

Work Pattern as Family Strategy in Rural China

Jing Song

Department of Sociology and
Population Studies and Training Center

Brown University

Box 1916

Providence, RI 02912

Jing_Song@Brown.edu

Abstract

The study uses the 2006 wave of The China Health and Nutrition Survey (CHNS) to investigate how individual characteristics, household dynamics, and market conditions impact the agricultural/ nonagricultural work patterns of rural couples by categorizing the patterns into “both agricultural,” “husband nonagricultural,” “wife nonagricultural,” “both nonagricultural.” The results of multinomial logistic regressions provide evidence that the division of labor between spouses is not purely determined by individual characteristics. Comparing the “both agricultural” and the “both nonagricultural” types, husband’s and wife’s education are positively associated with their involvement in nonagricultural work. Furthermore, the presence of parents or parents-in-law, the smaller number of children, and the fact of being in a suburban area rather than in a village all facilitate the switch from agricultural to nonagricultural work. But the “husband nonagricultural” and the “wife nonagricultural” types are not effectively predicted by factors of human capital, family workload, and market conditions.

The debate about work and family relations has taken on fresh significance in China not only due to the socialist legacy but also because of the recent market transition. Many studies have paid attention to gender differentials in education, earnings, and job mobility (Bian, Logan and Shu 2000; Bouma 1999; Michaelson and Parish 2000; Wang 1999). Given the high labor participation rates in general and the increasing education prevalence among women, some researchers noticed improved economic positions for women (Michelson and Parish, 2000), whereas others find the persisting economic disadvantage of women (Bian and Logan, 1996), partly because of the revival of patriarchal traditions when the state withdraws controls on individual lives (Croll, 1983) in the market transition era.

But due to the revival of family farming, household business, and family enterprises in the market reform, both the “feminization of agriculture” (Croll, 1983; Entwisle et al. 2000) and the leading role of men in the development and expansion of household business (Entwisle et al. 1995) can be seen as addressing the increasing demand of intra-family economic coordination. With men seeking new economic opportunities in the wage sector and women picking up agricultural fieldwork, the “inside vs. outside” definitions of work can be seen as shifting with agricultural fieldwork being reclassified as “inside” work (Henderson and Entwisle, 2000) which was traditionally conducted by women, though some rural women managed to shift from agricultural to nonagricultural market work (Chen, 2005). But few studies have explored the varying patterns of labor participation as an outcome of family strategy, particularly in the rural context. Building on previous studies of women’s work and status, the study tries to describe the distribution of agricultural/ nonagricultural work patterns of rural couples, and identify the effects of both individual characteristics and household dynamics on these work patterns.

The study uses the 2006 wave of The China Health and Nutrition Survey (CHNS) which covers 1387 rural couples. The study uses a four-category dependent variable based on the agricultural vs. nonagricultural work dichotomy for the husband and the wife. Descriptive analysis shows that 53% of the rural couples have both stayed in the agricultural sector, whereas 31% have both switched from agricultural to nonagricultural work. The rest are the “mixed” categories: 14% belong to the “husband nonagricultural” type, and only 2% belong to the “wife nonagricultural” type (Table 1).

The predictors in the multinomial logistic models include variables at the individual level, the household level, and the community level. Various models are used to separate different effects of individual characteristics, household dynamics, and market conditions. Model 1 only includes individual characteristics of the couples such as age and education. Model 2 only includes indicators of household characteristics including the presence of parents (in-laws) and the total number of children born. Model 3 include both groups of variables. In Model 4, the community variable of “suburban vs. village” is added. The results provide evidence that the division of labor between spouses is not purely determined by individual characteristics. Comparing the “both agricultural” and the “both nonagricultural” types, husband’s and wife’s education are positively associated with the shift from agricultural to nonagricultural work, but the work pattern employed by the couple is also influenced by family dynamics and market conditions. The presence of parents or parents-in-law, the smaller number of children, and the fact of being in a suburban area rather than in a village all facilitate the switch from agricultural to nonagricultural work (Table 3). But these indicators do not predict the “husband nonagricultural”

and the “wife nonagricultural” types effectively, which implies that the competing strategies and the potentially different quality of “family careers” may be affected by factors other than human capital, family workload, and market conditions. Potential explanations may arise from previously dominated ideologies of gender-based labor division within the family as well as the way to adapt the ideologies to the reality of outer conditions and inner needs of rural families in the market reform era.

Table 1. The distribution of family work patterns.

Family work pattern	Freq.	Percent
Both agricultural	739	53.28
Husband nonagricultural	190	13.7
Wife nonagricultural	30	2.16
Both nonagricultural	428	30.86
Total	1,387	100

Table 2. The distribution of family work patterns by spouses’ education levels.

Wife’s education	Family work pattern in rural areas				Total
	both agricultural	husband nonagricultural	wife nonagricultural	both nonagricultural	
no education	193 13.96	33 2.39	6 0.43	19 1.37	251 18.15
some primary school	211 15.26	56 4.05	5 0.36	41 2.96	313 22.63
completed primary school	146 10.56	50 3.62	7 0.51	43 3.11	246 18
completed lower middle school	162 11.71	44 3.18	7 0.51	164 11.86	377 27.26
some higher middle sc	23 1.66	4 0.29	2 0.14	71 5.13	100 7.23
some college or more	1 0.07	3 0.22	3 0.22	89 6.44	96 6.94
Total	736 53.22	190 13.74	30 2.17	427 30.87	1,383 100

Table 2.
continued.

Husband's education	Family work pattern in rural areas				Total
	both agricultural	husband nonagricultural	wife nonagricultural	both nonagricultural	
no education	60 4.34	5 0.36	2 0.14	4 0.29	71 5.13
some primary school	197 14.23	38 2.75	5 0.36	37 2.67	277 20.01
completed primary school	151 10.91	38 2.75	5 0.36	26 1.88	220 15.9
completed lower middle school	261 18.86	73 5.27	12 0.87	146 10.55	492 35.55
some higher middle school	64 4.62	27 1.95	6 0.43	100 7.23	197 14.23
some college or more	5 0.36	9 0.65	0 0	113 8.16	127 9.18
Total	738 53.32	190 13.73	30 2.17	426 30.78	1,384 100

Table 3. The Multinomial logistic Model 4.

Reference category:	Family work pattern	Coefficient
1	Both agricultural	
	Husband nonagricultural	
	Wife's age	-0.004
	Age gap (husband's age-wife's age)	0.020
	Husband education higher than wife	0.250
	Wife some primary school	-0.090
	Wife some middle school	-0.079
	Presence of parents(in-law)	-0.151
	Total number of children born	-0.013
	Suburb (vs. village)	-0.849
	_cons	-0.848

Table 3.
continued.

	Family work pattern	
2	Wife nonagricultural	
	Wife's age	-0.069
	Age gap (husband's age-wife's age)	0.129*
	Husband education higher than wife	0.040
	Wife some primary school	0.136
	Wife some middle school	1.231
	Presence of parents(in-law)	-0.017
	Total number of children born	0.172
	Suburb (vs. village)	-30.667
	_cons	-1.661
3	Both nonagricultural	
	Wife's age	0.036**
	Age gap (husband's age-wife's age)	0.031
	Husband education higher than wife	0.833***
	Wife some primary school	1.078**
	Wife some middle school	2.793***
	Presence of parents(in-law)	0.689***
	Total number of children born	-0.636***
	Suburb (vs. village)	2.969***
	_cons	-3.597***

*p<0.1 **p<0.05 ***p <0.01