

# Social reproduction in rural Chinese families: A three-generation portrait

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## Funding information

This article draws upon data from two  
research projects: 'Ageing in rural China:  
Exploring the impact of rural-urban migration  
on familial support for older people' (funded  
by UK Economic and Social Research Council  
ref: RES-000-22-4031) and 'Doing Intimacy:  
A Multi-Sited Ethnography of Modern  
Chinese Family Life' (funded by the European  
Research Council, ref. 640488). The funding  
bodies played no role in the design, execution,  
analysis and interpretation of data.

This article is part of a future Special Issue:  
The Social Reproduction of Agrarian Change:  
Feminist Political Economy and Rural  
Transformations in the Global South.

## Abstract

Much of the existing debate on social reproduction focuses on capitalist social relations or is framed around the distinction between the Global North and Global South. Using China, whose unique post-1949 developmental trajectory embraces both elements of socialism and capitalism, this article aims to breakdown the dichotomy between capitalism and other economic systems and instead draw attention to the ways in which households, the state and market are interdependent. Drawing upon an ethnography conducted in two rural villages and three-generational life history data, this article explores how the organization of reproductive work evolved in rural families against the backdrop of wider political and economic transformations since 1949. Through an examination of the inter-linkages between productive and reproductive activities across three generations, it reveals that unpaid reproductive work, performed unambiguously by women, has been central to China's economic modernization in both the Mao and Post-Mao eras. The organization of this reproductive work among women inside the households of each generation since 1949 is influenced by a combination of factors including the patrilocal and patrilineal kinship system, the social welfare context and the economic processes of a particular era. While confirming existing scholarship on migration and agrarian change, by revealing the household as a site of gendered and

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intergenerational negotiation, this article disputes a linear generational power shift in agrarian transformations.

**KEYWORDS**

gender, generation, life history research, rural China, social reproduction

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Early feminist scholars sought to theorize the role of domestic labour in the capitalist mode of production. They extended Marxist analysis of value generation from the productive sphere to the reproductive sphere and revealed how housework, childbearing and care for dependent members are necessary to reproduce societies over time (Dalla Costa, 1972; Morton, 1971). More recent scholarship proposes social reproduction as a ‘theory’ to capture the commodification of social reproduction in the neoliberal phase of capitalism (Fraser, 2017). While this scholarship has succeeded in confirming the key role social reproduction plays in contemporary capitalism, it is focused on the Global North and threatens to obscure the ways in which ‘productive and reproductive work may interplay and co-constitute in economies largely characterised by agrarian and/or informal labour relations’ (Naidu & Ossome, 2016 and Mezzadri, 2020b, as cited in Mezzadri et al., 2021:2).

This article joins the debate on social reproduction and explores it in the context of rural China’s developmental trajectory—including socialist engineering and economic reform—since the communist revolution in 1949. Rural households in China were traditionally both a reproductive unit and a productive unit in which smallholders combined family farming with handicraft industry (Zhang, 2015). Under Mao Zedong (1949–1976), agricultural institutional reform fundamentally reshaped rural production by organizing peasants into collective farming. While many productive activities were transferred to communes, rural households remained the primary unit of reproduction due to uneven and insufficient provision of welfare services in rural China (Croll, 1987). In the early 1980s, de-collectivization of agriculture meant that rural households once again became the basic unit of both reproduction and production. In the 1990s a gathering pace of economic market reforms, rising demand for cheap labour and relaxation of the urban–rural mobility encouraged and facilitated large-scale migration of younger workers from rural to urban areas. However, the institutionalized urban–rural segregation (*hukou*, household registration system<sup>1</sup>) which discriminates against rural migrants and their families left millions of children and ageing grandparents in villages while the middle generation temporarily migrated to cities in search of higher wages (Fan, 2007).

This article examines how processes of social reproduction within the family have evolved in rural households since 1949, drawing upon life history data involving both genders and three successive generations in two villages. Using China as the site location—a country which has been largely ignored in the theoretical discourse of social reproduction—the analysis extends the debate in a number of ways. First, capitalism is the default mode of production in which much of the existing debate on social reproduction is grounded. There is an implicit assumption that the crisis of social reproduction is a consequence of neoliberal capitalism. Given China’s unique post-1949 developmental trajectory (noted above), the article rejects the dichotomy between capitalism and socialism and instead emphasizes the interdependence of households, the state and markets. In particular, this article reveals how

<sup>1</sup>The household registration (*hukou*) system, introduced in 1958, required local authorities to register every Chinese citizen at birth as either an urban or a rural householder in a particular fixed place. Through this framework population mobility was controlled (Davin, 1999). Since the 1980s although the state’s ban on rural–urban migration has been lifted, the long-established systemic segregation between urban and rural *hukou* holders has remained intact and the *hukou* functions as a means of managing access to resources in the city destinations of migrants. For example, regardless of their actual place of residence, rural *hukou* holders are deprived various benefits (e.g., access to better jobs and admission to city schools) and welfare provisions (e.g., pension and housing allowance) available to urban *hukou* holders.

economic modernization in *both* the planned economy and market reform eras drew upon a *persistent* gender ideology and practice epitomized by the feminization of unpaid reproductive work. Second, the study from which this article draws is among the first to adopt a generation-sequence as well as multi-sited research design in examining changes and continuities in Chinese family life. Through a comparison of social reproduction practices at the family level across three generations of rural families, this article builds upon and extends early feminist political economists' work on agrarian transformations to capture the evolution of family forms over time as well as identify how the organization of households adapts to broader processes of socio-economic transformation. Thirdly, while confirming existing research on migration and agrarian change by revealing the household as a site of gendered and intergenerational negotiation, this article disputes a linear interpretation of generational power shift in the context of agrarian transformations. It reveals the way in which local migration history interacts with intergenerational dynamics. Finally, in contrast with much of the existing social reproduction scholarship based on a political economy analysis of policies and discourses, through life history data, the article adopts a bottom-up approach to highlight the dynamics and tensions between the processes of production and reproduction, as revealed in people's own voices.

## 2 | SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

Social reproduction is '... the fleshy, messy, and indeterminate stuff of everyday life. It is also a set of structured practices that unfold in dialectical relation with production, with which it is mutually constitutive and in tension. Social reproduction encompasses daily and long term reproduction, both of the means of production and the labour power to make them work.' (Katz, 2001: 710). Winder and Smith (2019) traced a genealogy of the role of social reproduction in academic discourse since the 1960s and found that in its early inception, the debate focused on the theorization of working-class women's domestic labour in the capitalist mode of production (e.g., Dalla Costa & James, 1975; Gerstein, 1973). More recent studies, grounded in Social Reproduction Theory (SRT), investigated changes to capitalist governance and broader transformations in the institutions of social reproduction, particularly the neoliberal withdrawal of state support in the Global North (e.g., Fraser, 2017). Most recently of all, attempts have been made to broaden the scope of analysis by examining the production-reproduction nexus in the Global South and extending it to labour processes and relations through the lens of social reproduction (see Baglioni, 2022; Mezzadri et al., 2021).

Adopting the lens of social reproduction helps to centre-stage the often-hidden activities and social relations involving human sustenance foundational to the organization and regeneration of societies over time. In so doing it highlights interdependence and relationality embedded in social relations, exposing 'the myths of independence and "self-sufficiency" on which neo-liberalism heavily relies' (Arat-Koç, 2006: 91). It further loosens the distinction between the spheres of production and reproduction, making it possible to challenge notions of productivism and economism dominant in the traditional understanding of labour and workers. Accordingly, attention may be shifted 'from the macro-processes of global capitalism to the power relations and people both shaping and experiencing those processes (Steans & Tepe, 2010) within the complex and chaotic dynamics of their daily practices and experiences' (Mezzadri et al., 2021: 7).

Informed by feminist political economic theory, I interpret social reproduction as entailing two broad and interrelated processes: the production of people as social and physical beings over time (on a daily basis and generationally) within the family (Peterson, 2003: 79), and the reproduction of social identities, institutions and societies (Di Muzio, 2012: 76). With rural Chinese families as the empirical base, I focus here upon social reproduction at the family level, that is, 'physical and social reproduction of bearing, raising, and socializing children, and of creating and maintaining households from infancy to old age' (Kofman, 2012: 147). This reproductive process covers a series of activities including care of children and the elderly, food preparation, shopping, cleaning, sewing and household maintenance. While focusing upon social reproductive activities at the family level, I echo Mezzadri's (2021)

argument that social reproduction is value-generating<sup>2</sup> and highlight how the reproductive work in rural households contributes to state and market capital accumulation and value production in each historical era under discussion.

Much of the existing literature on social reproduction focuses upon capitalist social relations and/or is framed by the Global North and Global South distinction.<sup>3</sup> Nancy Fraser, a key feminist theorist on social reproduction theory, outlined how capitalism, in its various historical phases, is sustained by distinct regimes of social reproduction: 'housewifization', 'the family wage' and 'two-earner households' (Fraser, 2017). While the trajectory of economic modernization in China shares the social-reproductive 'crisis tendency' in Fraser's theorization, the Chinese narratives outlined below do not neatly fit within the three typologies she put forward, not least because Fraser focused upon capitalist economic relations. I instead find Diane Elson's early conceptualization of households, and their connection to broader economic and political processes, effective in analysing the Chinese data. Elson (1998) sees households, markets and states as interrelated sectors of the economy. In her model, 'domestic sector', 'private sector' and the 'public sector' are different points on the circuits through which flow goods, services, labour (with physical, technical and social capacities) and values (commercial, regulatory or provisioning). According to Elson, on the one hand, households generate able-bodied workers/citizens on an everyday and intergenerational basis who contribute to the functioning of the economy (both market and state). On the other hand, households depend on the flow of goods and services from other sectors and if these inputs (from both the public and private sectors) are insufficiently nourishing, human capacities and provisioning values may be destroyed and removed from the circuit. Elson's model echoes the central themes in social reproduction scholarship. First, it reveals the interdependence between the domestic sector and other economic sectors. This corresponds with Fraser's argument of how social reproduction is a condition for sustained capitalist production. Second, the model illuminates the problems which arise when the wider economic and political structure fails to replenish the domestic sector, producing a disintegration, or in Fraser's words 'crisis of social reproduction'. Given Elson's model is open to application beyond capitalist economic relations, it is used below to elucidate the inter-links between productive and reproductive activities in China's Mao and post-Mao eras.

This article also builds on and extends the early work of feminist political economists on the internal workings of households in processes of agrarian transformation (see Razavi, 2009). Challenging the unitary household model dominating neoclassical analysis, these feminist scholars revealed that the peasant household was not an internally homogenous institution and highlighted the unequal distribution of resources along gender and generational lines (see Agarwal, 1990; White, 1986). They exposed the arduous domestic and care work women peasants undertook in addition to their contribution to agricultural work, as well as drawing attention to significant class differentiations that characterized household organization (Sharma, 1985). While this scholarship has made an invaluable contribution to understanding the political economy of agrarian change, its focus is mainly on the internal dynamics of families and households. As Razavi (2009: 200) notes, the 'analysis of changes in household and family forms over time, and the systemic relations between the domestic, economic and political structures' have been more difficult to pursue. Applying a generation-sequence design, this article aims to capture the evolution of family formation over time as well as identify how the organization of family life adapts to broader processes of socio-economic transformations.

Finally, this article builds upon and extends feminist studies of women and the household in rural China. Analysing the decollectivization of agriculture and introduction of the One Child Policy during the 1980s, Croll (1983) identified intrinsic contradictions in state policies: falling as they did upon the peasant household, productive demands required more intensive use of family labour, while the state's population policy simultaneously worked in

<sup>2</sup>Mezzadri (2021) challenges the use-value/exchange-value distinction in SRT scholarship and proposes an inclusive theorisation of value.

<sup>3</sup>There are exceptions: for example, Pearson (1997 on Cuba) and Stevano (2019 on Mozambique) have carried out a comprehensive analysis in non-capitalist countries and their studies have illuminated the ways in which the household responds to the changing capacity of the state to provide resources for family reproduction. In my study, I broaden the temporal scope of examination by including early generation experiences prior to China's economic transition.

the opposite direction by limiting family size through the One Child Policy. This contradiction, combined with a culturally embedded son preference, led to increasing selective abortions and female infanticide. Drawing upon fieldwork in Shandong villages in the 1980s, Judd (1994) suggested that the re-constitution of the Chinese state at this time drew force and authority from the inherent politics and power of gender. More recent studies have examined the gender dimensions of land tenure policies in the post-Mao era, revealing how policies have combined to reinforce traditional and emerging forms of gender bias and impact women's bargaining power within the home and community (see Belanger & Xu, 2009; Chen & Summerfield, 2007). Migration literature also reveals that gender and marriage have interacted to differentiate experiences of rural migrants: while men and young women have left their villages in search of better paid jobs in cities, older and married women have tended to stay behind and assumed responsibility for low-profit agricultural work (see Davin, 1999; Jacka, 1997). This literature has served to demonstrate that gender is deeply embedded in Chinese rural political economy.

Social reproduction, an 'invisible' aspect of the rural economy, remains understudied. Jacka (2018:1356) notes 'to date, most studies of rural political economy in China, as elsewhere, have focused on "production" and productive labour, and have neglected reproductive work'. Where existing scholarship on China has touched upon the social reproduction debate, it has done so in a very limited way, using the social reproduction lens in order to facilitate research on the labour regime (see Dong, 2020; Zhang, 2015). An exception is Jacka (2018) which adopts a social reproduction lens to analyse agrarian change in the context of rural-urban migration. Drawing upon fieldwork data from one village of central China, Jacka (2018) argues that shifts in rural family reproduction accompanying labour outmigration are core elements of agrarian change and that the aspiration for family reproduction serves as a driver for agrarian change. Jacka (2019) goes on to provide a historical account of the exploitation of rural women's 'inside work' as part of the development of the Chinese modern economy, albeit with limited reference to social reproduction scholarship. This article extends Jacka's work in a number of respects. First, Jacka (2019) followed a chorological order to chart the historical development of rural women's 'inside work' and did not discuss the intergenerational power dynamics in each historical era (the successive-generational life history data in this article reveals how the cooperation of reproductive work is negotiated at the household level in each generation and how the organization of reproductive work adapts to the wider socio-economic changes). Second, focusing upon data from one rural village, Jacka (2018) highlights how migration and agrarian change lead to a power shift between generations, confirming a pattern of 'descending familism' in which there is a downward flow of resources from older to younger generations (Yan, 2016 in Jacka, 2018). This article disputes the linear interpretation of a generational power shift over time in the context of agrarian transformations and reveals the ways in which local migration history interacts with intergenerational dynamics.

There is an established body of work examining care provision for older people in contemporary Chinese rural families (see Cong & Silverstein, 2014; Liu, 2014; Liu 2017) and this has revealed the increasing role of daughters in the old age care for their own parents. This literature is highly relevant to understanding the intra-family dynamics of the participants in the research underpinning this article; however, the lens of social reproduction adopted here covers a wider landscape of reproductive activities as well as connecting supposedly disparate circuits, such as labour and family, which are usually analysed separately but in fact interconnected (Kofman, 2012).

### 3 | METHODOLOGY

A life history approach helps to establish a connection between the past and present, and weaves together individual lives and wider social processes. In family research, the life history approach is particularly useful where an individual's biographical trajectory overlaps with those of other family members, thereby offering helpful insights into how family members interact with one other over a life course. This article draws upon life history interviews collected

during two periods of fieldwork conducted in China as part of two research projects.<sup>4</sup> In 2011 I spent 2 months each in Village A and Village B, collecting 60 life history interviews. In 2018<sup>5</sup> I revisited Village A and interviewed some of the families whom I had met during my previous field trip in order to update their life histories, as well as conducting life history interviews with new families. The life history interview approach was complemented by in-depth ethnographic observations to document the activities and interactions of the families.

Each village had a relatively high proportion (70%) of households that had experienced migration. At the same time, each was characterized by its own distinctive migration history and trajectory. Purposive non-random sampling techniques were utilized to recruit interviewees (Mason, 2002). This sampling approach specifically took account of age, gender and social hierarchy, embracing a mixed gender distribution within each generation and including families from different socioeconomic backgrounds. One-to-one interviews were conducted with at least two generations (sometimes three) in each family unit. The older generation (coded as G1) was born between the early 1930s and early 1950s. The middle generation (coded as G2) was mostly born in the 1960s and the early 1970s. The younger generation (coded as G3) was born between the 1980s and 2000.

Each interviewee was first asked to recall his/her childhood before being encouraged to take the lead in telling his/her life story. Each transcript was then analysed chronologically: from childhood/early life through migration phase to present circumstances and future plans. Each transcript was thematically analysed to identify common themes that emerged from the accounts of each generation. Further in-depth analysis of inter-generational relations was also conducted for each household. I have selected two extended families<sup>6</sup>—one from Village A and one from Village B—covering a range of scenarios (e.g., siblings' formation, migration trajectory) in order to describe the generational shifts as well as variations within each generation in the linkages between productive and reproductive activities. The discussion is supplemented by the inclusion of additional family data in order to capture common features across three generations. As revealed by the interviewees' narratives, social reproduction activities within the family embrace a broad range of experiences over a life course and are often blurred with productive activities. All names and any identifying characteristics have been changed to protect the anonymity of the interviewees.

## 4 | THE VILLAGES AND FAMILY CASE STUDIES

### 4.1 | Village A

Village A is located in the interior of Shandong province, East China. In the 1990s male villagers began to migrate in search of work to Beijing and other provincial and coastal cities in Northern China, albeit initially in small numbers. However, learning of the significantly higher wages earned by these pioneers, others followed and from 2000 migration increased markedly. The gender composition of migrants aged between 16 and 25 was balanced. This cohort mainly comprised those who migrated to work in a factory after completing or dropping out of school. After returning to the village to marry, most husbands maintained their migrant status, generally leaving their wives in the village (although a small number of couples migrated together). As a result, except during the Chinese New Year holiday (when most migrants returned to their villages), the majority of village residents comprised older people, married

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<sup>4</sup>The first project examined the impact of migration on old age familial support systems in rural China (see Liu, 2014; Liu, 2016; Liu, 2017; Liu & Cook, 2020). The second investigates how various aspects of family life (parent-child relations, conjugal relations, sexual relations and ageing and intergenerational support) have shifted across three generations in multiple sites in urban and rural China (see Liu, 2022a; Liu, 2022b; Liu, 2022c; Liu, 2023).

<sup>5</sup>During the period of fieldwork (2016–2019), I also visited other rural villages and collected more life history interviews. Due to space and scope of an article, I confine discussions to the data collected in Village A and Village B exclusively as they have reflected two distinct organizations of reproductive work in rural younger generations.

<sup>6</sup>The village case studies were selected because the social reproduction arrangement was indicative of the pattern among the majority of the families in the specific village. Rather than repeating similar quotes, a detailed description of these cases is included to contextualize the lived experiences and family setting.

women and children. When I returned in 2018, a new trend was observable: after their children (G3) married, many middle generation male migrants returned to their village and found local wage labour.

The Wang family was one of the multigenerational households in village A. Mother Wang (G1) was born in 1932, had only one (older) brother who had been sent to school and later became a teacher. However, in keeping with gender norms of the time, she herself received no education. Instead, she was kept at home and taught how to spin cotton and weave cloth. In 1951, as a result of an arranged marriage, she was married into village A (4 km from her natal village). A few years after her marriage, agricultural collectivization was introduced and she began to work in the fields alongside her husband to earn work points. She had three sons and one daughter. She wanted her sons to do well at school, but all dropped out as they found it difficult to study as well as help with farm work. Her youngest son died of an acute illness at the age of 21, while the other two were married within the village, each of them having three children. Her daughter was sent to school for only 1 year, was effectively illiterate as a result, and married into a nearby village where she had two children.

During my fieldwork in 2011 Mother Wang had been bedbound for 4 years. She was initially cared for by her husband, but after his death in 2009, she was looked after by her three children's families in turn (each family was responsible for cooking and caring for her for 5 days on a rota basis). As her elder son (G2) was a migrant labourer during this period, his wife fulfilled her family's care responsibilities to her mother-in-law. As well as the elder son, Mother Wang's grandson (the elder son's son) and his wife (G3) were also migrants prior to their marriage and their child's birth in 2010. Following his son's birth, Grandson Wang continued to work as a migrant, while his wife stayed in the village to look after their baby. In 2011 I undertook separate interviews with Mother Wang, her elder son's wife, her grandson (elder son's son) and grandson's wife.

When I revisited the village in 2018, I learnt that Mother Wang had died in 2012. The elder son (G2) had returned to the village and was a construction worker. His wife (G2) tended the family land, and also looked after the grandson's two children (Grandson Wang and his wife had another child [a girl] in 2013), as well as engaging in informal wage labour (e.g., making ropes and bags at home). Grandson Wang's wife (G3) worked in a nearby town in a board manufacturing factory. Grandson Wang meanwhile continued to work as a migrant in a coastal factory. During my 2018 visit I interviewed the elder son's wife and her daughter-in-law about recent changes in their life.

## 4.2 | Village B

Village B was in inner Hunan province, South China. Its closeness to Guangdong (the site of one of China's first Special Economic Zones) and relatively hilly terrain which made arable farming more difficult (in contrast to Village A, which is located on a plain) meant that Village B had a longer history of outward migration. Starting in the 1980s, young men who had dropped out of school had left the village to work on construction sites. Most of them subsequently returned to the village to get married, after which their wives stayed behind to look after the young children. From the 1990s, young women began to join young men in searching for migrant jobs, at least prior to marriage, with most finding work in the factories of Guangdong. When their children reached school age, most married women followed their husband to the cities in search of work, supporting their husbands as street vendors or working as cleaners in the factories. As a result, unlike those in village A, from 2000 village B households mostly comprised older people and their grandchildren.

The Li's family was a skipped generation family in village B. Father Li, who had an elder and younger brother, and a younger sister, was born in 1933 and had studied in school for 4 years. Mother Li was born in 1935 and like Mother Wang did not receive any education, she had a younger brother and a younger sister 5 km away in another village. After their arranged marriage in 1953, Father Li first worked in the village committee as a cashier/accountant and then in the 1970s became head of a production brigade. Mother Li (G1) meanwhile worked as a member of the collective agricultural labour force. They had six children, of whom two died in infancy, leaving two surviving sons

and two daughters. In the 1980s they worked alongside with their two sons' families on the land allocated to them through decollectivization (the two sons also engaged in other local non-agricultural work).

In the 1990s their elder daughter and her husband first migrated to a coastal city in Zhejiang province, where they worked as a cleaner and a security guard in a factory. A few years later, both sons, followed by their wives, migrated to Guangdong province, where they worked as street vendors. The only child who continued to live in Hunan province was the younger daughter, who worked with her husband in a coal factory in the nearby county. After their two sons and their wives migrated, Father Li and Mother Li looked after the farmland they had left behind, as well as caring for their five grandchildren until they finished middle school education. (The elder son had three children [two girls and one boy]; the younger son had two children [a girl and a boy].) After failing his senior school entrance exam, the elder son's son became a migrant worker in a factory. But because of the low (1000 yuan) monthly wage and lack of freedom, he left this job and joined his father as a street vendor in Guangdong. His two sisters completed their senior high school education and found secretarial/administrative employment in the provincial capital of Hunan. At the time of my fieldwork in 2011 all the other grandchildren were in college education, and Father Li and Mother Li lived alone in the village. After my interviews with them and other members of the older generation (G1) in the village, I travelled to Guangdong, where I subsequently interviewed Elder Son Li (G2) and his wife.

## 5 | INTERLINKAGE BETWEEN PRODUCTIVE AND REPRODUCTIVE ACTIVITIES

In this section, I use Elson's (1998) framework which sees households, markets and states as interrelated sectors of the economy to analyse the links between the productive and reproductive activities of rural households in three distinctive eras.

### 5.1 | The Mao era—Agricultural collectivization

The recollections of most G1s revealed that their early lives and household activities had been profoundly shaped by the collectivization of agriculture and working in the commune.

Mother Wang recalled

*When I first got married [in 1951], I didn't go to the fields often – I mainly did so during the harvest season in the autumn. Otherwise, I was at home weaving cloth. But a few years later<sup>7</sup> when the commune was established, I began working the fields all the time, from morning until evening. I had to work in order to earn work points, otherwise we wouldn't get enough food [work points were calculated annually and converted into cash and grain]. At that time, my mother-in-law stayed at home cooking for everyone and looking after my children. I was in the fields all day. Even when my children were little, I had to leave them at home and go to the fields during the day. In the evenings, I was making clothes – socks, trousers, winter jackets and so on – for my children. Evenings were the only time when I could only do such work. None of my children bought any clothes as I made them myself.*

As illustrated by Mother Wang, an intensification of the link between productive and reproductive activities was an outcome of the interdependent relationship between the state and household during the Mao era. All able-bodied

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<sup>7</sup>The collectivisation of agriculture started from 1955. As part of the 1958 Great Leap Forward campaign, rural communes were widely established.

peasants were mobilized into collective production<sup>8</sup> by the Communist party-state and this reconfigured household organization by transferring productive activities from the household to the state, changing the identity of many rural wives, such as Grandmother Wang, from a home-based worker to a labourer in the state-organized production team. Through the suppression of sideline production activities<sup>9</sup> and the imposition of a public remuneration system, which forged a direct link between the award of work points and the distribution of grain, the state made collective production a compulsory necessity for the reproduction of the household, enforcing a dependence of the 'domestic sector' upon the 'public sector'. Conversely, insufficient welfare provision in rural China during the Mao era meant that the state had to rely upon the household to supply able-bodied workers to support the collective economy. Except for a brief period during the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961), when interviewees recalled eating together in the commune mess hall, the household remained a key unit of reproduction and consumption. The reproductive burden for the provision of basic needs and servicing the rural family fell primarily on the domestic sector.

As a result of demographic variations in family formation, rural households differed in their ability to manage the circular flow between the domestic sector and the public sector.

Mother Wang's household consisted of four adults—Mother Wang, her husband and her in-laws—and four children. Along with her husband and her father-in-law she worked in the collective farm sector. Her mother-in-law also raised some animals for the production team in addition to looking after the four children. Since a male labourer was normally credited an average of 10 work points per day during the Maoist era, compared with 5–8 work points for a female labourer, when food was in short supply, the gendered nature of the remuneration ensured that male workers benefited disproportionately. Rather than sharing food equally among adults in the family, according to Mother Wang, her family replicated the uneven points distribution and saved more extra food for male labourers (i.e., her husband and father-in-law). By contrast, Mother Li's family had no surviving in-laws, but needed to feed six children who were too young to join the production team,<sup>10</sup> and so the Lis struggled to earn sufficient work points to nourish all family members, as Mother Li explained:

*At that time, we had to earn work points. If you didn't go to work, you wouldn't have work points and then you wouldn't have anything to eat. ... I worked as part of the construction team for a nearby reservoir. I put my children in a basket and carried them on my back to the construction site. During my break time, I breastfed them. Then when I was working, I put them back onto my back. I didn't have any surviving in-laws. I was responsible for all of them<sup>11</sup>.*

To deal with this crisis of social reproduction, Mother Li often undertook work normally reserved for men (e.g., building a reservoir) in order to secure the maximum work points available to a woman labourer. This in turn created a care dilemma for her children: although she took the youngest child with her to the construction site (as it required nursing), the older children were left on their own or cared for by elder siblings at home. Tragically two of Mother Li's children died at young ages as a result of the hardships at the time.

Rural women's reproductive work contributed to the state's capital accumulation and value generation during the Mao era in a number of ways. First, unpaid domestic and care work performed by women helped maintain labour power in the collective farm as well as reproduce inter-generationally, which in turn contributed to the generation of value by subsidizing the socialist economic production.<sup>12</sup> Second, a gendered work point system, in which women were systematically underpaid, helped to cheapen socialist agricultural production and increase the speed of state's

<sup>8</sup>During the 1955–1956 High Tide, when the principle of voluntarism was widely ignored, cooperativization was a de facto coercive process.

<sup>9</sup>According to G1s, households' sideline activities, which had previously made a significant contribution to farm household income, were only once more endorsed from the early 1970s.

<sup>10</sup>According to Father Li, from the age of 15 children could start working in the fields alongside adults. However, from the age of 10, children undertook ad hoc jobs such as tending to the cows.

<sup>11</sup>Mother Li's account confirms O'Laughlin's (2022:1843) argument that 'there is no fixed sphere where living labor is reproduced'.

<sup>12</sup>This mirrors the role of unpaid domestic and care work in the reproduction of capitalism (Dalla Costa and James 1972).

capital accumulation. Third, women's work in the evenings (e.g., to make clothes for their family) helped subsidize the state by providing commodities and services and lowering the reproduction costs.

## 5.2 | Early reform era—Agricultural de-collectivization

Most G2s got married in the early 1980s when agricultural de-collectivization took place. Agricultural de-collectivization made the household once more responsible for the costs of production, as well as allowing them, after the state's fixed quota had been met, to dispose of the major share of total agricultural production that remained in their hands as they wished (whether for their own consumption or for sale, at above-quota prices, to the state). While the state remade the household as a basic unit of production, no increased public provision was forthcoming to alleviate the household's social reproduction activities. The burden of servicing the rural family continued to fall upon the domestic sector, while simultaneously household production exclusively relied upon family labour.<sup>13</sup> Thus, in the early reform era, the interlinkage between the productive activities and reproductive activities was characterized by their joint and often competing demand upon family labour.

In her analysis of early rural reform Chinese policies, Croll (1987) argued that there was a correlation between the economic livelihood of the peasant household and the size of the family. My study reveals that Croll's posited correlation between income and family size overlooks the reproductive function of the household and the family's life cycle, that is, whether children are recipients of support or become support providers to the family. The narratives of Daughter-in-law Wang and Daughter-in-law Li reveal how G2 households, in their child-bearing years, struggled to meet reproductive and productive functions because of the irreconcilable demand upon family labour.

Daughter-in-law Wang: *At the time I got married [in 1981], the norm was that every household had its own allocated land.<sup>14</sup> After a certain amount of grain had been handed over to the village [i.e. the state], what remained belonged to the household. My mother-in-law had no time looking after my children. So my husband and I took turns going to the fields and staying at home. If he went to the fields, I looked after the children and did the cooking. If I went to the fields, he watched the children at home. As my husband was ill for a while, I went to the fields more often.*

Daughter-in-law Li: *After my children were born, life became much harder as both my in-laws were working on their own fields. So I had to look after my children while I was working. Sometimes, I wrapped my child on my back and worked in the fields. When I was cooking or doing housework at home, I turned a chair upside down and, if she/he could stand up, put my child inside the chair. If my child was unable to walk, I lay him/her down in a wide bucket. ... He (her husband) was working in a stone factory (a township enterprise). I was multi-tasking, looking after children and doing farm work. During harvest season, he would get some leave from the factory and helped me with heavy work. Other than that, I was doing most of the things on my own. I also worked on our family vegetable garden. Looking back, life was extremely hard.*

Both Daughter-in-law Wang and Daughter-in-law Li highlighted that their mothers-in-law were not available to assist with childcare as they themselves were family labourers for their own households<sup>15</sup> and so the nuclear family needed to balance both reproductive and productive activities on their own. In Daughter-in-law Li's family, while Daughter-in-law Li saw to the farm work and everyday reproductive work, her husband became a wage labourer in a nearby town in order to maximize their household income.<sup>16</sup> A circular flow was established between the 'domestic

<sup>13</sup>Croll (1987) highlighted the contradiction between the household responsibility system (which placed a premium on the supply of labour) and the One-Child Policy (which limited labour supply). In reality, however, G2 members did not always comply with state family planning policies and had between two and five children (on average, rural families had three children). They did so by either paying the fine for exceeding the one-child quota or temporarily leaving the village.

<sup>14</sup>Rural households were not given ownership rights over the land, but only the right to use it.

<sup>15</sup>A few years after G2 members married, intergenerational household partition took place involving the division by G1 members of the allocated family fields among the G2 married sons so that each conjugal unit controlled its own household finances. Cooperation between generations and brothers continued in terms of pooling money to buy agricultural equipment. However, each divided household was largely responsible for output produced on its own land.

<sup>16</sup>Other studies of the same period have also found that rural households took advantage of the opportunities afforded by increasing rural economic diversification to maximize their income (see Jacka, 1997; Judd, 1994).

sector' and the 'private sector' in their family to accommodate both productive and reproductive activities, albeit at the expense of the extreme hardship borne by Daughter-in-law Li.

In Daughter-in-law Wang's family, her husband's illness meant that there was insufficient family labour for production, which in turn failed to replenish the household reproductive activities. In order to cope with this crisis of social reproduction, she solicited help from her natal family: *'My husband was ill, I couldn't handle both the fields and household work. So my sisters made clothes for the children at home and brought them over to me. They also gave me a hand with the farm work. For a few years, when we were short of grain, my natal family carted wheat over to our house.'*

In comparison with her in-law's family, who had two surviving sons and one daughter (married in another village), Daughter-in-law Wang's natal family was large: she had three younger sisters and two younger brothers. After her marriage in the early 1980s, her five unmarried siblings continued to assist their parents in a variety of ways, including working in the fields, making the flour for cooked buns, weaving cloth to make clothes and general housework (with the latter two tasks the exclusive province of unmarried daughters). This confirmed Croll's predicated correlation between income and family size, Daughter-in-law Wang's natal family was faring far better economically than her in-law's family and was so in a position to provide productive assistance to her household. Moreover, as a result of the gender formation of her unmarried siblings, she also received assistance with household reproductive activities.

Women's reproductive work contributed to the capital accumulation in the early reform era in several respects. The de-collectivization of agriculture reformulated the gendered division of labour, with wives taking care of farm work and household maintenance while their husbands engage in waged labour. Reproductive work performed by wives helped reproduce labour-power and maximize any surplus labour time for their husbands to invest in capital accumulation. Simultaneously, the gendered production of staple food for rural households, and society at large, helped hold down the costs of reproduction and therefore subsidize capital accumulation.<sup>17</sup> There was no fixed productive and reproductive sphere for women (cf. O'Laughlin, 2022) and this compelled them to perform multiple tasks (productive/reproductive) at home and in the fields.

### 5.3 | Migration era

Since the 1990s, the interlinkage between production and reproduction in rural households has driven as well as conditioned rural outmigration. The failure of rural production to meet the rapidly growing costs of reproductive activities has fuelled rural household's desire for migration. As economic reform proceeded, the tension between income from farming and petty commodity productions<sup>18</sup> and the level of expenditure required to provide for the reproduction of successive generations intensified. Several factors were responsible for this. First, over a 20-year period a process of school consolidation took place in villages, resulting in a dramatic reduction in the number of schools accompanied by the reallocation of educational resources from failing village schools to 'central schools' (Xu, 2013). This meant that when they embarked on middle school education, village children had to become boarders in a county/town school. Since living standards were higher in counties/towns, educational costs steadily increased, putting a strain on family finances. Second, post-Mao family planning policies combined with the traditional patrilineal son preference led to a highly skewed sex ratio among the rural population (Greenhalgh, 2009). This made it increasingly difficult for rural young men to find a wife, causing the bride price upon marriage to increase. Third, although rural collective welfare provision during the Mao Era was minimal and very uneven, there did exist limited cooperative medical support. In the early 1980s the cooperative medical system collapsed and was replaced

<sup>17</sup>Echoing Pattenden (2023:173), the reproduction-reproduction nexus cannot be understood in linear terms (e.g. as the former providing labour-power for the latter), there are many ways in which capital 'tries to maximize the appropriation of all forms of labour at the lowest possible cost through the patriarchy of accumulation'.

<sup>18</sup>Both villages were located in inland regions where there were few township enterprises. Zhang (2015) noted that most well established township enterprises were located in the rural coastal regions.

by a payment-based system of medical care<sup>19</sup> (Zhang & Unschuld, 2008). As a result, the costs of support for both young and old increased dramatically in the post-Mao era.

Against the background of financial pressure, increasing demands for labour in the expanding urban economy led to the removal of restrictions on movement between countryside and cities and migration became a popular option for rural G2s. Daughter-in-law Wang explained her husband's migration: *'Why did he migrate? Previously we were doing some street vending in the village in addition to farm work. Then I said to him: "Street vending won't work: our second daughter is still in education, our son needs a wife and we need to provide for the older generation. The income from street vending won't be enough. All it can do is to earn us some pocket money. Don't do street vending any more. Go out to the city for work"'*. Persuaded by his wife, Mother Wang's elder son joined his neighbours and found a job on a construction site in a city in another province. In the first year, he did not earn any income home as his boss withheld payment and then absconded. But in each of the second and third years, he managed to bring home, on average, 11,000 yuan - more than twice what they could earn from farming (~5000 yuan a year). With this additional income from migrant work, Daughter-in-law Wang and her husband managed to pay for their son to get married in 2009 (and he had a baby son the following year). In accordance with the patrilocal and patrilineal custom, Daughter-in-law Wang (G2) and her husband paid the wedding expenses, a marital home and the costs of celebrating the subsequent birth. In 2011 the family was in considerable debt as a result of the post-nuptial expenses, leaving them no choice but for Daughter-in-law Wang's husband and their son to continue working as migrants.

Although a migrant's wage was higher than a villager's income from agricultural work, migrants were institutionally discriminated against in the city as second class citizens, often forced to take low-paid and undesirable jobs and were deprived various employment benefits to which registered urban citizens were entitled (Fan, 2007). Until the last decade, during which Chinese journalists and researchers have drawn increasing attention to the plight of migrants' children (with the term 'left-behind children' entering common vernacular), it was virtually impossible for migrants' children to gain admission to city kindergartens and schools. The only way to circumvent *hukou* regulations was to pay extra to the relevant school—an additional premium that could amount to a sum several times greater than the normal school fees (Liu, 2022a). The institutional segregation in the urban labour market and the hostility of Chinese cities in receiving rural migrants' families imply that reproductive work undertaken by family members who stay behind is critical to enabling migrants' work in the cities. In 2011, when I first met Daughter-in-law Wang and Granddaughter-in-law Wang, they were in the midst of a care crisis as their family needed to look after bedbound and widowed Mother Wang (G1), as part of a family care rotation with Mother Wang's other two children (G2), in addition to the infant son of Grandson Wang (G3). Rather than asking the men to stay in the village instead of migrate, Daughter-in-law Wang and Granddaughter-in-law Wang struggled on their own. Granddaughter-in-law Wang (G3) admitted: *'When both of them had gone, my mother-in-law and I were absolutely swamped. Especially when the rota required us to look after our bed-bound grandmother-in-law, we could hardly manage'*. During this period, her main role was to look after the baby, leaving her mother-in-law to be the main carer for Mother Wang and take the lead in looking after the crops on land allocated to the family.

In Village B with a longer migration history of both men and women, G2 such as Daughter-in-law Li and her husband, relied on their in-laws (G1) to stay behind in the village and look after their children (G3) so that they could earn money in the city (and send remittances to cover their children's school fees and living expenditure). This process of formation and sustenance of migrant households, shaped by exchanges and transfers among family members residing in multiple geographical locations, has been documented in existing studies (see Jacka, 2012; Liu, 2014) and termed 'householding' (Douglass, 2006). While 'householding' captures the new configuration of household organization, it does not fully comprehend the political economy interrelating 'domestic sector' and 'private sector'.

<sup>19</sup>The percentage of villages with a cooperative medical system fell from 90% in the 1960s to 5% by 1985 (Zhang & Unschuld, 2008:1866). Not until 2003 was a new cooperative medical system introduced to rural areas. In order to cover part (50%–70%) of the costs of hospitalization, individuals were required to contribute to the funding of this scheme. Although it helped towards covering the cost of treatment for serious illnesses, this new system was considered ineffective for rural citizens suffering from chronic and long-term diseases (Liu & Cook, 2020).

The objective of multi-sited householding in rural families was to sustain the circular flow between private and domestic sectors. However, maintaining this flow was precarious as migrant households were buffeted by the vagaries of the private economy. Daughter-in-law Li's husband did not earn much money in his first two years as a migrant worker, and he was forced to move to another city in Guangdong province to start afresh. Although he and his wife managed to send enough money to pay compulsory tuition fees, his children's living expenses were not always covered leaving the elderly Li (G1) couple to endure financial hardship. A paradoxical dilemma emerged for rural families: while migration is a financial necessity for reproduction, it is also dependent and puts a strain upon family members who stay behind to perform the reproductive responsibilities of the household.

The multi-sited reproductive work of rural households contributed to the capital accumulation of the migration era. As a result of institutionalized urban–rural segregation, rural migrant workers are deprived various benefits and provisions that urban *Hukou* permit holders are entitled to. In the absence of state provision, and with a lack of internalization of social costs by private employers, two processes of externalization of social reproductive costs take place. At the migration destination, the worker or the wife who accompanied their husband assumes daily reproductive responsibilities, reproducing the labour-power to facilitate capital accumulation and extraction of surplus value. At the migration origin, stay-behind grandparents provide childcare and absorb intergenerational reproductive costs. Finally, the farming work performed by the stayed-behind older generation provided services and commodities that helped to lower the reproduction costs of rural households and serve as a subsidy to the low wage migrant workers are trapped in.

## 6 | GENDER

From early debates about housework to recent SRT scholarship, research analysis has emphasized the disproportionate extent to which women are still associated with social reproduction activities (Winders & Smith, 2019). In confirmation of this finding, my three generational analysis reveals that although the Maoist ideal of gender equality ensured that rural women were mobilized into collective production, unpaid reproductive work remained a woman's responsibility across all three generations. Whether undertaken by mother or grandmother, women remained symbolically responsible for reproductive work to the exclusion of any residual role for men. Mother Wang described her husband's role in domestic work: *None. Nothing at all.* Daughter-in-law Wang also emphasized the difficulties of being a woman: *A woman's life was much harder than a man's life. ... [Author: Why?] If men want to help in the home, they can do so. But if they don't want to, they can just go out and play. Women are trapped by so many things at home.* Granddaughter-in-law Wang explained how she and her husband differed in their approaches to domestic work (describing the period when he returned to the village): *When my husband finished dinner, he just went outside and played. I stayed at home, tidying up, washing the dishes and wiping the table. ... [Author: Why not ask him to do the washing up] Men are unwilling to do the housework so I couldn't be bothered to ask him. In the time that I spent nagging him I would probably have finished the job.*

Within the definition of care work, there is a differentiation between childcare and old age care. Childcare is considered women's work and gendered childrearing persisted in both villages and across generations. Whether migrating or not, the father's involvement in childcare was minimal. Where the mother was absent or died young, grandmothers or other female relatives such as older sisters acted as a substitute. By contrast, in accordance with traditional filial piety, parents' old age care is a son's obligation and in practice many sons do provide some old age care. However, the crucial difference to women with childcare, is that men also delegate old age care tasks to female relatives. For example, Mother Wang (G1) served meals and washed clothes for nearly 20 years for her mother-in-law who had heart problems while her husband provided practical and emotional support such as accompanying his mother to the toilet and talking to her. This gendered pattern was reproduced in the care of Mother Wang herself: her second son had the closest relationship with Mother Wang and visited her throughout the day during his family's turn in the care rotation plan (since he lived 5 minutes' walk away), but his wife cooked the food he took to

Mother Wang at meal times. As a result of rural labour outmigration, daughters now play an important role in their parents' old age support.<sup>20</sup> Unlike Mother Wang's generation (G1), Mother Wang's stay-behind daughter (G2) participated in the care rotation plan alongside her brothers' families, with the dirty clothes and bedding of Mother Wang left specifically for the daughter to deal with when it was her turn on the rota.

One distinctive but hidden contribution women made to rural household reproduction was the making of clothes, bedding and shoes for family use. Prior to Mao's collectivization, according to Mother Wang, rural women were taught how to weave cloth and make clothes. Echoing Jacka (2019) and Eyferth (2012), while agricultural collectivization led to the demise of home-based weaving activities for production, women continued to spend their evenings making clothes and shoes for the reproductive needs of family members. This pattern was sustained in both Mother Wang (G1) and Daughter-in-law Wang's (G2) narratives. While women of the youngest generation (G3) no longer performed such tasks, some of the G2 women, such as Daughter-in-law Wang, continued to make clothes and shoes for their grandchildren (i.e., G3's children).

Jacka (2019) argues that Chinese women traditionally performed productive work (i.e., textile production) inside rural families, but the Western ideological division of labour, introduced by the Chinese Communist Party through an institutionalized divide between paid production for the collective and a private sphere of unpaid work, served as one of the 'main mechanisms through which the state and capitalists in China have exploited rural women undertaking inside work'. I agree with Jacka that rural women's reproductive work is essential to both state and market capital accumulation. However, Jacka's view that the adoption of a Western division between paid public and unpaid private spheres drove the exploitation of women fails to account for the fact that, in traditional Chinese families, domestic and other care work was feminized and devalued in contrast with men's outside work. It also overlooks regional variations under collective production. Some women (G1) of Village B recalled that in their natal villages (Western Hunan), women were asked by their commune to be based at their own home to make craft products such as bamboo hats and this was accredited for work points. Further it idolizes women's homework model, something found to be one of the most ruthless forms of surplus extraction in capitalist relations—a complete interpenetration between production and reproduction—enabling a process that hides women's exploitation through excluding them from the wage relation (see Mezzadri, 2021; Pattenden, 2023). Finally, it understates the liberating effect of the state's mobilization of women into public collective labour in the 1950s. According to Mother Wang, when she was in her late teens, she was compelled to confine herself to home weaving because going outside, even to the village market, was considered a family disgrace and would lead to her being heavily scolded by her father. The Chinese Communist Party's mobilization of women into paid public labour therefore forcefully reconfigured the gendered spatial divide, something viewed as central to the control and subordination of women in pre-modern China by feminist historians (Mann, 2011).

I argue that four interrelated processes contribute to the perpetuation of the gendered pattern of reproduction and accordingly facilitate the exploitation of women's unpaid reproductive work for Chinese economic development. First, the cultural legacy of Confucian familism dictates a gendered division of labour, epitomized in the adage 'men dominate the outside, women dominate the inside' (Mann, 2011). Indeed, this saying was frequently invoked by male interviewees to justify why their wives assumed responsibility for tasks within the family. Second, there is lacking in consistent state policies and measures to challenge gender ideologies and practices in Chinese households (something identified by early feminist scholars as one of the key weaknesses in the women's liberation movement after 1949) (Davin, 1976; Wolf, 1985). As a result, the gender ideology and practice which considered reproductive work as a women's responsibility was not tackled during the Mao era.<sup>21</sup> This ideology became even more entrenched with the rise of a public discourse promoting a 'natural' gender order with women's family duties emphasized (as a wife and mother) in the post-Mao era (Evans 1997).

<sup>20</sup>This confirms the existing care literature in rural families (see Liu, 2014; Liu, 2017).

<sup>21</sup>Here I emphasize that this feminized pattern of reproductive work is not only limited to rural households in agrarian economy, but also evident in urban households of the same era (see Liu, 2007 examining the life history of urban women born in the 1940s and 1950s).

Third, echoing early feminist economists' view of economies as gendered constructs (Elson & Pearson, 1981; Pearson, 1997), the economic processes in both Mao and post-Mao eras are not gender neutral; instead gender ideologies and practices are constitutive of the economic processes. On one hand, gender shaped the way in which reproductive tasks and responsibilities were allocated and the process of organizing reproduction was central to the function of an economy (as shown above in the analysis of the interlinkage between production and reproduction in each era). On the other hand, gender bias was inherent in the public labour processes in both Mao and post-Mao eras. As noted above, the work point system in agriculture was fundamentally gendered: a male labourer could earn up to 10 points, while the maximum work points available to a female labourer was only 8. In both Wang and Li's households, there was an underlying assumption that '*Male labourers shouldn't be wasted on domestic things*' because of their greater work point-earning capacity. In the Post-Mao era, gender has been central to migration patterns: for example, coastal factories in export zones disproportionately employ young migrant women (Pun, 2005) while men dominate the construction sector (Fan, 2007). However, married women's migration opportunities were very limited with the activities of Daughter-in-law Li restricted to occupations such as cleaning and street vending. The ways in which gender bias operated in both productive and reproductive processes of the economy has therefore created a 'cycle of vulnerability' (Okin, 1989) by further consolidating women's inferior position in the household and the labour market.

Fourth, one theme of existing SRT debate centres upon the commodification of social reproduction as a crisis in capitalism (Fraser, 2017). However, while some migrant women might have been employed as domestic workers in Chinese cities in recent decades, there has been no commodification of social reproduction in the agrarian settings. The failure of the state to attribute value to the reproductive work rural women perform for their family members derives from as well as consolidates the naturalized notion of reproductive work as women's responsibilities.<sup>22</sup> Against the backdrop of a welfare regime which emphasizes family responsibilities and the state's residual function, Chinese governments in Mao as well as post-Mao eras have placed great weight upon family obligations towards the young and the old through state legislation and public propaganda, building upon and reinforcing the perception that familial support is a duty which rests upon supposedly natural feelings. Compared with migrants or labourers who bring cash into the family, women's reproductive work to support other family members, essential to the economic livelihood of the family as a whole, continues to be trivialized. In the case of family care work, it is revealing that intergenerational negotiation about remittances focused not on grandmothers but on children's living expenses. When asked whether they paid grandmothers for looking after their children, most interviewees were surprised by my question and clearly thought that such work was natural and free. While acknowledging the difficulties of complete commodification of social reproduction (Bakker & Gill, 2019), this article argues in favour of a valorization of reproductive activities in order to de-naturalize and credit the work performed by rural women for their family members.

## 7 | INTERGENERATIONAL DYNAMICS

Scholars have documented an increasing flux in intra-family gender and intergenerational relations in the context of capitalist development, migration and agrarian transformations (Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Jacka, 2018; Nguyen, 2015). In the case of rural China, Yan (2016) has proposed a 'descending familism' model to depict a downward flow of resources from the older generations to younger generations in rural families. Building upon this, Yan (2021) coined the term 'neo-familism' to refer to the new discourses and practices predominantly associated with the post-1980s generation (G3 in my study), which entails an 'inverted family' structure characterized by the constant decline of parental authority and a rise of youth autonomy in Chinese families. This 'descending familism'/'the

<sup>22</sup>This echoes Mezzadri's critique of capitalism: 'production both *is and appears* value-generating. Reproduction is naturalized as the realm of "non-value"' (2021:1188, original emphasis).

inverted family' model portrays a uni-directional intergenerational power shift which runs the risk of over-generalization and fails to acknowledge the impact on intergenerational negotiation in a variety of material circumstances. I highlight below how local migration history interacts with intergenerational dynamics through an examination of negotiation in the care of grandchildren.

While women were consistently responsible for social reproduction activities, as negotiations and contestations took place between different generations of women, unpaid reproductive work undertaken by older women within the household expanded. This has particularly been the case for grandchildren's care. Across the three generations, grandmothering has effectively become a de facto obligation. Among those of the G1 generation, the childcare support Mother Wang received from her mother-in-law was an exception. She explained: *in those days the senior generation behaved differently from the senior generation today. If they wanted to help with grandchildren's care, they would do so. If they didn't want to, there was no obligation. I was lucky having a husband who was the only surviving son. But more commonly it was the parents themselves who were regarded as carrying the responsibility for raising their children.* With respect to the G2 generation, prior to migration, grandmothering remained rare as G1 women were busy working on their own farms, but it has now become a necessity. There are, however, variations in the organization of care of grandchildren, depending on families' migration trajectories.

In Village A, where only male farmers (G2 and G3) tended to migrate, there was a degree of coordination and negotiation among different generations of women who stayed behind. In Wang's family, Granddaughter-in-law Wang (G3) worked in a factory close to the village and looked after her two children in the evening/at night. During the day, Daughter-in-law Wang (G2) cared for the children (her grandchildren) while tending the fields allocated to the Granddaughter-in-law Wang's household and making clothes and shoes for the grandchildren. Daughter-in-law Wang explained a process resembling Yan's 'descending familism': *Often they (the grandchildren) passed on their mother's requests to us (what we needed to do for her). We did our best to do all the work in the fields so that she could take on more (non-agricultural) work and earn a bit more money. After all, they didn't have much savings. I also made clothes and shoes for the grandchildren as their mother didn't know how to do such jobs.*

In Village B where men and women of the middle generation (G2) had migrated, childcare and farm work responsibilities had shifted onto the older left behind generation (G1). However, when married G2 and G3 members both lived in cities as migrants, a new process of intergenerational negotiations emerged. Daughter-in-law Li and her husband worked as street vendors in the city (repairing shoes for a daily income of 40–200 yuan per day) and, as their only son and his wife earned low wages in a factory work (~1000 yuan a month each) they joined the family business instead. Nevertheless, Daughter-in-law Li refused to care for the granddaughter when their son's wife gave birth to a baby girl in the city:

*My daughter-in-law wasn't working in a factory (she did some piecework at home, such as making necklaces) so she was responsible for sending her daughter to the kindergarten. If I had to do pick-ups and drop-offs, I wouldn't be able to help my son with his business. ... I also want to stay in the city a bit longer so that we can save a bit more money for our old age. Relying upon children is difficult as they face heavy financial pressures too!...When we're around 60, we will definitely go back and spend our time growing some vegetables and looking after the grandchildren.*

The dynamics between Daughter-in-law Li and Granddaughter-in-law Li at the migration destination question a linear interpretation of reversed intergenerational relations in China. In contrast to Daughter-in-law Wang (G2) who stayed behind in the village and faced discrimination by the private sector which preferred younger women, Daughter-in-law Li (G2) was part of a family business in the city that had been set up by her and her husband. Before marriage Granddaughter-in-law Li (G3) worked in a factory, but after marriage she undertook only work at home (making necklaces and other handicrafts). Unlike Daughter-in-law Wang who embraced her grandmothering obligation, Daughter-in-law Li refused to look after her granddaughter because she wanted to continue earning money in the city. And so, in the negotiations between women of different generations, it was their status in the private sector

that shaped and defined the form that the intergenerational division of labour took within the domestic sector. That being said, Daughter-in-law Li acknowledged that when she returned to the village and no longer had access to the private sector, she would follow the normal practice of looking after the grandchildren in order to enable her son and his wife to earn money in the city.

## 8 | CONCLUSION

By exploring the material and social practices through which people reproduced themselves on a daily and generational basis across three generations of rural families in China, this article has demonstrated the interlinkages between the productive and reproductive spheres in both Mao and post-Mao eras. Despite changes in productive activities across generations, both the industrializing socialist state and the market sector systematically externalized the costs of social reproduction by shifting them onto rural households. From the 'double burden' which they carried in the Mao Era to multi-sited 'householding' (Douglass, 2006) in the era of migration, unpaid and invisible reproductive work undertaken unambiguously by women has been central to China's economic modernization since 1949. The three-generational analysis also exposes the multiple forces—patrilineal and patrilocal kinship, state and market—in shaping the organization and negotiation of reproductive work among women of different generations within the household. The transition from a planned economy to a market economy accelerated rural-to-urban migration, widened inequality (between urban and rural sectors, between genders and across generations) yet the intergenerational power shift is uneven and non-linear.

Using rural China as a case study, this article adds significantly to the existing social reproduction debate, which is largely focused on Western capitalist societies or framed in a distinction between the Global North and Global South. Through a comparison of reproduction and production in different economic systems, it challenges the dichotomy between capitalist and other economic systems implicit in the existing literature. It reveals that both the socialist state and market have drawn on the cultural system of gender, and exploited the unpaid and invisible labour of women to facilitate capital accumulation. In short, by providing cheap labourers to the urban industrial production as well as supplying unpaid labour—generally performed by women—as a systemic subsidy to production, rural households are the unacknowledged foundation on which China's economic success has rested.

Applying Elson's model reveals how China's modernization in both the Mao and post-Mao era heavily relied upon the unpaid non-market-oriented feminized labour undertaken in rural households. The Chinese case study also extends Elson's model. The household, in both Elson's model and recent social reproduction theory, has been implicitly seen as a conjugal unit premised upon a gendered division of labour. This article reveals the complex negotiations between generations of women that shape the organization of reproductive work in households and suggests the need to widen discussion beyond considerations of gender to also consider generation and kinship structures. Further, this article disputes a linear interpretation of generational power shifts over time in the context of agrarian transformations and calls for more attention to the impact on intergenerational negotiation in a variety of material and geographical circumstances.

The agrarian question remains an unsolved paradox in China's economic development as modernization itself is firmly grounded in an urban–rural divide. Since 1949, the Communist Party's industrialization strategy has prioritized the development of cities at the expense of rural China. Reforms in the 1980s enabled rural to urban migration, however migration is not a sufficient condition for the reproduction of rural households as rural migrants have been overwhelmingly concentrated in low-paid jobs (Fan, 2007). This high degree of material inequality experienced by rural households is also exacerbated by the dual welfare regime in China. Only since 2009 have rural pensions<sup>23</sup> gradually been introduced—nearly 60 years after the introduction of urban pensions. In addition, medical care, education and

<sup>23</sup>Although a rural pension has now been introduced in China, and welcomed by rural residents, the gap between rural and urban pensions is striking. In 2019, for example, a retired urban factory worker's monthly pension was 2000 yuan while the state pension for a rural resident was a mere 5% of this figure (c.100 yuan).

rural infrastructure development have all lagged well behind the provision in urban regions (Hell & Rozelle, 2020). This deeply entrenched urban–rural divide accelerated the crisis of social reproduction in rural households, which has manifested itself in various ways across three generations, including the death of young children and inter-generational conflict as a result of financial strain. Elson (1998) warned, ‘the domestic sector cannot ... be seen as a bottomless well upon which the other sectors can draw’. Therefore, depending upon rural households to absorb the crisis of social reproduction is not a sustainable solution for agrarian transformation and will continue to perpetuate gender, generational and urban–rural inequalities. It is critical for the Chinese economy to provide decent livelihoods and welfare for the rural population and help to lift rural families out of a perpetual cycle of low income (from low-paid migration and subsistence farming) and high expenditure (due to increasing costs of social reproduction).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for the support from Elena Baglioni, Hannah Bargawi, Alessandra Mezzadri, Lyn Ossome and Sara Stevano—guest editors of the special issue—throughout the publication process. I would like to thank Robert Ash for his thoughtful comments on the first draft of this article. I would also like to thank three anonymous referees, Carla Gras and Helena Perez-Nino for their constructive feedback when revising the manuscript.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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**How to cite this article:** Liu, J. (2024). Social reproduction in rural Chinese families: A three-generation portrait. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, e12578. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joac.12578>