state unit and the husband in the market enterprise), the wife's job is stable and involves less time and energy and the husband's job has a higher salary and requires more time and energy.

<sup>7</sup>Similar to Mrs. Hu, Mrs. Wang was a full-time wife for only 1 year; 1 year later, she found a new job in which she could take care of her family at the same time.

<sup>8</sup>This idea was suggested by an anonymous reviewer.

#### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

#### Authors' contributions

YF carried out the interview survey and wrote an initial draft in China. When she attended the University of Sheffield as an exchange scholar in 2012–2013, she discussed various drafts with AW, who also put forward key proposals from a sociological and social policy perspective. The authors jointly developed the paper through a long series of drafts. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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YF is an associate professor at Guangzhou University in South China who focuses on women's studies and NGOs in China. AW is a professor of social policy at the Sheffield University, UK, who is familiar with Chinese social policy.

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