

## **Economic Reforms, Changing Intergenerational Transfers, and Women's Labor in Contemporary Rural South China**

**Clara Wai-chun To, PhD**  
Department of Social Sciences  
The Hong Kong Institute of Education  
10 Lo Ping Road  
Tai Po, New Territories  
Hong Kong

### **Abstract**

*Studies in household research, gender, and economic change increasingly recognize the important role of cultural motives and inter-household transfers in affecting intra-household bargaining and outcomes, including women's labor allocation. Utilizing ethnographic data collected from rural south China, this article demonstrates that women's labor allocation is not simply a result of market-oriented economic reforms, but mediated by household goals of familial reproduction and their personal motives in a context of rising consumerism, escalating costs of intergenerational transfers, and changing intergenerational relations. Being active social agents, women deploy their labor not only to fulfill their parental responsibilities and to improve their social position in a changing rural status hierarchy, but to pursue their own interests. Focusing on the rising costs of three major intergenerational transfers, namely housing, wedding expenses, and education, I demonstrate how the impacts of socio-economic change on rural Chinese women vary by their marriage cohorts, rather than being monolithic.*

**Keywords:** Intergenerational transfers, economic change, Chinese women, gender, labor, family strategies, marriage cohort

### **1. Introduction**

The concept of “adaptive family strategies” has been widely used to understand household behaviors, such as employment and labor allocation, and individuals’ and household responses to macro economic and social changes in both developed and developing countries. While critics have challenged the assumption of a unitary household with a collective goal, recent studies have called for the need to inquire into the motives of actors (Katz, 1997), including those that are non-economic in nature. Moreover, research on gender, households/intra-household allocation, and economic development underscores the importance of inter-household transfers, such as intergenerational transfers and assets at marriage, in affecting intra-household bargaining and outcomes, including women’s labor deployment (Agarwal, 1994, 1997; Alam, 2012; de la Brière, Hallman, & Quisumbing, 2003; Hallman, 2003; Katz, 1997).

This study examines the varied cultural meanings of intergenerational transfers to three cohorts of married women and the impact of their rising costs on their labor allocation in contemporary rural southern China, mediating the impact of market-oriented economic reforms. While these intergenerational transfers play an increasingly important role in accomplishing the cultural goals of family reproduction and status attainment in post-reform China, they are also instrumental for fulfilling the personal interests of, and carry diverse meanings for, women of different marriage cohorts with varied family responsibilities. Viewing women and their family members as active social agents, I demonstrate that these women are not simply responding to new economic opportunities or complying with household goals, but that they are actively pursuing their personal interests, which may or may not align with these household objectives. Focusing on the rising costs of three major intergenerational transfers, namely housing, wedding expenses, and education, this study aims to elucidate how the impacts of economic and social change on Chinese women’s labor vary by their marriage cohorts and life stages, rather than being monolithic.

## 2. Literature Review

Scholars have utilized the concept of “adaptive family strategies” to understand how families respond to macro social and economic changes in both developed (Hareven, 1978; Scott & Tilly, 1975, Tilly & Scott, 1978) and developing countries. While the concept of “household survival strategies” has been useful in bridging the gap between social structure, social change, and individual lives, in mediating the macro and micro levels of analysis, and in depicting family and kinship as active agents in rapid social change, its underlying assumption of the household as a corporate unit has been the subject of severe criticism by various scholars.<sup>1</sup> Recently, critics further point out that actors’ motives have been assumed, rather than examined. “Household strategies tend to be read retrospectively into completed actions, especially successful ones,” while the actors are often not consulted about their motives to determine if the strategies actually exist (Jacka, 2005; Moen & Wethington, 1992, pp.241-242; Wolf, 1992, p.17). Recent studies suggest the importance of personal initiatives, peer influences, and individual interests, instead of parental control on young rural women’s decisions to seek factory employment or migrate (Fan, 2004, pp.186-189; Jacka, 2005; Liu, 2012; Wolf, 1992, 1997).

However, the importance of cultural motives, such as family reproduction and status attainment as family goals, has been underexamined. These may include: 1) the responsibility to provide for children’s marriage and inheritance, particularly sons in patriarchal and patrilocal societies, such as rural China; 2) the attempt to improve, or at least maintain, one’s social reputation in a changing social status hierarchy; and 3) to achieve intergenerational mobility through investing in children’s education.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the role of cultural motives, recent research highlights the importance of intergenerational transfers and dynamics (Agarwal, 1994, 1997; Katz, 1997; Quisumbing & Maluccio, 2003) in affecting intra-household bargaining and outcomes. Studies have demonstrated that intergenerational transfers between parents and married children, such as assets at marriage, dowry payments, and schooling may also have substantial influence on outcomes in marriages, as well as cross-generational impacts by children’s gender (Duflo, 2003; Fafchamps, Kebede, & Quisumbing, 2009). Parents’ assets, landholdings in particular, determine the premarital and current assets of their respective married children. Women’s pre-wedding assets, in turn, improve the well-being of their children, such as through clothing and education expenditures (de la Brière, Hallman, & Quisumbing, 2003; Quisumbing & Smith, 2009) and decrease the morbidity of daughters (Hallman, 2003).

While these studies provide insights to the understanding of the impacts of intergenerational transfers on intra-household processes and resource allocation, few studies examine how changing intergenerational transfers and their rising costs may redefine women’s household and individual goals, and consequently modify their labor deployment. Moreover, most studies discuss the impact of these transfers on dependent children, sometimes via the mother, and less attention has been paid to their diverse impact on different cohorts of married women. This study will fill the gap by examining the cultural meanings of these transfers, as well as personal motives and the subsequent labor deployment of rural Chinese women by their marriage cohorts.

## 3. The Chinese Context

In the past thirty years, rural China has experienced dramatic transformations in the spheres of production, consumption, and the social status structure. By the end of 1983, market-oriented reforms under the rubric of the “household responsibility system” replaced the collective farm system, which had been in place for more than two decades in most parts of China (Lin, 1994). During the collectivization era (from the mid-1950s to 1978), private ownership was abolished and farmland was confiscated by the state. Agricultural production was carried out by production teams consisting of villagers and directed by team leaders, instead of family households. After 1978, collective land was divided and reallocated to individual households. Although rural households only had use rights, but not ownership of land (and thus no right to buy or sell farmland), they regained full autonomy over the management of their production and labor. They took advantage of the new economic opportunities and diversified their household economies, with off-farm employment and sideline production, such as livestock farming and cash crop cultivation, playing a much more important role in generating household savings and cash income.

In addition to the dramatic transformations in the sphere of production, there were also substantial changes in consumption and the rural status hierarchy. During the collectivization era, the Chinese state controlled not only production through central planning, but also the redistribution system of goods and services.

Many consumer items and daily necessities, limited in varieties and often in short supply, were distributed through bureaucratic channels, the work units (*danwei*) in urban areas, and the production teams in rural areas instead of through the free market (Lu, 2000; Walder, 1986). In the post-collectivization era (1979 to the present), market-oriented reforms in the redistribution system have allowed more goods and services to move through the market, fueling new desires not only in the urban areas, but also in the countryside, often called the “revolution of consumption” (Croll, 2006; Davis, 2000; Yan, 2000). The most notable phenomena of this consumption revolution in rural China were the housing boom that started in the mid-1980s (Cheng, 1993; Li, 1993; Siu, 1993; Sargeson, 2002, 2004; Yan, 1997, 2003) and the influx of luxury consumer goods. Starting in the late 1980s, new houses were erected everywhere in rural China, with two-story cement houses tiled on the exterior becoming the new standard in southern China, replacing mud brick structures in the area under study. In some more affluent villages, such as in Zhejiang province, even more luxurious European-style villas of three or four stories became a part of the new rural landscape (Sargeson, 2002, 2004). Besides housing, luxury consumer goods - particularly imported or foreign-branded ones - such as color TVs, VCRs, motorcycles, foreign-brand cigarettes, wines and alcohols, and western-style furniture and home decoration, could also be found in rural homes in the mid-1980s.

While rural households in general may acquire these items to improve their living standard, larger appliances and modern-style furniture were particularly important intergenerational transfers provided to the young couples, mostly by the groom’s family as marital gifts. Housing, being the most expensive item among all, is particularly important in enhancing the “competitiveness” of sons in an increasingly competitive marriage market, besides being the only inheritable private property in rural China (see more detailed discussion below). With the decline of parental authority with the confiscation of farmland and economic reforms favoring the young, provision of a new house and marrying their sons in style have also become important strategies in securing filial loyalty and old age support (Guo, 2001; Yan, 1997, 2003).

Besides changes in rural consumption, market reforms also led to significant changes in the rural status hierarchy, which were based more on economic achievement and purchasing power than on political position (Unger, 1994; Yan, 1992).<sup>3</sup> Not only does income level differentiate the different strata of rural society, individuals’ purchasing power and possession of splendid new housing and luxury items have become increasingly important signifiers of one’s economic achievement and social status (Yan, 2000). In small rural communities in which “face” or social reputation has been a powerful social control mechanism, villagers are under strong social pressure to keep up with a socially-acceptable standard of living to avoid falling behind the others and losing “face” (Li, 1993; Liu, 2000). Egalitarianism in the collectivization period in terms of low level of income and consumption for everyone is now turned upside down and imbued with new meaning: peasants have to follow suit with others in the pursuit of social status through conspicuous consumption.

With rising consumerism and a changing rural social hierarchy, housing and new consumer items, particularly luxury and durable goods, serve important social functions for family reproduction and status attainment for rural families, while education remains as a key investment for achieving intergenerational social mobility (see more details below). Yet, their standards and costs have been escalating since the mid-1980s. In the village under study, housing costs rose from about 2,000 *yuan*<sup>4</sup> for a new mud house in the early 1980s to an average of 20,000 to 30,000 *yuan* for a one-story single-family cement house in the late 1990s. A two-family duplex of two stories amounted to 100,000 *yuan*. Wedding expenses, including for the wedding feast and the conjugal fund used to purchase luxury items, increased from an average of 200 to 400 *yuan* in the mid-1970s to 10,000 to 15,000 *yuan* in 1999, while the average annual household income of a family of four with two income earners in 1999 was 8,000 *yuan* in the study area. Luxury goods, such as western-style furniture and bedding as well as expensive household appliances, such as a large color TV set of a famous imported brand such as Sony or Panasonic, a motorcycle, a washing machine and a refrigerator, took up a major proportion of the wedding expenses. Tuition for primary education also skyrocketed as a result of educational reforms from 20 to 30 *yuan* per semester in the late 1980s to 700 to 1,400 *yuan* per semester for elementary and junior middle school children.<sup>5</sup> Costs for high school students were even higher, amounting to 5,000 or 6,000 *yuan* annually, including tuition and room and board fees in urban high schools. Parents who had children pursuing higher or tertiary education, such as training in the police cadet school or normal university (for training teachers) with the hope of securing a more stable government job, had to pay 6500 to 8000 *yuan* annually for tuition and room and board expenses.

The escalating costs of these major transfers have significant impacts on rural household economy, labor deployment, and migration decisions. Reports have shown that, for some families, the need to save for house construction and children's education has been one of the key motivators for rural-urban migration (Fan, 2008). Rural migrants have spent a large proportion of remittances on house construction, renovation, or for clearing related debts (Fan, 2004, 2008; Murphy, 2004, p.257; Sargeson, 2002, p.945).

#### **4. Research Design and Methodology**

The fieldwork for this study was conducted in Baijia village<sup>6</sup> in the Aotao township of Conghua City in Guangdong province of the People's Republic of China, 80 km from the provincial capital of Guangzhou. Land was divided and allocated to rural families in 1981 and again in 1984 on a per capita basis. Basically, the economic model in this village is characterized by off-farm employment of the village men in the construction and transportation industries as in many parts of rural China, while the village women participate in small-scale sideline production and subsistence farming, with some variations among the different cohorts. The types of sideline production undertaken include growing cash crops (fruit orchards) and raising animals, such as pigs, chickens, ducks, and geese. Among the various kinds of sideline activities, pig farming is a particularly important source of cash income and savings.

The total population of this village was 212 in 52 households<sup>7</sup>, with an average household size of 4.1.<sup>8</sup> Based on interview data on genealogies of different surname groups and households crosschecked with demographic data in the official household registration record, 27 households were selected as the sample, including seven stem families, 15 nuclear families, and five elderly nuclear families of different marriage cohorts ranging from those who married before 1949 until the 1990s, with an average household size of 4.3. This study was part of a larger study examining how changing intergenerational contracts and transfers affect women's allocation of production and reproductive labor, in which I used the sibling set for sample selection instead of selecting households on an individual and random basis. In other words, the households of the eldest and the youngest married sons in the family together with their living parents were used in the sample, who likely lived in a separate household than with their married sons. These households very often fell into different marriage cohorts, with parents with adult sons likely belonging to the cohort marrying before the 1960s and their sons marrying between 1970 and 1999.

There were 34 married women in the 27 sample households, because stem families could include two married women of different generations (i.e., a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law).

Among them, 15% married before 1949, 18% between 1950 and 1969, 44% between 1970 and 1989, and 23% of the women belonged to the youngest marriage cohort who married in the 1990s. According to the vice-chairman of the village committee (village government), the average annual per capita income of rural households in this area was 2,000 *yuan* (US \$241.84) in 1999, compared to 3,628.95 *yuan* (US \$438.81) across Guangdong province and 2,210.34 *yuan* (US \$267.27) across China (State Statistical Bureau, PRC 2000, p. 21).

The gender division of labor in productive activities somewhat varied by marriage cohort. Older men were the only group solely engaging in farming and livestock husbandry without holding an off-farm occupation at the same time. Older women mostly engaged in agricultural and sideline production, while their role in sideline activities varied by their husbands' presence and sideline production. Middle-aged women who married between the mid-1970s and 1989 played a more important role in the management of grain and sideline production, such as pig and poultry farming, since their husbands were mostly employed off-farm and only helped with farming during busy seasons. These women were also more likely to engage in multiple economic activities, including seasonal off-farm employment. In contrast, there is a greater likelihood of the youngest marriage cohort of women who married in the 1990s to quit farming while engaging in self-employment off-farm.

The fieldwork was conducted between 1998 and 2000, during which I had the rare opportunity to stay with a host family of which the household head was a senior elder of his surname group and also an ex-brigade and commune leader. This study used a triangulation of qualitative methods, complemented by quantitative data. Multiple visits were made to conduct in-depth interviews with women in the sample households and sometimes with their husbands. Basic household data were collected during the first visit, while semi-structured interviews were conducted in follow-up visits, with each lasting for one to two and a half hours. Information on the household economy was collected, with special attention paid to the relationships between productive activities, budget management, and the three major household expenses.

Since rural informants were not used to having their conversations recorded, which might elicit political sensitivity and affect the quality of the data, interview data were recorded verbatim immediately (in Chinese) after each interview, with several informative cases and sections of the transcriptions translated into English at a later time. This method was effective because the interviews were conducted in an informal and casual atmosphere. Data were then coded using a coding scheme developed during the process of research, following the grounded theory method (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Strauss & Corbin 1990). Patterns were then established by sorting and comparisons by marriage cohorts, the husband's income and occupation, as well as housing conditions.

## **5. Intergenerational Transfers, Cultural Goals, and Personal Motives**

As we have discussed earlier, housing, luxury marital gifts, and education were important intergenerational transfers and imperative status signifiers or means of achieving social mobility. While these intergenerational transfers are important to rural households in general, they carry diverse social meanings to and served different personal interests for the three cohorts of rural women studied here. Since housing and marital gifts are closely related to each other as intergenerational transfers given to adult children, mainly sons and daughters-in-law, at the time of their marriage, I will first discuss them and their significance in fulfillment of cultural goals of women and their families before analyzing education, the other major transfer across generations.

### **5.1 Housing, Marital Gifts, and Wedding Expenses**

#### **5.1.1 Meanings for Older Women**

Among the various intergenerational transfers, housing is the most important and expensive item, affecting all three cohorts of married women, albeit in different ways. Since the confiscation of farmland by the state in the mid-1950s, housing has become the single most important inheritable private property and thus the major good for intergenerational transfer to sons (Potter & Potter, 1990).<sup>9</sup> New house construction, in particular, requires many years of savings and often leaves the household in debt for a few years after the new house has been built.<sup>10</sup>

A new house also becomes an indispensable prerequisite (Potter & Potter, 1990) in finding a wife with the rise of young women's bargaining power in mate choice and marriage (Sargeson, 2002, 2004). As Wai, a father of two married sons explained:

These days we don't have much (property) for the sons, mainly the house. I have to build a house for my sons; otherwise they won't be able to find a wife.

For many parents, preparing for sons' marriage is a "*renwu*", a term borrowed from the collectivization era referring to tasks assigned by production team leaders, which need to be fulfilled without reservation. Uncle Fa, a father of three married sons remarked on his tasks ("*renwu*") as to "build houses for them, get them married", and "help them with child care". Villagers commented that it was when all of the sons were married that the parents' responsibilities were fully accomplished. When asked about her feelings after her younger son's wedding, Aunt Bi, a mother of two married sons and my host family, said:

It is our duty to find a wife for my sons, to continue the family line. I am a bit relieved now, although I won't be completely relieved until my younger son bears a child.

Although she considered getting her son married as only a partial fulfillment of her parental duties, it nevertheless indicates her commitment to her obligations and the pressure that she felt.

For older women, provision of a new house and luxury marital gifts are not only instrumental in getting their sons married---a pivotal parental responsibility, but give them "face". With rising living standards and increasing social expectations, not being able to prepare for their sons' marriage in style with large conjugal funds<sup>11</sup> and new housing would lead to shame and moral failure for the parents, who risk "losing face" among their relatives and neighbors (Li, 1993; Sargeson, 2002).

For instance, Aunt Bi engaged in market sale of vegetables and poultry on her own in addition to grain cultivation and pig farming to save money for the wedding expenses for her younger son. When I asked her why she worked so hard, she explained as follows: When my elder son and younger daughter got married, we didn't hold wedding banquets for them...we were saving money to build the house. Now, A Guo (her youngest child of four) is getting married, it's really a shame (not to do that)(*ng ho yi si*).

Her married daughter, in another occasion, disclosed that her mother's relatives and friends had repeatedly asked her about holding a wedding feast for her son, so that she was subjected to a lot of pressure from her natal family and relatives to meet social expectations.

While women work hard to save money for house construction and marriage expenses for marrying their sons in style, fulfilling their parental duties and social expectations, their decisions are not always in line with their spouse's, but rather their own interests. Aunt Bi referred to her husband's stand on this issue and added:

Wai was not interested in holding a banquet; he disliked extravagance and thought that it was wasteful. So I grew some extra vegetables on the river bank and sold them on the market. I have saved 9,000 *yuan* (for my son's wedding expenses), and now not much money is left (after the wedding)!

With the fear that her hope of holding a banquet may not materialize, she had to take on extra economic activities to bring in more income. Instead of simply complying with household goals or fulfilling a shared goal with her husband and son, her personal interests were the most at stake—to “save her face” by being able to manage offering a respectable wedding feast for her younger son.

### 5.1.2 Meanings for Young Women

Compared with their older counterparts, a new house and luxury marital gifts not only bring social status to young brides, but practical economic benefits. Since a young couple acquires most of its household goods in the form of the conjugal fund, a larger endowment---in the form of a new house and luxury marital gifts---means a higher living standard, less financial burden, as well as a more comfortable and debt-free life. Liying, the elder daughter-in-law of my host family, explained the impact of a new cement house on the well-being of a bride and its significance in the marriage market: These days when (rural) young women choose their husbands, they will consider if the family has a (new) house or not, if they are well off. If they have a house, you don't have to work that hard. Take Aijin as an example; Guohua (Aijin's husband)'s family is rich. She can choose not to work. Otherwise, would she date him?

In another occasion, she referred to a young woman in the village who married into a family in another village which provided no new house for her. She commented on her marriage choice as follows:

A Mei's husband was very poor. He didn't have a (new) house, but only a mudbrick house. And she's willing to marry him. She was pretty, many guys courted her, and she didn't choose them. She's so stupid.

Her comments vividly account for reports on the pivotal role of young women's aspirations for a new house at marriage in the housing boom and rising consumerism in rural areas (Sargeson, 2004; Yan, 1997, 2003, 2005). Being the major beneficiaries of the conjugal fund, it is not difficult to understand why young women demand new housing and luxury marital gifts as a prerequisite to marriage.

In addition to practical economic considerations, housing and luxury marital gifts are also important status markers for brides. Marital gifts are usually displayed to the members of both the bride and the groom's village while being transported from the bride's home (as indirect dowry) when the bride is escorted to the groom's family on the wedding day. The fact that a washing machine and a refrigerator being included as the new “four big items” (*si dajian*, i.e., luxury consumer goods) even though they are most likely to lay idle in the new home due to insufficient or expensive electricity, is particularly telling of their symbolic importance as status signifiers.

### 5.2 Housing and Children's Education – Meanings for Middle-Aged Women

While housing and marital gifts serve as important transfers to the young in fulfilling the goal of family reproduction and as significant status markers, new housing and education for their children are important “investments” for middle-aged women to pursue both household goals and their personal interests. These women, who likely did not receive new houses (which would have been the old-style mud and brick houses) from their parents-in-law upon marriage, are also eager to invest in new housing due to the strong social pressure to conform to the new standard of living amid the housing boom (Li, 1993; Liu, 2000). However, instead of simply being cultural dupes laboring to fulfill family goals or meet social expectations, new house construction is an important and effective strategy for these women to safeguard their savings from their husbands' personal expenses or gambling, from their relatives in the form of loans, and to provide them with a sense of security. Xiaoxiao's example serves as an excellent illustration of women's active role in house construction in the pursuit of her own interests. She explained why she initiated the construction of a new house in the village:

Author: Was it Mirror who suggested building the house?

Xiaoxiao: I suggested building it. Mirror has a place to stay (in the market town). I don't have a house. If my two children and I return to stay in the village, there's no place for us.

Author: So you wanted to build it?

Xiaoxiao: I didn't make up my mind (at the beginning)...Mirror had very good relationships with his colleagues and friends. At that time, if other people knew that you had some money, they would borrow money from you to do business. I was afraid that the money would be gone if people borrowed it. So I thought, well, it's better to build it. So Mirror asked his friends to give him back all his money.

Xiaoxiao: It was fortunate that I built the house. Otherwise, everything would be gone with the flooding. After the flooding, there were a lot of people living in my house.

Since it is not uncommon for rural households to borrow money from relatives for house construction, wedding expenses, and sometimes children's education expenses, house construction is an effective way to protect their earnings from "disappearing" in the form of loans to relatives. It also provides them with a sense of security and a feeling of being grounded. In addition, middle-aged women use housing as an important investment strategy to safeguard their earnings and financial assets from loss in gambling by their own husbands by turning them into a "fixed" and durable form. Xiaoyun and her husband recently added a second story to the existing one-story apartment available at the time of her marriage with the income from selling the litchi orchard owned and managed by her husband and brother-in-law. Just like Xiaoxiao, Xiaoyun initiated adding a second-story at a time when gambling has become rampant in the village with a burgeoning economy and rising household income:

Author: Who initiated building the second floor?

Xiaoyun: I suggested it. If we didn't build it, the money would be gone. My husband will take the money and gamble. Little by little, all will be gone. No money will be left.....

Xiaoyun: We used the money we got from selling the orchard for house construction; nothing was left behind. (The two brothers sold the orchard for ¥80,000).

Author: Did your husband agree with adding the second floor?

Xiaoyun: My husband agreed, but I initiated it first.

As we can see from their narratives, while their decisions and the outcome may *de facto* benefit the whole family and overlap with household goals---especially from an outsider's perspective---it is women, being perfectly aware of their personal motives, who take the initiative rather than simply follow their husbands' decisions to protect their own interests.

### 5.3 Education as a Major Intergenerational Transfer

While housing, marital gifts, and wedding expenses carry significant symbolic meanings at a time when conspicuous consumption becomes a major means of status enhancement, education is the principal intergenerational transfer for middle-aged women to make to their unmarried children. It is an important means for the young to achieve social mobility in a changing labor market. Although increasing opportunities for off-farm work in the cities and special economic zones may serve as disincentives for investing in children's education, most parents in the village under study still considered it as a parental responsibility to provide nine-year basic education to their dependents through junior high school, as mandated by the Compulsory Education Law. In particular, parents with children who were promising in academic performance and had been enrolled in upper middle schools and postsecondary institutions would try all means to generate income to finance their children's education. As a father of two sons explained, attending high school gave his children a chance to "break away from the village" (*chongchuqu*) and shed their rural status, which is still a social stigma, in which the rural/urban divide and the household registration (*hukou*) system<sup>12</sup> continue as pertinent stratification mechanisms. Tertiary education leading to jobs with more security, such as police cadets and teachers, was also considered to be a worthwhile investment. Contrary to reports which state that girls are at a disadvantage in rural education during the reform era, mothers consider education as an important asset for daughters to improve their well-being and life chances. As Shulan, a mother of two who not only paid for her daughter's tuition bills but extra payments for after-school tutorial lessons, explained:

Girls don't inherit property from parents like boys, so if my daughter performs well in school, I will be willing to support her in her studies so that she could have some knowledge and a better future.

Education thus remains as a key route for parents in enhancing the life chances of their dependents.

## 6. Intergenerational Transfers and Women's Labor by Marriage Cohorts

While these intergenerational transfers carry specific meanings and fulfill important social functions and personal interests for rural women and their households, their ever-rising standards and costs since the mid-1980s redefine their financial needs and priorities, and impact the labor allocation of women varying by their marriage cohort. During my fieldwork study, villagers repeatedly cited the need to pay for housing, wedding expenses, and children's tuition bills as a major motivator for expanding their production activities, particularly sideline production.

### 6.1 Older Cohort Laboring for Their Sons' Marriage

As we have seen in the above discussion, housing, marital gifts, and wedding expenses are important transfers to adult children, particularly sons of marriageable age, for older women. Labor allocation of these women evolved around the need and parental responsibility to get their sons married, which reign as the top priority in their family goals. Being classified as "half-labor" or "non-labor" under the work point system during the collectivization era, these women were likely to withdraw from agricultural field labor after their eldest son married (Parish & Whyte, 1978). With the dismantling of the collective farms in 1981, the artificial restrictions placed on older women's labor were alleviated. Rather than simply responding to new market opportunities, older women expanded the scale of their productive activities to save for their sons' marriage, with most of them now postponed their "retirement" until their youngest son was married. Since sideline activities were the major source of cash income and savings for the older women and their households, most of these older women engaged in activities, such as livestock and poultry farming, as well as vegetable cultivation and market sale, in addition to grain production (Table 1). Four of six women of the older cohort marrying in the 1950s and 1960s in my study raised pigs and poultry, such as ducks and chicken, with one of them also working off-farm as a "temporary" elementary school teacher, and another woman engaging in cash crop cultivation to bring in extra income.

**Table 1: Changes in Older Women's Labor Allocation and Gender Division of Labor**

Name	Women's sideline	Women's work after sons married	Men's sideline	Men's work after sons married
<b>High income group<sup>a</sup></b>				
Yan	sows and pigs	quit SLP <sup>b</sup> ; vegetables for own consumption; child care for second and third daughters-in-law	geese farming, tangerine orchard	quit SLP, worked off-farm
Aunt Bi	vegetables and some poultry	quit SLP; child care for younger son and daughter	pigs	quit SLP, child care for daughter in city with some payment
Hua	pigs, ducks, and chicken (with help of maternal mother); work off-farm as substitute teacher	quit SLP and off-farm job; child care for younger son	worked off-farm	kept off-farm job as a factory manager
Xiang	helped elder DIL <sup>b</sup> with livestock-raising; child care and chores	ditto	orange orchard; managed store in market town	managed store in market town
<b>Low income group</b>				
Hao <sup>c</sup>	pigs and chicken	chicken; also collected medicinal herbs for sale	litchi orchard; vegetables for sale	vegetables for sale after orchard was destroyed by flood
Fang	helped elder DIL with livestock-raising; child care and chores	helped two DILs with livestock-raising; child care and chores	helped elder son manage litchi orchard	helped elder son manage litchi orchard for two years, then quit

a. I am referring to the husband's income here instead of household income before these couples retired from farm work. Men in the high income group earned 1,001 or more *yuan* a month, in the middle-income group 501 to 1,000 *yuan*, and in the low income group less than 500 *yuan*.

b. DIL stands for daughter-in-law; SLP stands for sideline production.

c. Youngest son was still single and lived with parents.



While older women have to work hard on their own sideline activities, the demand on their labor may be further intensified due to an increase in the scale of the husbands' economic activities to generate savings for house construction and their sons' wedding expenses. Their husbands, unlike younger men, were more likely to stay in the village and engage in agricultural and sideline activities, which are more lucrative than those of the women (Table 1). Instead of receiving help from their men, older women may bear a "double" burden contributing to their husbands' sideline production to different degrees besides participating in their own sideline activities.

This is particularly true in the case of pig farming, as women have to increase their labor input into vegetable and rice cultivation for fodder, as well as time for fodder preparation, which are partially or exclusively women's tasks. For instance, Aunt Bi used to keep six hogs when her husband worked as a factory manager in a nearby city. When her husband quit his job in 1989 and took the pig farming over, he increased the number of pigs from six to about 20 in each batch, with 50 to 60 pigs plus three litters of piglets sold annually to save money to build a new house and to prepare for the marriage of his two sons. Instead of being relieved from work because her husband took charge of the pig farming, Aunt Bi then had to cultivate more paddy fields and vegetables, and help to cook the fodder for some 20 pigs rather than six when she raised them by herself. In addition, she expanded her vegetable cultivation by tilling some dry land by the riverbank and the land parcel of another villager (with his permission), and began selling vegetables and chickens in the market to save money for her son's wedding banquet, as discussed earlier. She managed to save about 9,000 *yuan* from her market sale of vegetables and poultry, and spent about 7,800 *yuan* for the wedding banquet and other related expenses for her younger son, leaving only about 1,200 *yuan* for personal savings in her bank account. While all couples work hard to fulfill their parental obligations to get all of their sons married, older women's work-life trajectory is more dominated by the needs and marital status of their adult children ---now switching to child care and domestic labor. They are very likely to retire from field labor and extensive sideline production after all of their sons are married, while men remain in paid employment, either keeping their off-farm jobs or switching to nonagricultural employment to support themselves and their wives. As Table 1 shows, all of the older women quit cultivating rice after their sons were married, including the only woman who quit her full-time job as a "temporary" elementary school teacher to assist her daughter-in-law with child care and cooking. If they cultivated some vegetables or raised a few chickens, it was mainly for household consumption and not for fodder or market sale, or for helping their daughters-in-law. Meanwhile, they continued to perform "indoor" labor by assisting their daughters-in-law with child care or even sideline production.

## **6.2 Middle-Aged Cohort - Double Burden of Housing and Children's Education Expenses**

While the older women's labor deployment centers around their sons' marriage and the expenses incurred, the middle-aged women (married in the 1970s and 1980s) are pressured by their own housing needs and rising educational costs of their children. As we have discussed above, unlike the older women who build houses for marrying sons, these women seek to provide housing for their own use to keep up with social expectations and to protect their savings, even though they may have plans for their sons' marriage in mind. Since they do not inherit much endowment from their parents-in-law (in terms of housing and a starting conjugal fund), they have to rely on themselves. These women consciously expand the scale of production, which normally reaches a peak a few years before and after house construction.

**Table 2: Changes in the Number of Pigs Raised by Middle-Aged Women Before and after House Construction or Clearance of Housing Debts**

	No. to start with	Maximum no. raised	No. raised after house construction	Housing debts cleared
<u>High income group<sup>a</sup></u>				
Yuexiang	1	2	2 (0 in 1999)	Yes
Jiao	missing	9 + 1 sow	6-7 (0 in 1999)	Yes
Qunxue	3	4, + 1 sow	3-4, +1 sow (0 in 1999)	Yes <sup>b</sup>
Lin	1	7	1-2 (0 in 1999)	Yes <sup>c</sup>
<u>Middle income group</u>				
Fen	2	20 + 3 sows	6	Yes
Xiaoxiao	3	10 + 2 sows	10	No
Meizhu	3-4	9 + 1 sow	9 (+ piglets)	No
Shulan	3-4	10 + 1 sow	6-10 + 1 sow	in 1999
Zhen	missing	missing	4	Yes <sup>c</sup>
<u>Low income group</u>				
Xiaoyun	3-4	10 + 1 sow	6-8, + 1 sow	Yes <sup>b</sup>
Yuemei	1	5 + 1 sow	2-4, + 1 sow	No
Ping	3	4 + 1 sow	3-4, + 1 sow	No
Xiaoqing <sup>d</sup>	0	0	0	No
Shang	missing	missing	pigs raised, no. missing	No
<u>N/A (husband as assistant to wife's business)</u>				
Lirong	missing	missing	pigs raised, no. missing	Yes

a. Same categorization as old-aged group.

b. Qunxue and Xiaoyun's husbands were brothers who co-owned a litchi orchard and sold it for ¥80,000 in 1999. The elder brother was constructing a new two-story house and the younger one was adding a second story to his own during my fieldwork. Xiaoyun's husband did not have another regular job and did not bring in regular income to his household.

c. Lin and Zhen were sisters-in-law. They were the only women in this cohort who had a new house built with financial assistance from the older generation.

d. The household did not have enough cash income or space to start sideline production, and the woman took care of her four young children.

Table 2 shows that these women usually raised fewer pigs at the beginning due to insufficient funding for the purchase of piglets and the cost of commercial pig feed, as well as child care responsibilities (for those who did not receive child care assistance from their mothers-in-law). The scale of their sideline production usually peaked before their house was constructed, and then decreased after that. However, the construction process would normally take a few years, and they would maintain the number of pigs they raised until they cleared all of the housing debts. While older women are likely to withdraw from outdoor agricultural labor and extensive sideline production after all of their sons are married, the burden of rising educational costs makes it unlikely for the middle-aged women to quit their sideline production completely even after a new house is built and all debts are cleared. Only two of the 15 women in this group had children who had finished their schooling (at the junior high school level), while another had young children who had not begun their schooling. As a result, two-thirds of the middle-aged women continued their sideline activities at a reduced scale, but did not quit after their homes had been built and paid for. Even the four women with husbands in the high-income group only quit pig farming in 1999 for various reasons, and none of them dropped their sideline production immediately after their new houses were built.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, the desire to build a new house and the need to pay for children's tuition fees lead these women to perform a lot of mental labor in budgeting and (sideline) production planning. With their husbands' mostly working off-farm, middle-aged women very often are in charge of the sideline production and they also play the role of household budget manager. Since children's tuition fees often compete for household financial resources with savings for housing, these women have to juggle accumulating funds for house construction and for tuition simultaneously, which requires careful financial planning. Yuemei, a *de facto* female household head whose husband worked in the nearby city Conghua and seldom returned home, reduced the number of pigs raised from five hogs to two after her house was constructed.

However, with her elder son starting middle school in the fall of 1999, causing the tuition bill for her two sons to increase, she planned to keep four piglets instead of two when her sow delivered the litter so that the pigs would be ready for sale at the right time, i.e., before or around the beginning of semesters, so that she would not need to borrow from others. She explained, emphasizing the importance of financial planning, that, “I have to budget for paying tuition fees for my kids....You have to think ahead of time. You have to plan well.” Although she emphasized the importance of budget planning repeatedly and on different occasions, she complained that there was nothing good about “controlling the purse strings” as she had to “plan very hard”. While middle-aged women play a more important role in household budget management, they also bear its burden at the same time.

### 6.3 Young Married Women Benefiting from Better Endowments at the Time of Marriage

While housing and other expenses create greater demand on the labor of the older and middle-aged women and their household economy, young married women who married in the 1990s directly benefit from her parents-in-law’s hard work. Unlike the middle-aged women who have to rely on their own resources, young women enjoy a higher level of endowment from their parents-in-law at the time of their marriage. All except two of the young women who married in the 1990s were provided with a new house, more trendy furniture and bedding, as well as luxury household appliances, such as color TV sets, as part of their starting conjugal fund, in line with the elevated standard of living and social expectations resulting from rising rural consumerism (Table 3). This is particularly the case for those who married in the late 1990s and early 2000s in the study. Moreover, since their children are still young and have not begun their elementary school education, tuition bills are not yet a big concern for these young women.

**Table 3: Number of Pigs Raised by Young Married Women**

Name	Year married	Major occupation	No. of pigs	Other poultry raised <sup>a</sup>	Housing debts cleared
<u>High income group<sup>b</sup></u>					
Liying	1990	agricultural	0	ducks	N/A <sup>c</sup>
<u>Middle income group</u>					
Qunhua	1990	industrial/agricultural	4-6	chicken	No
Jinyu	1995	agricultural	2-3, 1 sow	ducks, chicken	N/A
Shan	1995	agricultural	4-6	chicken	No
Aijin	1998	vegetable wholesaler	0	0	N/A
Yifen	1999	agricultural	0	chicken	N/A
<u>N/A (husband as assistant)</u>					
Liumei	1997	store owner	0	0	N/A
Hong	1997	store owner	0	0	N/A

a. For household consumption.

b. Same categorization as the old-aged and middle-aged group.

c. Those to whom housing debts were not applicable had their houses built by their parents before their marriage.

In general, these young married women do not have to work as hard as the older women. The five women who had agricultural labor as their major occupation either raised few or no pigs.<sup>14</sup> In fact, Jinyu was the only one raising pigs among those who did not have any housing debt. The two other women who raised four to six hogs still had debts incurred from their marriage expenses and house construction, or they did not inherit a new house upon marriage. Those who worked off-farm, unlike their middle-aged counterparts who juggle multiple economic activities, did not engage in agricultural production at all.

A comparison of Jinyu’s case with another woman in the same cohort who was still repaying housing debt highlights the significant positive impact of intergenerational transfer (in the form of housing) from the parents on a young women’s economic well-being and labor deployment. Jinyu, whose one-story house had been built by her in-laws before she married, kept one sow and usually retained two to three piglets to raise and sold the rest. She would go shopping in Conghua several times a year, spending up to one-third of the monthly expenses for some lower-middle income families in one trip, buying clothing and snacks for herself and her children, which was rare among the middle-aged village women. Jinyu’s family also bought meat, fish, and other treats, such as fruits, in the market on a regular basis.

By contrast, middle-aged women and their families who are juggling saving for housing and children's tuition "may not even have pork once a week".<sup>15</sup> Shan's case serves as a good illustration of how insufficient intergenerational transfer (in the form of housing) from the parents may negatively affect a young woman's economic status and labor deployment. Shan, whose mother-in-law was a widow and did not have the resources to pay for her wedding expenses and house construction, was still repaying her debts after three years of marriage. In order to repay her debts, she raised four to six pigs in each batch, but no sows since she did not have a pigsty. Since she cooked fodder rather than mixing it with commercial pig feed due to insufficient cash, this translated into more work from cultivating and preparing fodder. Shan was also the only young married woman in the village who did not have a bicycle and had to walk to the market town on foot.

## 7. Discussion

While scholars suggest that it is important to understand the motives behind individuals' economic behaviors, this study demonstrates that social actors do not simply respond or adapt to economic pressures or new opportunities brought about by economic changes, but act upon new conditions based on their family values, household goals, and individual motives. It demonstrates that needs of family reproduction and status attainment, rather than simply economic incentives, impact family and individual goals. To continue the family line and to fulfill the obligation to provide for their adult sons' marriage are the basic cultural motives behind the labor deployment of the older women. Their ability to provide their sons with intergenerational transfers in the form of a new house and a handsome conjugal fund and, most importantly, to find them a wife, is instrumental in bringing them reputations and social status as capable parents. Similarly, housing is a crucial means for enhancing the social status of middle-aged and young married women, while providing education for children is an important investment for middle-aged women in improving the chances of intergenerational mobility.

While women's labor deployment may appear to work for the collective good, this study extends the feminist critique of the corporate household model and demonstrates women's agency by explicating the distinctive moments when women take initiatives and strategize to pursue their personal interests, which may align with household goals or may be at odds with other family members' wishes. On the one hand, Aunt Bi's example shows that although her putting extra labor in cash crop cultivation to save for her son's wedding expenses may reflect her succumbing to social pressure, she nevertheless defied her husband's position on this matter. On the other hand, there are specific moments when women may take action to protect their own interests, which may overlap with household ones. This is particularly the case when men's short-term interests may jeopardize the welfare of the family. Middle-aged women, such as Xiaoxiao and Xiaoyun, pursued strategies to save money and invest in building a new house for themselves not simply to better their living conditions and enhance their sense of security, but to safeguard the fruits of their labor (particularly from sideline production) from men's dipping into the "common fund" for personal expenditures and loans to relatives and friends. While they use housing as an important investment strategy to protect their financial assets by turning them into a "fixed" and durable form, they not only protect their own interests, but also improve the well-being of the family. It is therefore problematic to view self-interest and altruism as two distinct and oppositional categories, and to consider that women ought to give up their personal preferences while working for the collective good. It is even further away from the reality and the subjective experience of these actors if we simply regard their behavior as "compliance" or "enforced cooperation". Not only can women pursue their interests through overt conflicts and bargaining, they can also actively and consciously accumulate resources for their own benefit within socially and culturally acceptable parameters in a particular context. It is therefore important to investigate women's motives and identify the distinctive moments when women can achieve their individual and family goals simultaneously, and to analyze contextually the conditions under which women's interests may collaborate or contradict with family goals. This is particularly important in examining the experience of women in societies where their status is low both within and outside the family. Seeing women as social actors, I demonstrate that women are conscious of their personal motives behind their actions and they actively derive strategies to protect their own interests. It is through the consultation of their personal motives, rather than imposing researchers' assumptions and interpretations retrospectively on individual and household-level data, that we can illuminate the complexities of women's strategies and their capacity as social agents.

While scholars have called for an examination of the role of intergenerational transfers in intra-household resource allocation, particularly in developing societies (Katz, 1997), this study demonstrates how their cultural meanings and impacts on women's labor deployment may vary by women's marriage cohort.

It also highlights the need to understand the significance and the impacts of intergenerational transfers in the larger context of market-oriented reforms and changing rural consumption and status hierarchy. As discussed above, intergenerational transfers carry different meanings for the three cohorts of married women, while their rising costs put greater pressure on the older and middle-aged marriage cohorts of women. Housing, the most expensive household expenditure for rural Chinese families, affects all three cohorts, but in differing ways. For older women, housing effects come from intergenerational property transfers to their adult sons of marrying age, whose family (and most likely the youngest cohort of married women) are the beneficiaries. For middle-aged women, since they did not receive much endowment at the time of the marriages in terms of housing and a conjugal fund, they have to expand their agricultural and sideline production to accumulate savings for housing expenses. In comparison, younger women who inherit a new house do not have to work as hard and have more discretionary money for their personal consumption. While housing and wedding expenses most likely complement each other as part of the marriage package for adult sons in the case of older women, children's tuition competes with housing expenditures for limited household resources among the middle-aged women.

Although intergenerational transfers in the form of housing, wedding expenses, and education, put more pressure on older and middle-aged women, their economic roles are different due to the gender division of labor with their husbands. Since most of the husbands of the older group engage in production activities at home, the older women specialize in sideline production on a smaller scale compared to that of their husbands. Thus, they appear to be "helping hands" even though both their economic contributions to the household and their labor contributions to their husbands' activities are significant. Middle-aged women play a more important role in managing household sideline production, as almost all of the husbands work off-farm. It is also more likely for middle-aged women to multi-task and engage in multiple occupations to bring in more income.

Due to the varying responsibilities at different life stages, the labor allocation to the production activities of these women also differs after they have fulfilled their major financial goals, i.e., building a new house, either for their sons or for themselves. While older women retire from field labor or off-farm employment after all of their sons are married to assist their daughters-in-law with reproductive labor, such as child care, middle-aged women only reduce the scale of sideline production instead of retiring completely from pig farming in order to finance their children's education.

## **8. Conclusion**

By focusing on the impact of changing intergenerational transfers on women's labor allocation, this study further contributes to the literature on family strategies and intra-household resource allocation by examining the impact of cultural motives and inter-household transfers in guiding women's labor deployment. As I have tried to demonstrate in my analysis, intergenerational transfers serve as the key medium in guiding women's economic behavior. On the one hand, the need to provide transfers to children and their rising costs force older and middle-aged women to expand the scale of household production. On the other hand, they also affect women of different cohorts differentially, depending on the endowment level that women received from their parents at the time of their marriage. Through the analysis of the varied impact of the rising costs of the three major intergenerational transfers on Chinese women's economic activities, it demonstrates the diverse and multifaceted experience of women by their marriage cohorts in a context of rapid economic and social change.

## **Acknowledgements**

This work was supported by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, Inc. [grant number 6398]; the China Times Cultural Foundation Young Scholars Award; and the Pacific Cultural Foundation [grant number SC7810].

## **Endnotes**

- 1 For excellent reviews and critiques, see Moen and Wethington (1992) and Wolf (1992).
- 2 Scholars have disagreed on the importance of education or human capital compared with political position and work organization in income distribution. However, recent research findings show that income returns to education and entrepreneurship have increased in the past two decades in urban and rural settings, particularly among new recruits and employees in the market sector (see review by Cao & Nee, 2000).

- 3 For highlights of the debate on the extent to which the authority of local cadres has declined with decollectivization and market-oriented reforms, see Symposium on Market Transition in *American Journal of Sociology* 1996, Vol. 101, no. 4. There is less agreement on the fact that economic power of the new rural entrepreneurs comes to play a more significant role in redefining the rural social hierarchy (Unger, 1994).
- 4 The Chinese currency, the Renminbi, appreciated from 1 US\$=8.28 *yuan* in 1999 to about 1 US\$=6.20 *yuan* in 2014 after the government loosened its monetary policy in 2005.
- 5 High tuition fees have been a major financial burden for rural households since market mechanisms were introduced in the educational sector. The Chinese government eliminated textbook fees in 2006 in an attempt to reduce the burden on farmers, but the impact remains unclear as it is not unusual for local authorities, including schools, to transgress government policies or create other ways to extract money.
- 6 I use pseudonyms for place names and informants in this paper.
- 7 I use “household” and “family” interchangeably in this study.
- 8 According the Population Census of 2000, the national average size of rural family households was 3.68; whereas, the average household size in Guangdong province was 4.04, the highest among the coastal provinces (Population Census Office, 2002, pp.8-9). The 2000 Census data is provided here instead for comparison to the demographic profile of the village under study between 1998 and 2000.
- 9 Rural China is a patrilocal and patrilineal society, with new couples usually residing in the groom’s village.
- 10 Rural households seldom save enough money before they begin new house construction. They usually save and buy building materials at various stages, and borrow some money from relatives and friends when they hire construction teams to build a new house. They then clear their debt in the next few years.
- 11 A young couple acquires most of its household goods, which comprise large appliances, as well as bedding and furniture, in the form of the conjugal fund.
- 12 The household registration system was established in 1959 to curtail a large influx of rural migrants to the cities. It bound citizens to their residence at birth and posed a great barrier to physical and social mobility for rural residents during the collectivization period. It has been a major mechanism for the rural/urban divide and social stratification even in the years of economic reforms after 1978 and a major institutional basis for the issue of rural migrant workers in China.
- 13 One did stop sideline production for health reasons, one helped her husband in his construction business, one provided child care for her daughter-in-law, and one did so when the price of pork dropped by half in 1998. The husband’s income level is not a more important factor than the marriage cohort in determining the scale of women’s sideline production since only one of these four women raised as few as two pigs and no sows throughout the years.
- 14 I did not find that child care responsibilities were a major constraint limiting the scale of sideline production for these women, as five out of the eight women received child care assistance from their mothers-in-law. The woman who worked off-farm while raising pigs simultaneously did not receive child care assistance.
- 15 Pork for daily consumption is usually purchased from the market with cash. Pigs raised by households are for sale to the market, and they will be slaughtered for self-consumption only during festivals or wedding banquets.

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