Investigating China's "Stalled Revolution": Husband and Wife Involvement in Housework in the PRC

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Introduction

China's socialist revolution is credited with improving the status of women in China – in absolute terms and relative to men. In promoting the socialist agenda, leaders emphasized the importance of women's labor to China's drive to modernize; as half the population, women had much to contribute. Women comrades were exhorted to do "outside" work and heroines of the period included "iron girls" – those who did heavy labor equal to that of men comrades. The drive to engage women in productive work was successful. Today women are strongly attached to the labor force and female labor force participation rates are among the highest of any country in the world. In 2000, female labor force participation accounted for 45% of total labor force participation (World Bank).

Shifting rhetoric accompanied this shift of women into the outside world of work. Expressions that symbolize days past, such as *"nan zhu wai; nu zhu nei"* (men are responsible for outdoor activities; women are responsible for indoor activities), were replaced by expressions highlighting gender equality, such as "*fu nu neng ding ban bian tian*" (women can hold up half the sky). Yet, while expectations for gender-neutral work outside the house were cultivated, in the arena of household work, expectations remained highly gendered; housework was to remain the purview of women. Thus, while women shifted into outside work, men did not shift into domestic work. The situation is similar to what Hochschild (1989) observed in the early 1980s among couples in the United States, a phenomenon she labeled the "stalled revolution."

This paper investigates the current division of household labor among married couples in China. Several factors would predict husband participation in housework in China. First, given a strong socialist ideology of equality in China, and particularly an ideology that highlights gender equality in work, we might predict that large imbalances in the division of housework would be difficult to sustain over the long run. Second, the associated gains made by women in education, income, and occupational prestige, might be expected to shift the balance of power in households in ways that would promote a more equitable division of labor at home. Finally, women's extensive engagement in outside work may remove them physically from the household and leave them less time for housework, encouraging others in the household, husbands included, to increase their housework time.

It has been over fifty years since the onset of the communist revolution. To what extent do gender disparities in housework persist in 2000? What factors are associated with a more equitable division of labor among couples, and greater involvement by husbands specifically? After a review of the relevant literature, this paper investigates the factors associated with the current division of housework using data from the China Health and Nutrition Survey (CHNS). A particular strength of this paper is the use of CHNS data. The CHNS includes substantial information on time allocation and economic activity. In addition, the CHNS includes a community instrument, which allows us to explore the role of community factors in the division of housework. Finally, unlike previous research, we are able to use the panel nature of the CHNS to assess the factors associated with change in the division of housework among couples.

Data

The China Health and Nutrition Survey (CHNS) is conducted jointly by the Chinese Academy of Preventive Medicine, Beijing, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The CHNS is a panel survey, and data have been collected in 1989, 1991, 1993, 1997 and 2000. The survey area covers nine provinces including, from northeast to southwest, Heilongjiang, Liaoning, Shangdong, Henan, Jiangsu, Hubei, Hunan, Guizhou, and Guangxi. These provinces differ substantially in geography, demography and economic infrastructure. The CHNS sample was drawn using a multistage, random cluster process. Counties in the nine provinces were stratified by income (high, middle, and low) and four counties in each province were randomly selected using a weighted sampling scheme. In addition, the provincial capital and a lower income city were selected. Villages and townships within the counties, urban and suburban neighborhoods within the cities, and households within neighborhoods were selected randomly. The sample for this analysis includes married women ages 20-65 and their husbands, roughly 3400 couples. The analysis is limited to married couples because in China, during this period, over 95% of couples were married.

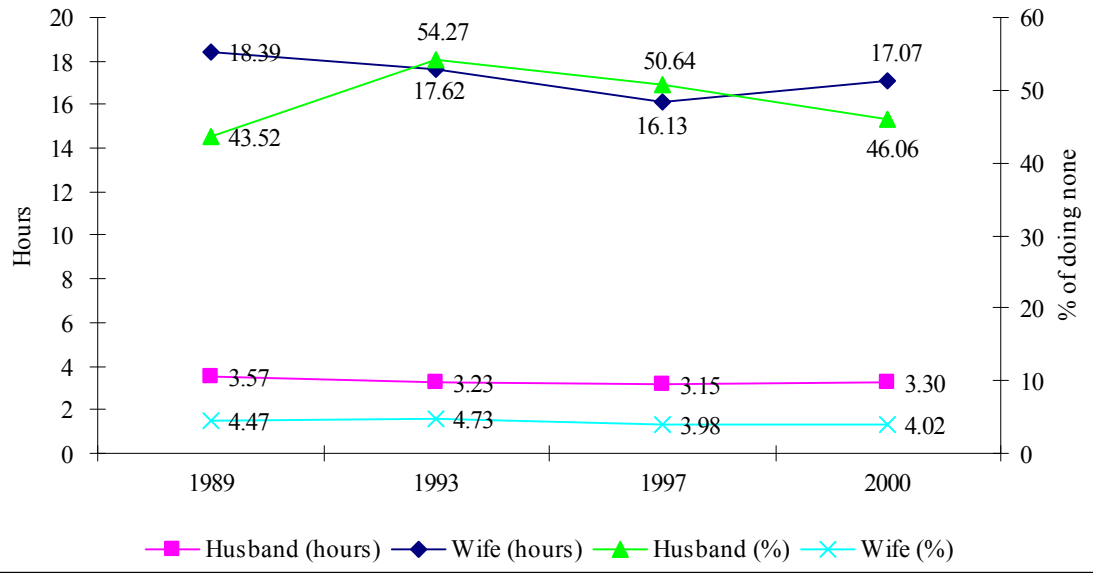
Preliminary Results

The China Health and Nutrition Survey includes information on four types of housework – shopping cooking, cleaning, and washing. In the first part of the analysis we describe basic patterns of involvement in housework. For example, Figure 1 summarizes the total hours spent during the past week in the measured housework activities by husbands and wives over four waves of the survey, 1989, 1993, 1997, and 2000. On average, women reported spending close to 17 hours on these tasks, while their husbands on average spent about three hours. Figure 1 also shows the percentage of wives and husbands who reported spending no time in these activities over the past week. Very few women, only 4% indicated no involvement in any of these activities. By contrast, roughly half of husbands indicated that they did no cooking, shopping, washing, or cleaning over the past week. Over the twelve year period, 1989-2000, there is a surprising degree of stability in these figures. Thus, despite women's extensive engagement in paid work for decades, their husbands, on average remain relatively uninvolved in domestic work.

Nonetheless, substantial variation in husband involvement in housework exists. In the second part of the analysis we explore the factors related to husband involvement

and change in husband involvement. Tables 1 and 2 show preliminary multilevel regression results based on 2000 data. Table 1 explores three outcomes: wives' number of hours; husbands' number of hours; and husbands' share of total couple hours. Table 2 examines the factors associated with the likelihood that a husband has no involvement in cooking, cleaning, washing, or shopping. These results, based on just one cross-section, represent the first step in our analysis. They indicate the importance of individual and family factors, including education, occupation, and family composition to housework involvement and gender equity in housework. They also point to the potential importance of community factors to gender equity in housework. In on-going analyses we explore these results further. We extend the analysis to examine change in involvement using the panel nature of the data. We also explore further community characteristics and their connection to housework patterns. These results will allow us to comment on the factors that might promote greater gender equity in domestic work – and their implications for China's current "stalled revolution."

Figure 1. Total Weekly Housework Hours and Percent Doing No Housework by Gender, CHNS 1989-2000



Note: The source is 1989, 1993, 1997 and 2000 China Health and Nutrition Survey.
Total housework hours are calculated by summing hours on shopping, cooking, cleaning, and washing.
The sample includes wives age 20-65 and their husbands from seven provinces: Shandong, Henan, Jiangsu, Hubei, Hunan, Guangxi, and Guizhou.

Table 1. Multilevel Estimates of Total Weekly Housework Hours by Sex and Husband's Share, CHNS 2000

	Wife Hours			Husband Hours			Husband Share		
	B		SE	B		SE	B		SE
Individual-household level factors									
Respondents' age	0.63	***	0.14	0.17	*	0.07	0.00		0.00
Respondents'age squared	-0.01	***	0.00	0.00	^	0.00	0.00		0.00
Han ethnicity	0.63		0.55	-1.71	*	0.82	-0.09	**	0.03
Household wealth	0.23	**	0.08	0.17	***	0.05	0.01	**	0.00
Family cycle									
Coresidence	-2.59	***	0.43	-1.33	***	0.26	-0.03	**	0.01
Child composition									
Presence of children 0-6	0.93	^	0.51	0.75	*	0.32	0.02		0.01
Presence of children 7-10	0.65		0.47	-0.28		0.30	-0.02		0.01
Presence of boys 11-17	1.15	**	0.44	-0.29		0.28	-0.02	^	0.01
Presence of girls 11-17	0.56		0.45	-0.21		0.30	-0.01		0.01
Presence of boys 18+	-0.72		0.98	0.81		0.55	0.04	^	0.02
Presence of girls 18+	-0.47		0.48	-0.45		0.31	-0.02		0.01
Time availability (occupation)									
Ordinary work (=ref)									
Not working	3.34	***	0.63	0.99	*	0.45	0.02		0.02
Farmer	3.72	***	0.62	0.18		0.38	0.00		0.02
Administrator	1.53	*	0.69	1.08	**	0.36	0.03	*	0.01
Relative resources									
Education									
Same (=ref)									
Husband' education higher	0.45		0.38	-0.14		0.25	-0.02	^	0.01
Wife's education higher	1.35	**	0.50	0.29		0.33	0.01		0.01
Occupation									
Same (=ref)									
Husband's occupation better	1.37	**	0.43	-1.25	***	0.31	-0.05	***	0.01
Wife's occupation better	-0.52		0.72	2.01	***	0.45	0.09	***	0.02
Gender role ideology (education)									
<=Primary school (=ref)									
Middle school	0.36		0.45	0.42		0.28	0.01		0.01
High school	-1.24	^	0.64	0.30		0.37	0.03	**	0.01
College	-3.84	***	1.15	0.37		0.59	0.05	*	0.02
Community-level factors									
Proportion in agriculture	-0.02	^	0.01	0.00		0.01	0.00		0.00
Urbanization									
City (=ref)									
Suburban	0.80		0.98	-1.53	**	0.53	-0.06	*	0.02
Town	-0.57		0.91	-2.41	***	0.50	-0.08	***	0.02
Village	-0.22		1.07	-2.38	***	0.59	-0.10	***	0.02
Province									
Guangxi (=ref)									
Heilongjiang	6.21	***	1.04	-1.41	*	0.55	-0.14	***	0.02
Liaoning	5.08	***	1.35	-1.36	*	0.61	-0.12	***	0.03
Shandong	4.23	***	1.12	-2.07	***	0.59	-0.16	***	0.02
Henan	6.31	***	1.06	-1.37	*	0.57	-0.14	***	0.02
Jiangsu	2.21	*	1.05	-0.60		0.55	-0.07	**	0.02
Hubei	4.78	***	1.05	-1.28	*	0.56	-0.12	***	0.02
Hunan	5.93	***	1.11	-1.99	**	0.61	-0.14	***	0.03
Guizhou	1.30		1.07	-0.78		0.56	-0.07	**	0.02
Intercept	-4.43		3.25	1.99		2.06	0.34	***	0.08
Random Effects									
Between community variance(τ_0^2)	7.58	***	1.34	1.35	***	0.38	0.00	***	0.00
Within community variance (σ^2)	82.14	***	2.07	34.90	***	0.89	0.05	***	0.00
N of individuals	3404			3284			3168		
N of communities	216			216			216		
Intraclass correlation	0.08			0.04			0.05		

^p<0.10; * p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001.

Table 2. Multilevel Estimates of the Likelihood of Husband's Doing None, CHNS 2000

	B		OR	SE
Individual-household level factors				
Respondents' age	-0.01		0.99	0.03
Respondents'age squared	0.00		1.00	0.00
Han ethnicity	0.78	**	2.17	0.27
Household wealth	-0.04	*	0.96	0.02
Family cycle				
Coresidence	0.51	***	1.67	0.09
Child composition				
Presence of children 0-6	-0.41	***	0.67	0.11
Presence of children 7-10	0.13		1.14	0.10
Presence of boys 11-17	-0.07		0.94	0.10
Presence of girls 11-17	-0.06		0.94	0.10
Presence of boys 18+	-0.06		0.95	0.19
Presence of girls 18+	0.19	^	1.21	0.11
Time availability (occupation)				
Ordinary work (=ref)				
Not working	-0.02		0.98	0.16
Farmer	0.09		1.10	0.13
Administrator	-0.29	*	0.75	0.12
Relative resources				
Education				
Same (=ref)				
Husband' education higher	0.00		1.00	0.09
Wife's education higher	-0.12		0.89	0.12
Occupation				
Same (=ref)				
Husband's occupation better	0.42	***	1.53	0.11
Wife's occupation better	-0.40	*	0.67	0.16
Gender role ideology (education)				
<=Primary school (=ref)				
Middle school	-0.18	^	0.84	0.10
High school	-0.27	*	0.76	0.13
College	-0.20		0.82	0.20
Community-level factors				
Proportion in agriculture	0.00		1.00	0.00
Urbanization				
City (=ref)				
Suburban	0.27	^	1.31	0.15
Town	0.43	**	1.54	0.15
Village	0.74	***	2.09	0.17
Province				
Guangxi (=ref)				
Heilongjiang	1.54	***	4.69	0.16
Liaoning	1.60	***	4.96	0.19
Shandong	1.60	***	4.95	0.18
Henan	1.32	***	3.73	0.17
Jiangsu	0.83	***	2.29	0.16
Hubei	1.15	***	3.15	0.16
Hunan	1.27	***	3.55	0.18
Guizhou	1.04	***	2.82	0.16
Intercept	-1.44	*		0.70
Random Effects				
Between community variance(τ_0^2)	0.46			
N of individuals	3412			
N of communities	216			
Intraclass correlation	0.12			

^p<0.10; * p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001.