

# Gender Inequality and Economic Growth in Rural China

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This article joins the debate over the effect of market-driven economic development on women's work opportunities and household gender inequalities. It assesses women's opportunities for off-farm employment, the relative contributions of female off-farm workers to household income, and the distribution of power in families whose male members have left for off-farm jobs, leaving women behind in agricultural work. We find that women are not uniformly excluded from opportunities for off-farm employment and that economic development does not uniformly increase gender inequalities within Chinese households. Although men are more likely than women to obtain off-farm employment in China, women's opportunities for off-farm work improve significantly when the coexistence of local and regional marketization creates a shortage of male workers and compels employers to hire women. The relative size of contributions to household income for male and female nonfarm workers also narrows incrementally with increased marketization. In addition, women who are left in agricultural work are more likely to become heads of household, a position which brings greater household decision-making power to female family members. © 2000 Academic Press

In developing societies the rising tide lifting millions of households out of poverty has been sustained economic growth. Households have experienced gains in income when opportunities for nonfarm employment expand and rural

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residents leave subsistence agriculture. This pattern has also characterized the Chinese transition from state socialism. Growth in rural industry has raised household incomes among rural Chinese (Griffin and Zhao, 1993). Yet research on women and rural development has shown that, within households, male family members disproportionately reap the benefits of opportunities for nonagricultural employment (Boserup, 1970 [1986]; Standing, 1978; Anker and Hein, 1986). These studies focus our attention on a central paradox in economic development: that the life conditions of women may deteriorate even while households benefit in the aggregate. Because of employers' preferences for male workers and because of women's child-care obligations, more men than women leave subsistence agriculture for wage employment. Subsistence agriculture soon becomes feminized. As female family members earn less and less money relative to male household members, their power and influence within the family also fade.

Does economic development uniformly exclude women from off-farm work opportunities and increase gender inequalities within households? Or are there settings in which detrimental effects on women are mitigated somewhat? We are here primarily concerned with gender inequalities in household power—defined as the degree to which a family member can influence important decisions within the family, including decisions about the use of household income. In research on household power within both industrialized and developing countries, wage income and family influence are closely linked, thus pointing to the importance of assessing women's opportunities for nonfarm work (England and Farkas, 1986; Blumberg, 1995). We first explore whether, in particular kinds of economic settings, rural Chinese women have significant opportunities for such employment and whether male and female off-farm workers make comparable contributions to household income. Yet focus on female off-farm employment alone is too narrow. It may not be the case that all (or even most) women who miss out on opportunities for off-farm employment see their household status deteriorate. Thus we also examine the distribution of power within Chinese families whose male members obtain wage employment, leaving female family members in agricultural work.

#### OFF-FARM EMPLOYMENT AND RURAL HOUSEHOLD MOBILITY

Following the shift to household-based farming in 1978, economic growth and rural industrialization in China proceeded at a rapid pace, especially in the southeastern maritime provinces which made the shift to greater reliance on markets earlier. Despite the income gains made through private businesses and commercial agriculture, the broadest base for rural income mobility stemmed from the rapid growth of rural industry (Knight and Song, 1993). Fiscal reforms conferred well-defined property rights over collective enterprises on local governments, strengthening thereby the incentives for political actors to encourage growth in these rural industries (Byrd and Gelb, 1990; Oi, 1992). Prior to market

reforms, collective firms were excluded from the centrally planned economy and could only develop outside the plan through market-oriented growth. As barriers to entry were lowered by reform policies, these nonstate firms grew rapidly by exploiting artificially high prices for manufactured products and the ready source of cheap labor in rural communities to gain a competitive edge over state-owned enterprises (Naughton, 1995). Despite their often primitive industrial technology, nonstate firms grew from 23% in 1978 to over 50% by 1990 of the industrial output of the Chinese economy. Although these collective enterprises are legally owned by the community as a whole, they operate like quasiprivate firms with hard budget constraints, hiring labor on short-term contracts, and selling products in markets (Byrd and Lin, 1990; Qian and Xu, 1993; Qian and Stiglitz, 1996).

Entwisle et al. (1995) address the effects of Chinese market-driven economic development on women's opportunities for off-farm work by assessing the odds that households with female labor will establish private businesses. They also address the gendered allocation of work within families that start such businesses. Their study shows that the odds are greater for families with male labor to start entrepreneurial businesses and that male family members are more likely than female family members to take part in running them. They conclude that rural Chinese women are losing out in the shift to marketization because their labor is not perceived to be valuable in establishing and maintaining private family businesses.

In their eight-province survey collected in 1989, just 15.6% of rural families operated family businesses. In our national survey, also fielded in 1989 but sampling 25 provinces, only 7% of rural households operate family businesses. However, nearly one-third of all households in our sample have at least one family member engaged in rural industry and service. Rural industries are the principal off-farm employers for both men and women shifting out of agriculture, providing about 140 million jobs in 1994. About 50 million rural women are employed by township-village enterprises (Reuters, 1994). This proportion of male to female nonfarm workers in rural industry (35% female) is slightly higher than in our sample collected in 1989 (29% female). In our analysis of the effect of marketization on rural women we address women's entry into all of these forms of off-farm employment. Extending the analysis beyond family-run businesses, thus including a much larger sector of the population, gives a better sense of the impact of economic development on women.

#### GENDER QUEUES AND FEMALE ENTRY INTO OFF-FARM EMPLOYMENT

A major factor shaping opportunities for wage employment is employers' preferences for certain employee traits, or the ordering of labor queues (Reskin and Roos, 1990). Employers implicitly assess job seekers according to the attributes they desire in employees. They may prefer to hire workers who are better educated and have more work experience, for example, believing that these

traits will make them more productive. Employers may also rank potential employees using discriminatory criteria objectively (though perhaps not subjectively) unrelated to expected productivity—for example, race or sex.

The ordering of labor queues in developing economies generally works to give men more opportunities for wage employment than women, since employers value characteristics that are more prevalent among men than women. Employers of nonfarm workers in these economies value employees who are better educated and perceived as well-suited for industrial work. These preferences place men ahead of women, since rural families are more likely to have invested in the education and training of sons than of daughters. Physical strength is often valued as well, and women are perceived to have less of it than men. Employers also value employees who are relatively inexpensive to keep. Legal regulations requiring employers to provide maternity benefits or on-site nurseries or to restrict working hours for women generally make female employees more expensive than male employees. Cultural prohibitions against women working in particular kinds of work may also push women to the back of employers' labor queues (Boserup, 1970 [1986]; Anker and Hein, 1986). The fact that employers' preferred traits for workers tend to be more prevalent among men than women turns queues for rural off-farm labor into "gender queues" (Reskin and Roos, 1990) wherein men are overwhelmingly preferred as employees over women.

Supply-side factors also tend to make rural women less able to participate in wage employment. Child-care obligations may make it difficult to commit to employment outside the home (Boserup, 1970 [1986]; Rosenfeld, 1985; Anker and Hein, 1986). Moreover, off-farm jobs can be located at a considerable distance from residential villages. Employees may not be able to commute home on a daily basis, making it even more complicated for women with dependent children to balance wage work with motherhood. However, in China the number of women employed in off-farm jobs may be limited more by employers' preferences for male employees than by women's child-care obligations. Many rural Chinese households consist of stem families, in which three generations live under the same roof. The adult-to-child ratio in these families is quite large because Chinese birth control policies limit women to having just one or two children. In our sample the mean ratio of children to adult females is .743. The likelihood that a mother- or sister-in-law is available to provide day care should make wage employment more accessible for Chinese women with children. In addition, rapid growth of township and village enterprises nearby provides jobs to which mothers *can* commute easily on a day-to-day basis. This makes off-farm work more accessible to mothers than in countries where off-farm jobs are located only in cities. Households may prefer to allocate opportunities for off-farm employment to permanent members of the family instead of their unmarried daughters. But where women with children are unable to pursue employment opportunities, there is a very large supply of young, unmarried females who would gladly take their place.

*Labor Shortages*

Although labor queues favor men for wage employment in industrializing rural areas, factors which create a shortage of male labor constrain employers to hire women in increasing proportions. In the American economy, men also tend to be favored over women for employment in lucrative, stable, and prestigious jobs. Yet, historically, periods of growth in male-dominated occupations or increased competition for employees have driven employers to hire women into predominantly male jobs (Goldin, 1990; Reskin and Roos, 1990). Something of this nature occurred during World War II, when a shortage of men for "male" work forced employers to hire women by the thousands. Structural changes forcing employers to hire women do not change employers' bottom-line preferences for hiring men. But the outcome is that women's opportunities for obtaining wage employment are improved. In rural China, we believe, employers in localities with shortages of male labor are also constrained to hire a greater percentage of female workers than they would otherwise.

It is regional industrial growth coupled with local and regional labor market development which creates these shortages of local male labor, thereby improving opportunities for female off-farm employment in local township and village firms. Economic development creates extensive job opportunities in cities, in addition to work available locally. During the 1980s, preferential state policies opened the way for the rapid incorporation of China's maritime provinces into the global market economy through trade and foreign investments. The resulting export-led economic boom and huge in-flow of foreign investments into newly established special economic zones, coastal cities, and rural towns sparked high-speed market-driven economic development. These firms face hard budget constraints, making them more likely to hire through labor markets rather than through government job allocation and wage setting. Hiring through labor markets gives urban marketized firms a competitive edge over public firms, which are often saddled with too many workers, artificially high wages, and excessive welfare obligations. Wages are set high enough to attract cheap migrant labor from other areas, but remain low enough to make these jobs unattractive to local urbanites accustomed to higher, government-subsidized wages and welfare benefits. In response, more and more men leave local villages to take advantage of distant job opportunities, leaving women the majority of available labor for hires among local enterprises. The combined effects of rural-urban migration of male laborers seeking better urban jobs and a decade-long 40% growth rate of rural industries thus created conditions favorable to female off-farm employment in local village and township enterprises.

Labor market size increases from the combined effects of commodity and production markets and industrialization. As Smith (1776 [1982]) argued, commodity markets give rise to increasing specialization and division of labor. As commodity markets develop, households and firms increasingly produce to profit from market exchange, and employers increasingly use employees for more

specialized tasks. The emergence of production markets also increases competition for skilled workers or, when labor is in short supply, for employable labor. Production markets are groups or networks of firms that compete with one another (White, 1981). The larger the size of the production market, the more competition between firms for skilled and experienced workers. A greater number of private and collective firms, rather than state-owned firms, indicates a greater population of firms competing with one another for resources. It follows that labor markets will be more developed in regions and localities that have more developed commodity and production markets. It might be argued that labor markets for nonagricultural work are simply a function of level of industrialization, since in the absence of industry the only source of employment for rural people is agriculture and small-scale commerce. However, rural industries in China have been around since the Great Leap Forward and developed at a 20% growth rate through the 1970s. But before market reform opened the way for the emergence of labor markets, jobs in rural industry were allocated by local governments in nonmarket trade of labor.

Women's opportunities for wage employment are improved in another way when local nonfarm jobs are allocated through labor markets rather than through ties to local officials. Although, given employers' preference for male workers, such personal connections can be important for women seeking off-farm jobs, providing timely information about job openings and direct introductions to local government-owned firms—and although in *nonmarket* settings job seekers with strong ties to local officials are more likely to secure off-farm employment than those lacking such ties (Nee, 1996), in fact only a minority have such connections. Seventy-five percent of the households in our sample lack strong ties to officials. But, in a setting where labor markets serve as the primary mechanism for matching workers to jobs, job seekers who lack such connections are not necessarily disadvantaged. Moreover, personal ties to local officials may not be as effective in rapidly growing industrial districts with large numbers of nonstate firms where the matching of workers to jobs is likely to rely less on government than on recruitment efforts by firms competing for skilled labor.

### *Conditions in Off-Farm Jobs*

Types of off-farm jobs in developing societies are of course quite varied, and one must not presume that men and women who acquire them end up in the same kinds occupations for equal pay. Off-farm jobs are often gender-segregated, with women limited to unskilled jobs with lower pay. Employers are more willing to hire women for unskilled positions than for other jobs because these jobs require less on-the-job training and work commitment. Unskilled jobs require little or no formal education, and a woman who quits because of child-care obligations can be replaced quickly, without a loss of training investment for the employer (Standing, 1978). Indeed, for jobs that are labor-intensive and cost-sensitive, young, unmarried women are often sought out specifically because they can be

compensated at much lower pay rates and with fewer benefits than men or older married women (Nash and Fernández-Kelly, 1983; Deyo, 1989; Ward, 1990).

This points to a second important development issue for women. Even when they are able to acquire off-farm jobs, their pay rates are consistently lower than those of male nonfarm workers (Anker and Hein, 1986). In export-processing zones—like those which dot China's southern coast—wages in female jobs can be so low that some have questioned whether women actually improve their living conditions by working there (Lim, 1990, p. 111). Some of this lower pay can be attributed to the fact that rural women generally have less education and off-farm work skills than men and thus are not qualified for the same jobs. Yet, even when educational opportunities for women expand, gender discrimination still keeps rural women on the lowest rungs of work ladders (Boserup, 1970 [1986]). However, we believe that, when women acquire jobs in townships where market growth has made male labor scarce, they are able to find jobs with somewhat better pay and working conditions. This is simply because many of the more desirable jobs which would otherwise have gone to men must now be allocated to women.

### WOMEN AS HOUSEHOLD HEADS

In places where male family members are more likely than women to leave agriculture for off-farm jobs in towns and cities, rural families must increasingly rely upon women to farm whatever land is retained by the household. Indeed, by 1994 women composed nearly 70% of China's agricultural labor force (Reuters, 1994). Research on women in developing economies assumes that women who are left behind in subsistence agriculture when male family members obtain wage employment see their household influence deteriorate. While the wage incomes of male family members increase markedly, women left in subsistence farming become much poorer than before because factory production also destroys their opportunities for home sideline income (Boserup, 1970 [1986]). Increasing wage differentials between male and female family members intensify household power differentials between men and women.

What this argument overlooks is that off-farm employment often takes men away from their households for long periods of time. Some nonagricultural jobs may be located just outside residential villages, but many men also travel to more distant towns and urban areas. Many of them are unable to commute home on a daily basis, and those who commute are still unable to spend as much time at their homes as when they were engaged in full-time farming. Wage employment for men decreases their day-to-day power within their families for the simple reason that they are too far removed from the home, physically, to control household affairs as closely as family members who are not so employed. Within the "feminized" villages they leave behind, women's power to influence family decisions actually increases.

In addition, it is routine for men employed in nonfarm work to remit a

substantial portion of their income to family members still on the farm. The financial obligations of sojourning male family members have been well established for centuries among rural Chinese families. Custom requires male migrants to maintain their social ties and status in the village community by sending regular remittances to support their families. Otherwise, they risk losing face not only among relatives and neighbors in the home village, but also within the emigrant network of fellow villagers in the city. Massey et al. (1987) report similar obligations among male migrant workers from Mexico. Because the men who earn this income are away from the household on a day-to-day basis, the women left on the farm see an increase in their ability to control the use of these resources.

## DATA AND METHOD

We draw upon two sources of data in assessing women's opportunities for off-farm employment, relative contributions to household income of male and female off-farm workers, and the household power of women who remain in agriculture. We rely primarily on the China–Cornell–Oxford survey of rural China. This survey samples 69 rural counties from 25 of China's 29 provinces, selected nonrandomly. Within these counties, 138 townships (*xiang*), 138 villages (*cun*), and 7950 households were selected randomly. The data were collected in 1989 and 1990 by the Chinese Academy of Preventative Medicine and include extensive health and socioeconomic measures at the county, village, and household levels (see Chen, Campbell, Li and Peto, 1989). In addition we use household decision-making data from the Fujian Rural Survey.<sup>1</sup> These data were collected in 1985 using a probabilistic sample of 30 villages and 624 households located in two socioeconomically diverse periurban counties near Xiamen in rural Fujian province. Both surveys were designated to collect household- and community-level data, recognizing the importance of these social units. In peasant societies the family household provides the social organization of reproduction and production. It is characterized by a high level of solidarity in dealing with the outside world and communism of property and consumption of goods within. While there may be conflicts and disagreements among individual household members, their strong mutual dependence ultimately renders the family household—not its individual members—the effective unit of decision making.

### *Models*

Hypotheses are tested with a series of hierarchical and OLS models. When OLS models are used to analyze multilevel data, the assumption of uncorrelated error terms is violated because all households within the same community share

<sup>1</sup> Sponsored by the University of California at Santa Barbara and Xiamen University (see Nee, 1989).

community-level attributes. Violation of this assumption affects the standard errors of contextual variables (Mason, Wong, and Entwisle, 1983). Hierarchical models were developed to address this problem (Bryk and Raudenbush, 1992; Searle, Casella, and McCulloch, 1992).

*Female off-farm work.* We first use hierarchical models to model the determinants of obtaining off-farm work at the household level. We employ the GLIMMIX SAS macro for this analysis. Decisions about the allocation of family labor are made at the household level, and individual entry into nonfarm work is highly dependent upon characteristics of the household (Massey et al., 1987). The number of male and female household members working outside the village in off-farm work are the dependent variables for two separate regressions. Off-farm occupations include employment in factories and service sectors and entrepreneurial businesses.<sup>2</sup> Family members who are government officials are not included in the count of off-farm workers. This allows us to examine whether having a local official in the household effects the likelihood that other family members acquire off-farm jobs. Because these dependent variables are count variables we estimate them with hierarchical Poisson regression. Our main interest is in testing whether extent of regional marketization and local development of labor markets predict off-farm work for women. Although the data are cross sectional, detailed data on regional variation in economic conditions allow us to make this assessment (see Xie and Hannum, 1996).

The models also test for alternative explanations. We first test for the effect of rural industrialization on off-farm employment. As more and more nonagricultural jobs are created through industrial growth, increased participation in off-farm work by both men and women is an expected outcome. *Industrial output* controls for level of industrial growth in the locality, measured as the per capita industrial output at the township level.<sup>3</sup> We then control for selected household characteristics. *Age*, *primary*, *junior*, and *advanced* control for the human capital of the household head and are used as indicators for the general educational level of the household. Our expectation that educational levels among all household members are positively correlated follows Knight and Li (1993), who found that children in Chinese rural households with well-educated parents have higher educational attainment. *Primary*, *junior*, and *advanced* are dummy variables indicating whether the household head attended or graduated from primary

<sup>2</sup> It is possible that a percentage of respondents employed in entrepreneurial businesses are the proprietors of these businesses. We follow Entwisle et al. (1995) in assuming that household economic interdependence in rural areas means that the vast majority of entrepreneurial businesses are family businesses in which the respondent is one of several family members who help out. Whether or not he or she is selected to help operate the business over other household members still depends upon how he or she is ranked in the family's labor queue.

<sup>3</sup> A variable measuring whether the village had experienced economic growth between 1983 and 1989 was initially added to the models as well. This variable was not significant in preliminary analysis and was eliminated. Since this variable measures economic growth at the village level, the fact that it fails to predict entry into nonagricultural work *outside* the village is not unexpected.

school; junior middle school; or senior middle school, technical school, or college or university, respectively. The omitted category is respondents who never attended school. Several additional variables control for family life-cycle stage. *Adults* measures the total number of household members over age 14, and *increase in female laborers* and *increase in male laborers* are count variables measuring increases in the number of adult female and male household laborers between 1983 and 1989. Households with a greater number of adults or a recent increase in adult labor should be better able to spare labor power for off-farm employment. However, women in families with a large number of children may be unable to work away from the home because of child-care responsibilities. *Children per adult female* is the ratio of children under 15 to adult females in the household. This variable is added to the model predicting female entry into off-farm employment.<sup>4</sup> *Mu per adult* controls for per capita area of cultivated land among adult household members. Families with bigger plots of cultivated land per capita should be less able to spare household labor power for off-farm work.

It might also be argued that opportunity for off-farm employment is a function of network ties. It is common even in market economies to obtain jobs through network ties to friends and relatives (Granovetter, 1974), and it is reasonable that these ties might be helpful in obtaining wage employment in rural China as well. We expect that living in a community with strong kin ties to urban areas and foreign ties should be helpful in securing off-farm work in cities for men, where households are less likely to have direct ties to employers. *Strength of urban and foreign ties* is constructed by interacting two village-level variables: one measuring the proportion of villagers who have relatives in cities and foreign countries and one measuring the proportion of villagers who receive remittances from these relatives.<sup>5</sup> As rural males leave for jobs in the cities, they leave vacancies in the local off-farm economy, generating demand for female laborers. The vast majority of female off-farm workers find jobs within their local counties such that strength of ties outside the county should be less relevant for their job prospects (Table 1). Instead, if personal ties are important in securing off-village employment, they are more likely to be strong ties with local officials. Until recent years all nonfarm jobs in rural China were allocated through local governments. Local officials are still involved in controlling collective enterprises (Oi, 1992), and even when firms have been leased to private entrepreneurs, they may exercise indirect influence on hiring decisions when firms remain dependent upon the goodwill of local government (Nee, 1992). *Official in household* and *official relative* control for local official influence in obtaining off-farm employment. *Official in household* is a dummy variable coded as 1

<sup>4</sup> Since child care is overwhelmingly a female responsibility in rural China, we do not expect that child-care responsibilities constrain men's abilities to participate in wage employment.

<sup>5</sup> Both of these variables are measured on a 5-point scale where a score of 5 indicates that almost all village residents have relatives in, or receive remittances from, relatives outside the village.

TABLE 1  
Location of Male and Female Nonfarm Workers,  
China–Cornell–Oxford Survey

Job location	Male nonfarm workers	Female nonfarm workers
Within township	58.76% (1778)	73.92% (927)
Within county	21.71% (657)	17.86% (224)
Within city	12.29% (372)	5.90% (74)
Outside province	7.24% (219)	2.31% (29)
<i>N</i>	3026	1254

when there is a local official living in the household. *Official relative* is a dummy variable equal to 1 when the family has a relative outside the household who is a local official.<sup>6</sup>

We then add variables which test for the effect of regional marketization and labor markets on male and female nonagricultural employment. *Labor market* is the proportion of the village population working outside the village in off-farm work. It includes off-farm work in construction, entrepreneurial businesses, factories and workshops as well as traveling craftsmen and peddlers (Table 2). We do not include nonagricultural work performed within the village. While jobs located within the village may still be allocated through nonmarket mechanisms, off-farm jobs located outside respondents' home villages are likely to be acquired through market and quasi-market means (Parish, Zhe, and Li, 1995). Within the village nonagricultural employment is more likely to involve small businesses owned and operated by the family household. We also develop regional specifications for the types of emergent mixed economies in China. The specifications employ cluster analysis of the relative contribution to the industrial output in each province of private, collective, and state property forms over 3 years, from 1987 to 1989 (Nee, 1996). In general *the shift to markets precedes change in the structure of property rights*. We infer from this that marketization is most extensive in the *coastal laissez-faire* provinces (Guangdong and Fujian), where private and collective firms accounted for 19.4 and 35.8% respectively of the industrial output by 1989. Industrial output per capita from private firms is also much higher in the more *laissez-faire* coastal provinces (0.00073) than in any other region (Hsueh, Li, and Liu, 1993).<sup>7</sup> The shift to an institutional environ-

<sup>6</sup> In preliminary analysis we also tested a dummy variable which is equal to 1 when most jobs in the village are obtained through the local government. This variable was nonsignificant and was dropped from the analysis.

<sup>7</sup> Compared to 0.00025 in the coastal corporatist provinces, 0.00050 in the coastal redistributive provinces, and 0.00011 in the inland provinces.

TABLE 2  
Means and Standard Deviations of Selected Village and Township Variables  
China–Cornell–Oxford Survey

Variables	Inland	Coastal redistributive	Coastal corporatist	Coastal laissez- faire	Nation
Township/village contextual variables <sup>a</sup>					
Industrial output per capita <sup>b</sup>	0.004 (0.009)	0.045 (0.075)	0.021 (0.033)	0.014 (0.019)	0.012 (0.031)
Production market	2.42 (1.68)	3.50 (1.31)	3.79 (1.62)	4.37 (1.92)	2.99 (1.83)
Commodity market	1.12 (1.23)	1.50 (1.79)	3.78 (3.69)	6.20 (7.42)	2.25 (3.76)
Labor market	0.048 (0.057)	0.135 (0.125)	0.141 (0.082)	0.142 (0.111)	0.083 (0.090)
Labor market components <sup>c</sup>					
Workers in construction jobs	46.59 (95.32)	12.57 (16.24)	75.11 (78.85)	195.15 (267.58)	68.39 (139.04)
Workers in factories	19.29 (36.23)	167.29 (162.94)	98.72 (89.98)	144.65 (266.06)	62.83 (132.69)
Entrepreneurs	11.63 (32.05)	1.43 (3.57)	13.00 (19.07)	88.20 (208.42)	21.87 (86.43)
Traveling craftsmen	11.08 (43.13)	2.07 (3.32)	24.06 (32.12)	38.60 (92.06)	15.85 (50.76)
Peddlers	10.73 (35.46)	1.64 (3.50)	12.94 (23.88)	32.80 (61.88)	13.30 (38.17)
<i>N</i>	86	14	18	20	138

Note. Standard deviations in parentheses.

<sup>a</sup> Labor market is measured at the village level. Industrial output, commodity market, and production market are measured at the township level.

<sup>b</sup> Defined as the industrial output per capita divided by 100,000.

<sup>c</sup> Components indicate mean number of individuals commuting to nonfarm jobs outside the village.

ment characterized by market exchange is in descending order less extensive in the *coastal corporatist* provinces (Zhejiang and Shandong), *coastal redistributive* provinces (Hebei, Shandong, and Shanghai), and *inland* provinces (all other provinces). In the coastal corporatist region, collective enterprises dominate the industrial economy, accounting for 60.8% of the industrial output, a higher per capita industrial output for collective firms (0.00211) than in any other region (Hsueh, Li, and Liu, 1993).<sup>8</sup> Private firms account for only 7% of industrial output in the coastal corporatist region. Although collective enterprises are market-oriented, local government involvement in overseeing these firms and

<sup>8</sup> Industrial output per capita from collective firms is 0.00068 in the coastal laissez faire provinces, 0.00085 in the coastal redistributive provinces, and 0.00035 in the inland provinces.

competitive exclusion of private firms through government interventions into factor and product markets result in the corporatist subregion being less marketized than the more laissez-faire southeastern maritime provinces. In the coastal redistributive subregion, 53.8% of industrial output is accounted for by state-owned enterprises, with collective and private firms making up a subordinate 37.6 and 8.6% respectively. By contrast, in the *inland* region, state-owned enterprises account for 65.9% of industrial output. The larger the share of industrial output produced by state-owned enterprises, the less a market environment shapes the regional economy. *Coastal laissez-faire*, *coastal corporatist*, and *coastal redistributive* are included in each model. *Inland* is the omitted category.

These regional variables are used to specify distinctive types of mixed market economies in China, reflecting variation in the extent of the shift to reliance on market coordination and of changes in the structure of property rights at the time the China–Cornell–Oxford data set was collected. They are not in this sense meant to specify long-term equilibrium in market transition. The differences identified through cluster analysis of the relative share of industrial production of private, collective, and state-owned firms at the provincial level are reflected in corresponding differences at the local level. Of townships sampled in the China–Cornell–Oxford data set, those located in inland provinces have on average 10 times less industrial output per capita than townships in the coastal redistributive provinces and also have fewer commodity markets and smaller production markets (Table 2). This might be interpreted as indicating a strong correlation between industrialization and marketization. However, an inverse relationship between industrialization and marketization in the maritime provinces indicates that industrial growth is not synonymous with marketization. Industrial output per capita is highest in the coastal redistributive provinces, followed by the coastal corporatist and laissez-faire provinces. But production markets and commodity markets are more developed in the laissez-faire provinces and are progressively smaller as one moves from the corporatist to the coastal redistributive provinces. Regional variation in industrialization and marketization are in turn reflected in differences in the composition of the off-farm labor force reported by villages in our sample. Entrepreneurs, traveling craftsmen, peddlers, and construction workers working outside the residential village are by far more numerous in the more laissez-faire provinces where market-driven economic development has been very rapid. By contrast, factory work is almost the only source of off-farm employment in the more industrialized coastal redistributive provinces.

Regional differences are also manifested in other social and economic dimensions at the local level. Reflecting the higher population density of the maritime provinces, per capita arable land in *mu* is smallest in the laissez-faire (1.3) provinces, followed by the coastal corporatist (1.4) and redistributive (1.5) subregions, and highest in the inland provinces (2.5). The distance to the nearest bus station in kilometers is larger in the inland provinces (9.9) and the coastal

corporatist subregion (5.9), and least in the coastal redistributive (2.9) and laissez-faire (2.3) provinces. Network ties to cities and foreign countries are stronger, and female-headed households more numerous, in the more laissez-faire southeastern maritime provinces (Guangdong and Fujian), a region with a long history of male labor migration from rural communities. Almost 21% of households sampled in the laissez-faire region are headed by women compared to 16.1, 18.3, and 15.9% in the inland, coastal redistributive, and coastal corporatist regions, respectively.

*Relative contributions to household income.* Our data do not include information on individual incomes from off-farm work. In order to compare male and female incomes indirectly, we use a multilevel regression to model the determinants of total household income from off-farm work in 1989 in each of the four mixed-market regions specified above. We employ SAS/STAT software using the PROC MIXED procedure. We do not include income from other sources—such as agriculture—in the dependent variable. Our interest is in comparing the relative contribution of male and female off-farm workers (*female nonfarm workers* and *male nonfarm workers*) in the household under varying levels of regional marketization. Our expectation is that the same processes which give women more opportunities for off-farm work also yield a better range of jobs into which employers are compelled to hire women. This should be reflected in higher relative household income contributions from women in the more marketized, coastal regions. In this model, the regional marketization variables serve as proxies both for overall regional marketization and for broad coastal-inland differences in average township labor market development (Table 2). The model also controls for the age and educational level of the household head, number of farm laborers, family size, and township-level industrial output.

*Male off-farm employment and female household decision making.* Our hypothesis is that, as emergent labor markets draw male family members away from the household into off-farm work, female household members who do not participate in wage work become better able to control household affairs because at least some male family members are absent. The China–Cornell–Oxford survey does not include data on the distribution of household decision making that would allow us to directly test this hypothesis. However, such data is available in the Fujian survey conducted 4 years earlier. Likewise, both the Fujian and China–Cornell–Oxford surveys ask for the gender of the legally designated head of household.

As in a number of other peasant societies, household heads in traditional rural China held a role rich with economic, political, and symbolic import and had near absolute authority and power within their families (e.g., Lang, 1946; Fei, 1983). Prior to socialist rule female headship was extremely rare (Baker, 1979). In our 1985 Fujian sample, by contrast, 12% of households were headed by women, and in the 1989 China–Cornell–Oxford survey, 17.6%, with some variation by region. We first use household decision-making data from the Fujian data set to demonstrate that women who become heads of the household acquired some of

the power and authority traditionally associated with this position. We construct two measures of household decision-making power, which are used as dependent variables in separate OLS regressions. We employ SAS/STAT software using the PROC MIXED procedure. The first dependent variable is a ratio of the decision-making power of wives compared to husbands, and the second is a ratio of the decision-making power of all female family members compared to all male family members. Ratios are based on differential participation among household members in decisions about each of nine household management issues: buying or selling the family pig, starting a new household line, buying material for new clothes, children's schooling, plans for a new house, plans for scheduling household tasks, purchase of farm equipment, purchase of major household item, and plans for holidays.<sup>9</sup> Each ratio has a minimum of 0, indicating that wives or female household members do not participate at all in decisions about these issues. Maximums are 12 for the female-to-male ratio and 11 for the wife-to-husband ratio. The mean value for the wife-to-husband ratio is .615 (.771 SD) and .660 (.918 SD) for the female-to-male ratio. Such low means and standard deviations indicate that on the whole husbands and male family members dominate household decision making. We test whether being in a female-headed household predicts greater decision making for wives and female family members. The model also controls for the age of the household head and the educational attainment of husbands and wives.

We then use female headship as a proxy for greater female decision-making power in the household, and use the China–Cornell–Oxford survey to model its determinants. Our expectation is that households with at least one male off-farm worker will have greater odds of having a female head. The dependent variable for this regression is a dummy variable, where 1 indicates that the household is headed by a woman. Since the model uses multilevel data and the dependent variable is a dummy, we use a logistic hierarchical regression to model it. We employ the SAS GLIMMIX macro for this analysis. We include two measures of male off-farm labor as test variables. One measures the number of male off-farm workers in the household who are employed within the county, and one measures the number of male family members who are employed in off-farm work outside the county. We expect that both measures will be positive predictors of female headship, suggesting indirectly that, when labor markets pull men from the household into wage work, women gain more day-to-day control over the household. But we expect that female headship may be more likely when male off-farm workers live far enough away from the household that they are unable

<sup>9</sup> For each household, participation in these decisions is first summed and averaged for the husband, the wife, and for other female and male members (parents, parents-in-law, siblings, and children of household head). Ratios are then constructed by comparing averages among family members within each household—between wives and husbands and between all female and male family members. For the wife/husband index, households in which the head does not have a spouse were deleted. For the female/male index, households with only male or only female members were deleted.

to return home on a daily basis. Thus the coefficient for the variable measuring male off-farm labor outside the township should be bigger than for the variable measuring male off-farm labor within the township. The model controls for widowed heads of households with the dummy variable *widowed head of household* (widow or widower = 1). Women who are widowed heads of household are presumed to have become heads because of the death of a spouse.<sup>10</sup> *Farm labor* indicates the number of farm workers in the household. Since a greater number of farm workers is likely to mean the continuous presence of at least one male family member, we expect that this variable will be a negative predictor of female headship. The model also controls for the same age and education variables as in previous models using this data set as well as mean community household income.

## RESULTS

Table 3 reports results of hierarchical Poisson regression models of the likelihood of acquiring off-farm employment for men and women. On the whole, predictors for the number of male and female off-farm workers in the household are quite similar. The coefficient for *industrial output* is positive, significant, and quite large, corroborating that the more nonagricultural jobs available, the more wage employment. Dummy variables for all educational variables are positive for both the male and female models. Households where the head has received formal education—in which other household members are also likely to have received formal education—are advantaged in placing household members in off-farm work. Families with less cultivated land can send more members into off-farm work, as indicated by the negative coefficient for *mu per adult*. So can families with a greater number of adult laborers available, as indicated by positive coefficients for *number of adults*, *increase in female labor* (in the regression predicting female entry), and *increase in male labor* (in the regression predicting male entry).

The results also demonstrate the importance of network ties in placing men and women in wage employment. With regard to women, strong ties to local officials are positive, significant predictors—indicating that local officials use their redistributive power to benefit family members and relatives—but network ties linking the residential village to urban labor markets are not a significant predictor of female nonfarm employment. This is consistent with our expectations, since most off-farm jobs acquired by women are obtained within their county of residence, making ties to more distant areas less important. For men the opposite is true. Having urban and foreign network ties and a relative who is an official in government improve a household's odds of having a male member secure nonfarm employment, but having a local official in the same household

<sup>10</sup> There are only a handful of divorced or never-married female heads in our sample (.1% of all female heads and .3% of all female heads) for whom we do not control.

TABLE 3  
 Restricted Pseudolikelihood Estimation of Hierarchical Poisson Regressions of Female  
 and Male Nonfarm Workers, China–Cornell–Oxford Survey

Intercept	Total household female nonfarm workers	Total household male nonfarm workers
	−4.08**** (0.279)	−2.64**** (0.172)
Industrialization and human capital		
Age	−0.006 (0.004)	−0.003 (0.002)
Primary school	0.295**** (0.077)	0.102** (0.048)
Junior middle school	0.442*** (0.095)	0.205**** (0.061)
Advanced schooling	0.709**** (0.131)	0.406**** (0.085)
Adults	0.225**** (0.019)	0.195**** (0.012)
Children per adult female	−0.098** (0.047)	—
Increase in female labor, 1983–1989	0.379**** (0.039)	−0.061* (0.032)
Increase in male labor, 1983–1989	−0.133** (0.052)	0.242**** (0.028)
<i>Mu</i> per adult	−0.148**** (0.034)	−0.129**** (0.022)
Industrial output	9.02**** (2.71)	5.65**** (1.91)
Network ties		
Ties to urban and foreign areas	0.039 (0.045)	0.048* (0.029)
Official in household	0.146** (0.070)	0.058 (0.050)
Official relative	0.250**** (0.076)	0.182**** (0.052)

does not. These results are also consistent with the fact that male off-farm laborers are more likely to obtain nonfarm work in far-flung areas than female nonfarm laborers. Relatives who are officials may be located in other towns and cities and are more likely to provide the kinds of weak ties helpful in learning about and securing jobs in more distant labor markets.

Finally, as expected, being in an area with an emergent labor market is strongly associated with having male and female off-farm laborers in the family. Controlling for human capital, industrialization, and household network ties, households in localities with more developed local labor markets are more likely to have female family members in wage employment. Women are also more

TABLE 3—Continued

Intercept	Total household female nonfarm workers	Total household male nonfarm workers
Local and regional marketization		
Labor market	2.17** (1.07)	2.73**** (0.727)
Coastal redistributive	0.854*** (0.310)	0.004 (0.214)
Coastal corporate	1.15**** (0.262)	0.605**** (0.178)
Coastal laissez-faire	0.952**** (0.254)	0.383** (0.172)
Variance components		
Contextual	0.707**** (0.124)	0.348**** (0.055)
Household	0.873**** (0.014)	0.925**** (0.015)
Extra dispersion scale	0.873	0.925
N	7725	7725

Note. Standard errors (corrected for dispersion) in parentheses.

\*  $p < .10$ .

\*\*  $p < .05$ .

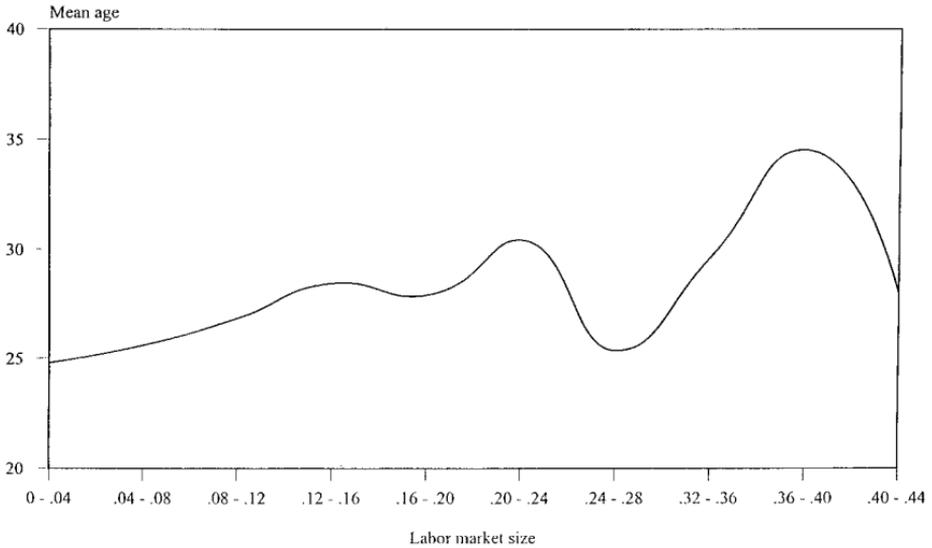
\*\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

likely to secure off-farm employment in all three of the coastal subregions. The effect of the coastal redistributive variable is positive and statistically significant on the odds of rural women finding nonfarm jobs, but this is not the case for rural men. These findings are consistent with the view that government involvement in helping rural women find off-farm jobs remains important. As expected, the dominance of market-oriented rural industrial firms in the mixed economies of the corporatist and laissez-faire subregions has positive and significant effects on the odds of both rural male and female off-farm employment.<sup>11</sup>

In general, market-driven economic development in China has also been export-oriented. One might raise the counterargument that the positive association between market size and female off-farm employment in Table 3 simply reflects known preferences for employers in export areas to hire young, unmar-

<sup>11</sup> Given the importance of labor markets for acquisition of off-farm jobs, in an OLS regression analysis not reported here we model the determinants of labor market size. This analysis confirms that local labor markets are thicker in areas where rural industry is more developed and where local production markets and commodity markets are more extensive. In other words, industrialized areas where many nonstate firms compete for factor resources and market share and where free markets are more numerous are likely to have well-developed labor markets. The settings most favorable to the movement of female workers out of subsistence agriculture are thus those in which the shift to a market environment has progressed the furthest.



**FIG. 1.** Labor market size and age of female workers in township and village enterprises.

ried women as a very cheap source of labor. Although families may be more likely to have female members in off-farm jobs, women in export zones are hired into jobs with much worse pay and working conditions than for men. Furthermore, employers are much more reluctant to hire older, married women because their increased family responsibilities make them too expensive and troublesome as employees. The bulk of female nonfarm workers in the sample are indeed quite young (and, presumably, unmarried).<sup>12</sup> The modal age for female workers is just 20 (9.43%), and 58% of all female off-farm workers are age 25 or younger. While percentages of male off-farm workers are also highest at young ages, the age distribution for male workers is somewhat more even, with only 37% at age 25 or younger.

However, Fig. 1 shows that, while most female workers are quite young, their mean age actually increases with labor market size. When labor markets are smallest (0–0.04), mean age for female workers in township enterprises is just 25. Mean age then gradually increases to 28 when the labor market variable is 0.12–0.16 and to 30 when labor market size is 0.20–0.24. It dips to age 25 when labor market size is 0.24–0.28, but then increases again to 30 (0.32–0.36), 35 (0.36–0.40), and 28 (0.40–0.44). While these age increases are modest, they are consistent with our arguments. The positive correlation between labor market size and age suggests that, rather than restrict employment opportunities to only the very young, bigger labor markets expand opportunities for older women who might otherwise be passed over by employers.

Results from the income analysis in Table 4 likewise suggest that women in

<sup>12</sup> Though we cannot ascertain marital status from our data.

TABLE 4  
Maximum-Likelihood Estimates of Determinants of Household Earnings from Off-Farm Work,  
China–Cornell–Oxford Survey

Variables	Inland	Coastal redistributive	Coastal corporatist	Coastal laissez- faire
Intercept	1.37**** (0.320)	2.28** (0.823)	2.74**** (0.628)	2.19*** (0.692)
Age	-0.002 (0.005)	-0.002 (0.011)	-0.004 (0.009)	0.015 (0.011)
Primary school	0.230** (0.105)	0.414* (0.251)	0.341* (0.205)	-0.013 (0.241)
Junior middle school	0.510**** (0.135)	0.306 (0.313)	0.072 (0.272)	0.389 (0.312)
Advanced schooling	0.959**** (0.211)	1.45*** (0.500)	0.038 (0.427)	-0.804* (0.425)
Family size	0.314**** (0.030)	0.324**** (0.082)	0.506**** (0.070)	0.406**** (0.063)
Farm workers	-0.284**** (0.034)	-0.446**** (0.085)	-0.561**** (0.082)	-0.508**** (0.071)
Female nonfarm workers	0.942**** (0.143)	0.760**** (0.188)	1.00**** (0.161)	1.15**** (0.163)
Male nonfarm workers	1.90**** (0.081)	1.23**** (0.170)	1.60**** (0.130)	1.34**** (0.119)
Industrial output	42.69*** (15.01)	11.75** (5.86)	-0.676 (8.90)	-5.76 (10.10)
Variance components				
Contextual	1.53	2.36	1.35	0.51
Household	8.28	7.18	6.71	9.62
-2 REML log likelihood	23,555.20	3969.71	5130.09	5778.37

Note. Standard errors (corrected for dispersion) in parentheses.

\*  $p < .10$ .

\*\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

more marketized areas have access to a better range of jobs. In all four economic regions having one or more female off-farm workers in the household contributes significantly to total off-farm income. However, as we expected the difference in the size of the contribution for male and female nonfarm workers incrementally narrows with increased marketization. In the inland region, the ratio of the female to the male coefficient is 0.496. In the more marketized coastal redistributive and coastal corporatist regions the ratio of the female to the male coefficient is much bigger, at 0.618 and 0.626 respectively. In the most marketized region—the coastal laissez-faire provinces—the ratio is even higher, at 0.852. Furthermore, while in the inland provinces the difference in magnitude between the male and

female coefficients is statistically significant,<sup>13</sup> in two of the three coastal provinces (coastal *laissez-faire* and coastal redistributive) there is no significant difference in the size of the coefficients for male and female off-farm workers.

Income differentials narrow in more marketized areas because shortages of male labor compel employers to hire women into higher paying, "male" jobs. Figures 2a and 2b show this process of male replacement more directly. These figures show women as a percentage of employees in the three different kinds of off-farm work (industry, service, and entrepreneurship) by the size of the local labor market.<sup>14</sup> In each kind of work the composition of employees becomes increasingly female with increased labor market size. These three types of work are still quite broad because we are unable with our data to further decompose them. Even though women make up a substantial percentage of off-farm workers in each of these categories, it is likely that there is still a great deal of gender segregation within more specific types of jobs in each category. However, the relationship between labor market size and proportion female in Figs. 2a and 2b is so consistent that it suggests a pattern at some level of male replacement.

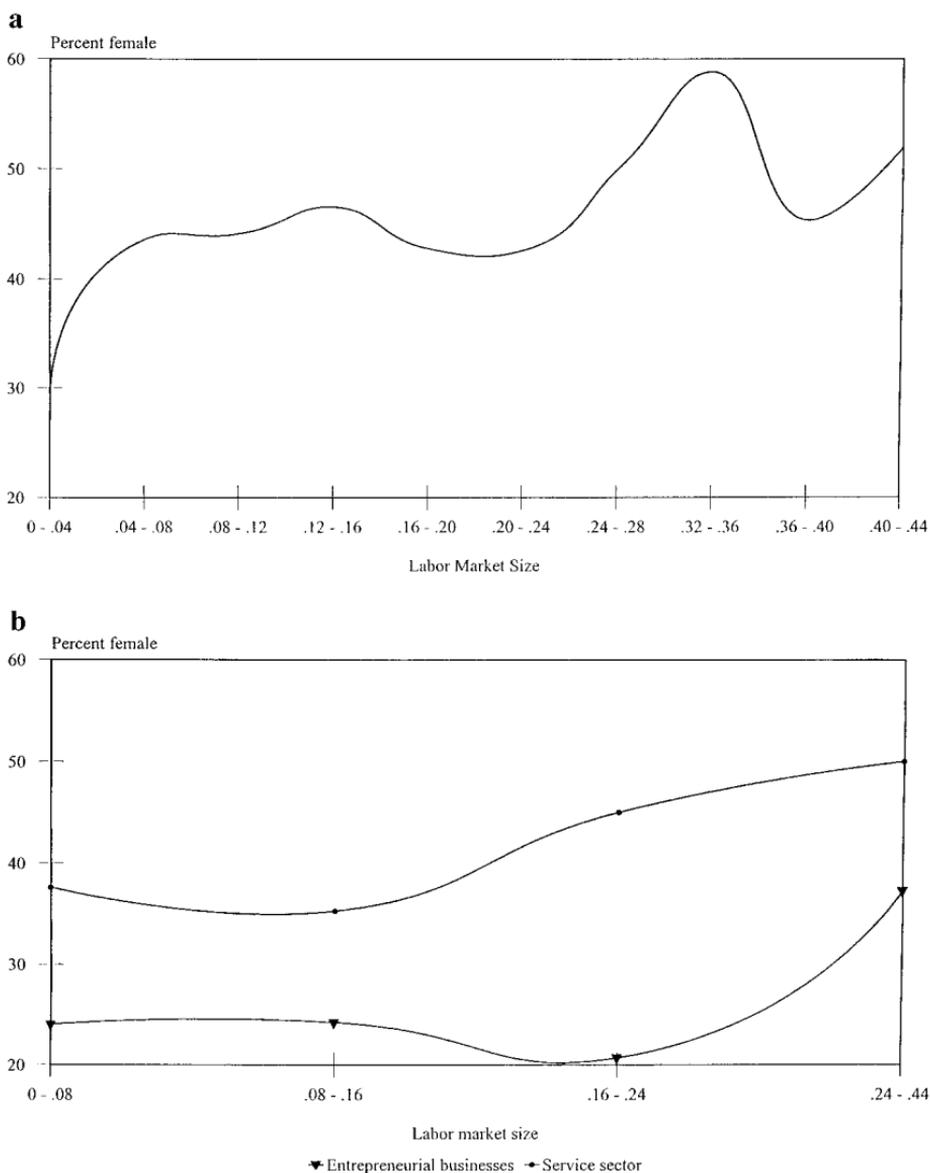
Table 5 reports results from the OLS regressions predicting household decision-making power for wives and females. In both models, being in a female-headed household is a positive predictor of greater decision-making power for wives and females respectively. Our hypothesis that female headship yields greater decision-making power for women is also corroborated with descriptive statistics addressing specific areas of decision making. In male-headed households, the only decision areas in which a majority or near-majority of wives participate are the more mundane domestic tasks: planning the purchase of material for making clothes for the family, setting wedding dates for children, and planning for holidays. Far fewer participate in decisions related to the management of the household economy and children's education. The profile of decision making found in the male-headed household conforms closely to the patriarchal model. By contrast, in female-headed households the majority of wives participate in nearly all household decision areas (with the exception of children's marriage selection and purchases of farm implements).<sup>15</sup> Decision-making power for other women in female-headed households is similar.

These figures do not imply that female headship gives female household members absolute dominance in their families. The institution of female-headship does not displace the dominant principle of patriarchal power in Chinese rural society. And even male heads of households in today's China lack the near absolute power of the household head of the prerevolutionary era. But we think it reasonable that headship can be used as a proxy variable for greater female

<sup>13</sup>  $p < .05$ .

<sup>14</sup> Employment in service work and entrepreneurial businesses is much lower than in industry. We use fewer data points in Fig. 2b to allow for a higher  $N$  per data point.

<sup>15</sup> Decisions about selecting marriage partners for children and selecting marriage dates for children were not used in constructing indices in Table 5 because of high numbers of missing values.



**FIG. 2.** (a) Labor market size and female employment in village and township industrial sector. (b) labor market size and female employment in township and village entrepreneurial businesses and service sector.

household power, allowing us to determine whether there might be at least something of a silver lining for women when men leave the village for off-farm jobs in distant cities.

Table 6 reports the results of hierarchical logistic regression on the odds of female headship. As expected, women are more likely to head their households

TABLE 5  
 OLS Estimates of Family Decision-Making Ratios, Rural Fujian Survey

Independent variables	Wife to husband ratio	Female to male ratio
Intercept	0.860** (0.404)	0.486 (0.399)
Age of head	-0.019 (0.018)	-0.007 (0.018)
Age of head squared	0.002 (0.002)	0.001 (0.002)
Wife attended primary school	0.069 (0.072)	-0.083 (0.079)
Wife attended junior middle school	0.061 (0.185)	0.087 (0.096)
Wife had advanced schooling	0.501 (0.420)	-0.050 (0.147)
Husband attended primary school	-0.129 (0.080)	0.057 (0.072)
Husband attended junior middle school	-0.017 (0.098)	-0.010 (0.177)
Husband had advanced schooling	-0.033 (0.153)	0.487 (0.427)
Female headed household	0.829**** (0.109)	0.872**** (0.106)
<i>N</i>	544	570
<i>F</i> value	7.987****	8.728****
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.104	.109

\*  $p < .10$ .

\*\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

when men acquire wage labor, as indicated by the fact that both variables measuring male off-farm employment are positive predictors of female headship. In addition, having male off-farm workers who commute to work outside the county increases the odds of female headship more than having male workers who commute to work within the township. Households with family members remaining in agricultural work are less likely to have female heads.<sup>16</sup>

Overall, these findings suggest that, with male family members away from the home, women will actually have more control over household decisions and over the use of income the men send home. Women left behind in the villages have

<sup>16</sup> Education has a negative effect on the odds of female headship, indicating that female heads of household are generally less educated than men. This finding probably reflects lower educational opportunities for rural women in general rather than for female heads alone.

TABLE 6  
Hierarchical Logistic Regressions of Selected Determinants  
of Female Headship, China–Cornell–Oxford Survey

Intercept	−2.11 (1.45)
Age	−0.039**** (0.004)
Primary school	−1.72**** (0.083)
Junior middle school	−2.11**** (0.117)
Advanced schooling	−2.96**** (0.246)
Widowed head of household	2.40**** (0.107)
Farm labor	−0.095**** (0.024)
Male nonfarm labor (within county)	0.254**** (0.095)
Male nonfarm labor (outside county)	1.03**** (0.096)
Mean community household income	0.388** (0.186)
Variance components	
Contextual	1.17**** (0.173)
Household	0.865**** (0.014)
Extra dispersion scale	0.865
<i>N</i>	7861

*Note.* Standard errors (corrected for dispersion) in parentheses.

\*  $p < .10$ .

\*\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

more power and higher status insofar as they often become heads of their households. As such, they control the arable land assigned to the household, which amounts to *de facto* ownership of the family's most valuable asset. The remittances sent home by their husbands provide them with a higher standard of living, which as Massey et al. (1987) report in their study of migrant villages in Mexico, confers higher status on the family members of sojourning male workers. Further, as already noted (Table 5), being in a household with a female head of household is a strong predictor of greater decision-making power for all female family members. There is thus a silver lining of sorts for women to the advantages men have in obtaining off-farm jobs.

## CONCLUSION

While research has offered strong evidence that women generally lose out to men in opportunities for off-farm work, how women fare in developing market economies varies across different contexts, involving both costs and—often unanticipated—benefits. We have explored labor market opportunities for women in certain economic settings and the effects on family dynamics when men leave for off-farm jobs in distant labor markets. We have shown that in regions that have experienced sustained market-driven economic development, women face more favorable opportunities for shifting out of subsistence agriculture. The entry of women into off-farm jobs opened up by the growth of rural industry has been very considerable. Because township-village enterprises are located near residential villages, women are able to retain their jobs during their reproductive years and through their adult life. The contribution they make to household income is significant and enhances their power and status within the family. Moreover, many women who remain in subsistence agriculture while their husbands sojourn in cities enjoy higher status and relative affluence in the village society as heads of household. Not only they but also all other female members of the household have more decision-making power. Remittances received from male labor migrants and control over the family's most valuable asset—land—enhance the relative standing of these women in rural society. Such improvement, however, is likely to have less enduring value for rural women than the movement out of subsistence agriculture by securing off-farm employment.

The qualified optimism which our findings suggest needs to be tempered by pointing to the lowly status of agricultural work in contemporary China. During the Maoist era, rural-urban inequality widened dramatically. For a brief period, the return to household production along with increases in the state purchasing price of grain improved earnings of farmers. But rapid inflation in the price of manufactured goods coupled with stable state purchasing prices for agricultural products led to a reversal in the terms of trade between city and countryside. By the mid-1980s, the exchange of manufactured goods for agricultural products once again worked against the interests of farmers (Zhao, 1993). In the 1980s, the decline in the profitability of farm work reinforced negative associations of earth-bound peasant life. The urban view of peasants as less than human in their conditions of life, relegated to back-breaking labor and cultural backwardness, has diffused widely in rural areas too. Young people in the villages universally want to leave the family farm to seek opportunities in the towns and cities. Those left behind to toil in agriculture are looked down upon for their darkened and weathered skin. As agriculture has become more feminized, rural women suffer disproportionately from the growing gap between the backward economic conditions that continue to characterize rural life and the new affluence associated with life in county towns and cities. With very high levels of female illiteracy and growing income inequality between town and country, the prospects for Chinese

women left behind in subsistence agriculture remain highly problematic. Within this more pessimistic scenario of persistent gender inequality, our analysis has identified conditions that, through opportunities for off-farm employment in nearby towns and cities, alleviate the otherwise dismal prospects for rural women in a rapidly industrializing economy.

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