

Sociological studies on women/gender in China during the past 40 years

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Abstract

Since the reconstruction of Chinese sociology in the 1980s, the sociology of women and gender has evolved from a marginal field to a more mainstream and professionalized discipline. This research trajectory has been dedicated to incorporating gender perspectives and women's experiences into the understanding of China's economic reforms, family dynamics, and ideological shifts. This paper reviews the development of women's and gender studies in China, summarizing the major theoretical and empirical contributions made by both domestic and overseas Chinese sociologists over the past four decades. Specifically, it examines gender inequality in education and the labor market, gender ideologies, and the gendered division of household labor. Finally, the paper outlines potential directions for future research on women's and gender studies in the Chinese context.

Keywords

Women's/gender studies, sociology of gender, gender ideology, gender inequality, Chinese sociology

The development and characteristics of women's and gender sociology in China

Over the past four decades since the reconstruction of Chinese sociology, women's and gender studies have been an integral part of the discipline. In 1952, sociology was abolished in Chinese universities as part of a nationwide restructuring of academic disciplines. However, research on women's issues continued despite the absence of formal

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sociological studies. The reinstatement of sociology in 1981 revitalized women's studies, and by 1998, the establishment of the first master's program in women's studies as a sub-discipline of sociology further promoted the professionalization and mainstreaming of this field.

The period from the early 1980s to around 1994 marked the initial stage of the revival of women's studies in China. This resurgence coincided with the early phase of China's economic reforms, during which women's issues became increasingly prominent in everyday life. Key research areas during this period focused on changes in women's employment, marriage, family roles, and their status amid the rural household responsibility system (*jiating lianchan chengbao zerenzhi*) reforms. Some studies began shifting from viewing women merely as research objects to recognizing their agency, leading to new research themes such as women and employment, women and reproduction, and the construction of indicators for women's social status (Xiong, 1993). However, discussions on the structural mechanisms of gender inequality remained underdeveloped at this stage.

The period from around 1994 to 2008 marked the emergence and early growth of women's and gender studies in China. In preparation for the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, the Chinese government actively promoted research on women and the dissemination of related knowledge. As a result, women's studies became a highly visible academic field, and gender perspectives began to take shape in scholarly discourse.

During this phase, academic research developed in two key directions. First, studies moved beyond empirical descriptions to engage with conceptual and theoretical frameworks. Second, discussions on issues such as "women returning home" and "gender differences in retirement age" reflected a distinctly feminist stance. For example, the debate over whether women should return to the domestic sphere after the economic reforms highlighted fundamental ideological differences. Scholars questioned whether research should maintain "value neutrality" or adopt a feminist position, and whether policies should prioritize "national interests" or "women's interests". Male sociologists, advocating for modernization, economic development, and efficiency, argued that equal employment for women—if pursued solely for the sake of women's liberation—would ultimately lead to inefficiency (Sun, 1994; Zheng, 1994). Although framed as "neutral" and objective, such narratives reinforced the dominant male perspective, which regarded women as a special category rather than as full participants in society. In response, feminist sociologists firmly asserted a gender-conscious stance: Whether women choose to stay at home or pursue employment should be their own decision—it is a fundamental human right (Li, 1994; Tan, 1994). This perspective emphasized recognizing women as individuals, acknowledging the role of gender culture, and valuing women's lived experiences, emotions, and perspectives (Wang, 2000; Tan, 1998).

From 2000 to approximately 2008, women's and gender studies in Chinese sociology focused particularly on women's experiences in a transforming society and the relationship between patriarchy and women's liberation. This period saw four major research directions. First, reexamining the socialist transformation and women's liberation in the socialist era. Scholars critically revisited the impact of socialist transformation on women's emancipation. Representative studies include the reconsideration of the "Iron

Girls” image (Jin, 2006), gender division of labor among rural women in the 1950s (Gao, 2005), the “spiritual collectivization” of women during the agricultural collectivization movement (Guo, 2003), and the concept of “state–family isomorphism” in women’s employment during the socialist era (Zuo, 2005). Second, critical studies on patriarchy in traditional Chinese culture. Scholars conducted in-depth critiques of patriarchal structures within Chinese traditions. Key topics included the relationship between marital conflicts and gender division of labor (Zhang, 1998), the production and reproduction of domestic violence in China (Tong, 2000), and the spatial and power dynamics of natal and marital families among rural women in North China (Li, 2010). These studies emphasized the role of family as a mechanism through which patriarchy operates, arguing that gendered social conditions are constructed through specific social contexts, cultural traditions, and gender interactions. Third, addressing contemporary social issues. Research during this period also examined the intersection of class, urban–rural divides, ethnicity, family, and gender (Hu, 2004; Meng, 2004; Zuo and Song, 2002). Fourth, investigating women’s organizations, agency, and practices. Scholars explored women’s participation in public life, such as rural women’s engagement in community affairs (Yang and Liu, 2005) and women’s reemployment (Yuen-Tsang, 2002). Collectively, these studies contributed to the integration of gender perspectives into Chinese sociology.

Since 2008, Chinese women’s and gender sociology has entered a phase of maturity and further development. A significant milestone was the establishment of the Women’s and Gender Sociology Committee under the Chinese Sociological Association in September 2007. This institutional development marked the mainstreaming of the field and the formalization of an academic community. Initially dominated by female scholars, the committee has since attracted a growing number of male sociologists. Moreover, research topics have increasingly engaged in dialogues with international scholarship. By 2022, five council terms have been completed by the committee. Its forum at the annual Chinese Sociological Association meeting had consistently been one of the most well-attended.

In terms of graduate education, the number of master’s and doctoral dissertations focusing on gender sociology has steadily increased, reflecting the expanding scope of research topics, engagement with contemporary social issues, and diversification of methodologies (J Li, 2019). Recent studies have sought to elevate theoretical discussions on women’s experiences. For example, some scholars have applied the concept of “doing gender” to analyze the production of gendered knowledge and to challenge gender stereotypes. One study on female truck drivers, for instance, employed the concept of “de-labeling” to illustrate the possibilities for women’s career development in male occupations (Ma, 2020).

Today, gender research is no longer confined to the subfield of gender sociology. The gender perspective has been widely adopted across various branches of sociology, serving as a critical lens for knowledge production. However, at the organizational level within the broader sociological community, female sociologists remain relatively marginalized. In China’s top five sociology departments, male sociologists outnumber their female counterparts by a ratio of 1.2 to 1, and among full professors, men outnumber women by a ratio of 2 to 1.

The growth of women's and gender sociology in China has been driven by multiple forces. First, since the founding of the People's Republic of China, rapid industrialization, urbanization, and social transformation have provided sociologists with rich research topics. Societal transformations, including gender equality practices during the socialist era and comprehensive social changes brought about by market transitions, demographic transitions, and the rise of individualism, have served as both the empirical foundation and intellectual reservoir for gender sociology. Second, with the expansion of globalization and international academic exchanges, women's and gender sociology in China has been influenced by global feminist movements and gender studies in terms of conceptual frameworks and theoretical approaches. This influence stems from cross-border intellectual exchanges, contributions from overseas Chinese scholars, and Chinese researchers and students studying abroad before returning to China to further develop the field. Third, the increasing availability of survey data and fieldwork materials has significantly strengthened women's and gender studies in China. Since 1990, the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) and the National Bureau of Statistics have conducted the Chinese Women's Social Status Survey (CWSSS) every 10 years. This survey examines the comparative status of women and men in terms of rights, resources, responsibilities, and societal recognition across various domains, including health, education, economy, social security, politics, marriage and family, lifestyle, legal rights and perceptions, and gender attitudes (Women's Studies Institute of China, 2006). In addition, large-scale national social surveys have provided an essential data foundation for quantitative gender studies, such as the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS), led by Renmin University of China, the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) and China Health and Retirement Longitudinal Study (CHARLS), conducted by Peking University, and the China Education Panel Survey (CEPS), also led by Renmin University. Moreover, the oral history archives compiled by the China Women's University have provided valuable qualitative research materials for gender studies.

This article will review the academic development of three critical areas in Chinese women's and gender sociology, namely, gender stratification in the context of China's social transformation, changes in gender ideology, and gendered division of labor in the family. The scope of this review includes: 1) academic publications in sociology, including books and journal articles; 2) research by Chinese scholars (including overseas Chinese scholars) on gender issues in China, published both domestically and internationally; and 3) studies that analyze gender experiences, particularly those contributing to the development of gender concepts and theories.

Gender stratification in the context of China's social transformation

Over the past 40 years, China has undergone profound transformations driven by market-oriented reforms, particularly in terms of economic growth, educational expansion, and demographic transitions (Xie, 2011). This historic transition has continuously reshaped gender stratification in the public sphere, particularly in educational attainment, labor

participation, career advancement, and income disparities. Changes in women's status and achievements in the public sphere have, in turn, laid the foundation for shifts in gender ideologies and gender relations in the private sphere.

Gender stratification in education

In most developed industrialized countries, the overall trend in educational stratification has shown a continuous narrowing of the gender gap, with women surpassing men in average educational attainment by the mid- to late 20th century (Hout and DiPrete, 2006). China has followed a similar trajectory toward gender equalization in education amid its educational expansion. The latest national census data indicate that, as of 2020, the average years of schooling for males aged 15 and above was 10.22 years, while for females, it was 9.59 years. The gender gap has narrowed from 0.8 years in 2010 to 0.6 years in 2020. When analyzed by birth cohort, the trend toward gender equalization in education becomes even more pronounced: for cohorts born in the early 20th century, the educational gap between men and women exceeded two years, whereas among those born in the 1980s, the gap had almost disappeared (Treiman, 2013). Over the past decade, women have increasingly gained an advantage in higher education and graduate education: by around 2010, the number of female students enrolled in junior colleges and universities surpassed that of males, and by 2020, women also outnumbered men in graduate education enrollment (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021).

Previous research has explored two key factors specific to China's social context that contributed to this trend toward educational gender equality. First, the political measures of the People's Republic of China aimed at reducing class inequality and promoting gender equality significantly expanded women's access to education. During historical periods when state policies emphasized equality, the gender gap in education narrowed rapidly (Hannum and Xie, 1994). Second, the one-child policy also played a role. Traditionally, Chinese families, influenced by son preference, tended to allocate limited educational resources toward boys while depriving girls of similar opportunities (Chu et al., 2007). However, as the one-child policy led to a sharp decline in family size, especially in families with a single daughter, parents no longer needed to prioritize sons over daughters in educational investment. An unintended consequence of this policy is the increase in average educational attainment among women born after 1980 (Ye and Wu, 2011). Among cohorts born after 1995, parental educational expectations for boys and girls have become nearly identical (Liu et al., 2014).

Nevertheless, the trend of educational gender equalization is not uniform across different social strata. The women who initially were able to catch up with men in education typically came from resource-rich families. In contrast, in families in rural areas, with low socioeconomic status, or with three or more children, son preference remains prevalent, leading to persistent educational disadvantages for girls compared to boys (Li, 2009a; Liu et al., 2014; Wu, 2012).

The increasing educational advantage of women has led to growing concerns about a "boy crisis" in education in Western countries (Sax, 2016). Similarly,

some Chinese sociological studies on education have observed that boys tend to underperform compared to girls in compulsory education (Hu, 2014). Research on junior high school students' mathematical abilities has found that despite the traditional gender stereotype that girls are weaker in math, Chinese female students do not seem to be negatively affected by this perception; instead, they exhibit a "pressure-induced resilience" in math performance (Cui and Venator, 2008; Xie and Liu, 2021). However, gender sociology research in China has yet to explore this issue in depth.

Gender differences in labor force participation

During the socialist planned economy era, the Chinese government emphasized gender equality through legislation and ideological guidance, actively encouraging women to participate in the labor force. As a result, China's female labor force participation rate (LFPR) was exceptionally high. According to World Bank Open Data (2024), in 1991, the labor force participation rates of Chinese men and women aged 15–64 were 88.5% and 78.8%, respectively. The LFPR of Chinese women was significantly higher than the United States (66.4%), Japan (58.2%), and South Korea (49.4%) at the same time. However, over the following decade, China's female LFPR declined by nearly 10 percentage points, widening the gender gap. Against this backdrop, Chinese scholars began examining the causes of women's declining labor force participation, particularly its relationship with market-oriented reforms.

From a theoretical perspective, the impact of market-oriented reforms on women's labor force participation is ambiguous—it has both positive and negative effects. On the one hand, following the market transition theory, some scholars argue that marketization provided women with more diverse and mobile job opportunities (Ai and Li, 2001; Liu, 1994; Nee and Matthews, 1996). On the other hand, the dominant view, supported by empirical research, suggests that marketization has led to a decline in female labor force participation for several reasons. First, market-oriented reforms ended the compulsory employment policy of the planned economy era, giving women the right to opt out of employment (Zhang et al., 2008). Second, without strict anti-gender discrimination laws, enterprises seeking economic efficiency often adopted discriminatory employment strategies. During the mass layoffs of the 1990s, many state-owned enterprises (SOEs) disproportionately laid off female employees first (Cai et al., 2005; YX Wu, 2010). Third, prior to the market reforms, China's work unit system (*danwei*) provided social services such as childcare, which helped alleviate women's work–family conflicts, ensuring their continued employment (Zuo, 2005). However, after marketization, these employer-based services diminished, and the state failed to offer sufficient maternity and childcare benefits. Consequently, child-rearing responsibilities shifted back to families, falling predominantly on women, forcing many to exit the labor market (Ji et al., 2017; XG Wu, 2010). Fourth, the rise of neoliberal market ideology, emphasizing individual choice and responsibility, contributed to a revival of traditional gender norms. The "men as breadwinners, women as homemakers" model was reinterpreted as a more "efficient" arrangement. This shift also fueled the emergence of the "quality discourse" (*suzhi huayu*), which

rationalized women's exclusion from the workforce as a result of "natural competition based on quality" (Wu, 2009).

Compared to the 1990s and early 2000s, the decline in China's female labor force participation rate has slowed significantly in the past two decades, stabilizing at around 70% (International Labour Organization, 2024). Research suggests that rising costs of housing, education, and healthcare have pushed many urban families to rely on women's paid labor to sustain household consumption. Notably, women's employment participation is higher in low-income urban households (Wu and Zhou, 2015). However, the observed changes in female labor force participation rate are influenced by period, cohort, and age effects, and future research should focus on young women's current labor force participation rates and their influencing factors.

The consequences of women's labor force exit on their family status and personal well-being remain subjects for further study. There are two contrasting perspectives. Some argue that urban employed women face dual pressures from formal work and household labor. The resurgence of traditional gender norms has legitimized women's return to the home. If the family provides sufficient economic security, leaving the workforce may be a preferable choice for women. Wu et al. (2015) found that non-employed married women, benefiting from family financial support, reported higher life satisfaction than women employed outside the state sector. However, others contend that women's exit from the labor force exacerbates employment and income gaps between spouses, increasing women's economic dependence on their husbands and weakening their bargaining power in the household (Liu, 2019). Recent studies on young people indicate that non-employed or part-time employed women have lower fertility intentions and experience poorer sexual satisfaction with their partners (Zhang and Pan, 2023).

Gender inequality in career development and income gap

For employed women, the gap in career development and income compared to men is a major issue in gender inequality research. One of the main concerns in domestic scholarship is how occupational gender segregation and the gender income gap have changed during China's transition from a planned economy to a market economy. On one hand, the pursuit of efficiency under market-oriented reforms may undermine gender equality. As the state gradually withdrew from labor organizations and the redistribution sector shrank, there was a reduction in employment protection for women and an increase in gender discrimination, leading to greater occupational gender segregation and income disparity. On the other hand, under the backdrop of educational expansion, the improvement in women's educational levels has increased their economic opportunities; the rise in gender equality awareness has also helped women enter professions that have traditionally been dominated by men, all of which contribute to reducing occupational gender segregation and narrowing the income gap between men and women.

Research on women's employment during the planned economy era indicates that the widespread employment of women coexisted with occupational gender segregation, which was closely related. The state, aiming to integrate social organizations and demonstrate the superiority of socialism, incorporated urban women into the work unit system.

As members of the state, women were required to fulfill work obligations. However, in an era when the state decided wage distribution and job assignments, women were generally assigned to lower-paying, lower-status, and monotonous positions (Zuo, 2005).

In the aftermath of China's economic reforms, there has been debates in domestic scholarship regarding whether the degree of occupational gender segregation has increased or decreased. Cai and Wu (2002) compared the degree of gender segregation in occupations from 1985 to 2000 and found that occupational gender segregation had increased during this period, with more gender-segregated occupations emerging. Wu and Wu (2008) found that from 1982 to 2000, the overall level of gender segregation in non-agricultural occupations in China increased in the 1980s but began to decrease in the 1990s. Li's (2009b) study showed that from 1982 to 2005, the overall trend of occupational gender segregation in China had decreased. Faced with contradictory findings from earlier research, Li and Xie (2015) argued that this was partially due to methodological issues such as inconsistent classification of occupations and insufficient categorization. They used data from the 1982, 1990, 2000, and 2010 national censuses to analyze gender distribution in detailed occupational categories and found that, across all occupations, the level of occupational gender segregation continued to rise from 1982 to 2010, but this increase was mainly due to the sharp reduction in agricultural labor. In terms of non-agricultural occupations, the degree of gender segregation experienced a process of first increasing and then decreasing. From 1982 to 1990, the degree of gender segregation in non-agricultural occupations increased, but after 1990, gender segregation in non-agricultural occupations steadily decreased. This shift was characterized by many "male" and "female" occupations transforming into "neutral" occupations, with the number, proportion, and relative size of "neutral" occupations continuing to grow.

Similarly, research on China's gender income gap has focused on whether the market-oriented reforms have reinforced or reduced this gap. Early studies on this topic by Chinese scholars Shu and Bian (2003), based on the 1988 and 1995 China Household Income Project data, found that from 1988 to 1995, the gender income gap remained stable, with female income being 83% of male income. While the development of a market economy during this period did not reduce or increase the gender income gap, it did change the sources of income disparity. The impact of educational level, industry, and occupational segregation on the gender income gap increased, especially in regions with higher marketization. In these more market-oriented areas, the influence of being a party member or holding a job within the system had relatively less of an impact. Later studies by Li and Li (2008), comparing urban resident income data from 1988, 1995, and 2002, confirmed the fact that gender income disparities had expanded since the market-oriented reforms. However, they also found that in regions and sectors with lower marketization, the gender income gap was smaller, but the areas with the largest gender income gaps were not necessarily those with the highest marketization. He and Wu's studies provided more comprehensive evidence. Based on data from the 2005 population mini-census with prefecture-level statistics, their research found that the more developed a region or sector's market economy, the greater the gender income gap. In these regions or sectors with higher degree of marketization, occupational gender segregation was more severe, and the impact of occupational gender segregation on income inequality was also larger (He and Wu, 2017, 2018).

Research on China's marketization and its effects on occupational gender segregation and the gender income gap has mainly been influenced by debates on market transition theory and the gender stratification research paradigm in the international academic community. Most of the research is quantitative, focusing on reflecting changes in gender disparities and their associated social transformation factors. Domestic scholars with a qualitative approach have also explored the dilemmas and resilience in the career development of Chinese women. Women's career development is redefined as their growing ability to acquire political, economic, and social resources, with women strategically developing their careers based on their experiences and life cycle goals, showing their agency, career development strategies, and efforts to transcend structural constraints (Tong and Pu, 2001). Related research has found that breaking traditional gender norms and balancing dual roles in family and work are key factors in Chinese women's career development. For example, a case study on white-collar women in foreign-funded enterprises found that the work pressure in white-collar workplaces both suppressed gender awareness and provided women with a sense of achievement, leading them to embrace the concept of self-reliance and discard traditional gender-role attitudes. This seemingly "gender-neutral" working condition is both a form of alienation imposed by capitalist labor processes and a process by which women gain independence (Zhu and Tan, 2001). A case study of female cadres in townships have shown that the key to their career development lies in improving personal work capabilities, effectively managing family-work conflicts, and maintaining a proactive spirit (Liao et al., 2017). Research on the low proportion of women in high-level positions in government and technology sectors has shown that Chinese women in senior positions surpass men in terms of education, economic income, and participation in political and social affairs. At the same time, they bear more caregiving responsibilities in the family. Compared with other factors, breaking traditional gender stereotype and adopting a positive attitude and strategy to cope with the pressure of balancing work and family roles are important factors in women's promotion to senior positions. Gender-friendly organizational environments, with higher proportions of women in decision-making bodies, also help reduce the barriers women face in their career development (Ma and Zhou, 2014; Tong et al., 2013).

In recent years, domestic research has gradually focused on the interplay between gender differences in career development, income disparities, and private-sector gender relations. Numerous studies have explored how women's responsibilities at home affect their performance in the workplace. Since China's social welfare system lacks support for caregiving, and gender division of labor within the family remains unequal, women face high levels of work-family conflict (Zhang and Shi, 2019) or experience motherhood penalties (Yu and Xie, 2014, 2018). Some studies have attempted to explore how changes in gender positions within career and income stratification have led to changes in marriage and family behaviors in China. For example, *Desire and Dignity: Class, Gender and Intimacy in Transitional China* (Xiao, 2018) explores the class, gender, and emotional logic of extramarital relationships in transitional China, attributing urban working-class men's extramarital affairs to economic and symbolic deprivation caused by market-oriented reforms, which led to a crisis in masculinity and the inability to maintain their "head of household" status. These men find self-worth, male dignity, and authority by having extramarital relationships with lower-status women

who depend economically on them. Similarly, with the rise of internal labor migration, rural women who secured employment in the urban area have gradually gained bargaining power in marriage negotiations and during divorce (Li, 2018; Li and Du, 2016), putting pressure on men in marriage.

Changes in gender ideology

Gender-role attitudes (also referred to as gender ideology or gender beliefs) refer to the beliefs about the social norms, role division, gender relationship patterns, and corresponding behavior patterns that men and women are expected to follow (Williams and Best, 1990).

Empirical studies in Western academia have found that modern societies have undergone a shift from traditional gender ideology to egalitarian gender ideology (Brewster and Padavic, 2000; Inglehart and Norris, 2003; Meagher and Shu, 2019; Thornton and Young-DeMarco, 2001). Traditional gender ideology refers to a set of gender stereotypes, believing in stable, fixed, and oppositional gender traits and social divisions between men and women. This ultimately forms an attitude and cognition where men are prioritized and women are secondary (Thornton and Young-DeMarco, 2001; Tong, 2022). Egalitarian gender ideology refers to the belief that gender traits are androgynous, with equal rights for both genders. Individuals are believed to have the same opportunities, responsibilities, and obligations in areas such as education, employment, income, promotion, and political participation. In terms of labor division, caregiving ethics are valued, with both genders sharing the responsibility of childcare and elder care while enjoying the pleasures of life together. Women can enter public spheres just like men. In terms of power distribution, both genders play roles in areas they are familiar with and passionate about, listening to and supporting each other (Tong, 2022). The transformation of gender ideology toward equality is a product of social construction. On the one hand, social practices in areas such as marriage, education, economy, and politics influence gender ideology, while on the other hand, individuals are active social agents who learn, accept, or resist various gender ideologies through socialization and social interaction. Personal experiences and role practices lead individuals to have diverse gender ideologies and actions (Bolzendahl and Myers, 2004; Brewster and Padavic, 2000; Davis and Robinson, 1991).

The following sections summarize major findings from Chinese sociology regarding the current state, causes, and mechanisms of the changes in gender ideology since the market transition.

Current situation of gender ideology

Surveys such as the CWSSS, CGSS, and CFPS measure gender-role attitudes in three main aspects: 1) attitudes toward gender relations, such as agreement with statements like “men are inherently more capable than women” or “doing well is less important than marrying well”; 2) attitudes toward gender division of labor, such as agreement with “in times of economic recession, female employees should be laid off first”, “men should prioritize careers, while women should prioritize family”, or “couples should

share household chores equally”; 3) attitudes toward inheritance rules, such as views on “children taking the mother’s surname” or “how daughters and sons inherit family property”.

Based on studies using these survey data (e.g. Liu, 2019; Liu and Tong, 2020; Luo, 2021; Qian and Li, 2020; Xu, 2016a), the current state of gender ideology in China can be summarized by the following features. First, gender ideology remains in a transitional state between traditional and egalitarian extremes, with traditional views and egalitarian awareness overlapping and intertwining. For example, the 2021 CGSS showed that nearly 80% of respondents agreed with the statement “couples should share household chores equally”, but 46% and 39% still agreed with the statements “men should prioritize careers, while women should prioritize family” and “doing well is less important than marrying well”, respectively. Second, women’s gender ideology is more egalitarian than men’s, but there are clear cohort differences: the younger the women, the more egalitarian their gender views; men’s gender views tend to be more traditional, and there is a high degree of stability in gender views across different male cohorts. There is a “scissors gap” in gender-egalitarian views across age groups between men and women. Third, men and women’s attitudes also differ in the three aspects of gender ideology. Both genders have similar views on inheritance, generally leaning toward equal inheritance. Their views on gender division of labor are relatively similar, still leaning toward traditional views. The greatest difference between men and women lies in surname inheritance, with men positioned in the middle of the traditional–egalitarian continuum and women leaning more toward egalitarian views. Finally, in terms of overall distribution, similar to most Western countries, China’s gender-role attitudes are much more equal in the public sphere than in the private sphere.

The transformation of gender ideology in historical perspective

The formation and development of egalitarian gender ideology in China have been influenced by both Western modern democratic ideas and domestic practices on pursuing gender equality. Additionally, these changes are closely related to attitudinal shifts toward marriage, family, and household labor division, exhibiting nonlinear and asynchronous characteristics. Since the 20th century, gender ideology in China has undergone three significant transformations. The first transformation can be traced back to the May Fourth Movement in 1919, which strongly criticized the traditional Chinese cultural norms of “male superiority and female inferiority” and “male dominance and female subordination”. This ideology reached its peak after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China and before the Reform and Opening-Up period (Wu et al., 2022). After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, supported by Marxist feminist views, gender ideology was shaped by the advocacy of Mao Zedong’s “women hold up half the sky”, emphasizing women’s participation in all areas of public life (Tong, 2022). During the socialist planned economy period, the state emphasized absolute equality between men and women in both legislation and ideological direction; in the labor and social division of roles, gender equality in participation was promoted. The socialist practices deeply influenced gender ideology, and the socialist advocacy for gender equality

led to a more modern understanding of gender roles (Jiang, 2012). This period has been referred to by some scholars as “state feminism” (Wu, 2009). Overall, gender ideologies in this historical phase were characterized by a strong “anti-traditional” stance.

The second transformation in gender ideology occurred during the market transition period, around 2010. In this stage, the change of gender ideologies primarily reflected a “revival” of traditional gender ideas. With the progress of market-oriented reforms, childcare and elderly care responsibilities increasingly became family obligations. The principles of rationality and competition influenced people’s lives, and traditional gender roles within the household emerged as a strategy to adapt to the market economy, signaling a return to traditional gender-role attitudes (Tong, 2022). Numerous studies have explained the adverse situation faced by women and the resurgence of traditional gender roles in the post-reform era from the perspective of market transition (Gu, 2013; Jia and Ma, 2015; Liu, 2019; Xu, 2016a; Yang et al., 2014). Scholars like Yang et al. have found that the gender division of labor, such as “men should prioritize careers, while women should prioritize family” and “men lead, women follow”, has shown a trend of returning to traditional roles. However, in areas such as children’s surnames and inheritance of property, traditional restrictions have gradually been overcome. Compared to rural men, urban women held the most egalitarian gender attitudes, while rural men held the most conservative views. The more educated or higher the professional status, the more gender equality was perceived. However, egalitarian gender views did not rise accordingly with economic development or income increases (Yang et al., 2014). Liu’s study (2019) indicates that various social groups have shown a return to traditional views on men being the primary breadwinners, with a stronger tendency for men to return to traditional roles than women. This shift is attributed to changes in younger generations’ acceptance of the breadwinner role, compared to 20 years ago, as well as the increasing similarity between young men’s gender-role attitudes and those of older men. Qian and Li (2020) also reached similar conclusions. Based on gender-role practice theory, Liu investigated the impact of absolute status of and relative status between the husband and wife on attitudes toward male breadwinning and how these attitudes shifted from 1990 to 2010. The market reforms significantly shaped the social and family roles of both sexes. As women’s positions in the labor market weakened, their economic dependence on husbands strengthened their support for the men’s breadwinner role, reinforcing more traditional gender roles in the household. Particularly, support for the male breadwinner model was stronger when the husband worked and the wife did not. Conversely, when the husband did not work and the wife worked, support for this model weakened (Liu, 2019).

After 2010, gender-role attitudes in China began to show a new turning point, moving toward greater equality (Luo, 2021; Qian and Li, 2020; Wu et al., 2022). This change was manifested by a rise in the proportion of both genders holding more equal attitudes toward gender relations, social gender roles, and household labor division. What triggered this third transformation? Wu et al. (2022) suggest that the primary reasons for this change are twofold: first, the further advancement of women’s socioeconomic status (such as education and labor force participation), and second, the rapid development of internet technology and the popularization of social media, which have

profoundly influenced the gender-role attitudes of younger generations. They also predict that in the future, both rural and urban residents in China will have more equal and modern gender ideology. Since 2010, the gender gap in labor force participation between men and women aged 18–64 has not significantly widened. According to Liu's (2019) gender-role practice theory, the extent of women's deteriorating labor market status has been mitigated in this period, which, in some sense, has prevented the trend of a return to traditional gender-role attitudes. However, this explanation based on systems and structures is still insufficient to fully uncover the shift toward gender equality, especially as the impact of rapid internet and social media development on gender ideology across different genders and age groups during this period warrants further exploration.

Social transformation and its shaping of gender ideology

Social change in China plays a crucial role in the transformation of gender ideologies. Chinese scholars focus particularly on the impact of market transition on the reconstruction of gender discourse and how social structural transformation shapes gender ideologies.

Market transition and the reconstruction of gender discourse. Gender discourse reflects societal gender norms. The transformation of gender discourse in China has largely coincided with market-oriented reforms (Wu, 2009). Wu argues that as market-oriented reforms advanced and the state's role receded, the gender-neutral discourse dominated by state political ideologies before the reform era shifted toward the revival of traditional gender discourse under the influence of pluralistic, heterogeneous voices. Natural differences between the sexes were overly emphasized, and traditional gender roles and divisions of labor were revalued. The market economy, which emphasizes individual competitive abilities and qualities, recognizes gendered divisions and differences. The emphasis on a return to the "natural essence" of women aligns with the principles of gender construction in a market economy, without challenging traditional cultural attitudes that position men as superior to women. Consequently, the market economy allied with traditional gender discourses (Wu, 2009).

A review of the literature reveals several core perspectives on the transformation of gender discourse, including efficiency/rationality theory, quality theory, and "women returning home" debate. The dominant characteristics of gender discourse during market transition are aligned with the modernist principles of efficiency and rationality (Tong, 2010). "Efficiency first, with fairness considered" was the guiding principle for the first 30 years of the economic reform, which often evolved into a focus on efficiency at the cost of fairness. The emphasis on efficiency, rationality, and individualism in the market discourse provided women with more opportunities and a wider range of personal choices but also led to a retreat of egalitarian gender attitudes, confining women to traditional family roles (Parish and Busse, 2000; Wang, 1997).

Regarding the quality theory, scholars have analyzed the keywords "quality" and "modernization" in Chinese neoliberal discourse, suggesting that quality and modernization have

become key factors in distinguishing social classes and values. For instance, in neoliberal discourse, migrant workers are portrayed as low-quality and lacking in modernity, which justifies their low position in urban society. On the other hand, neoliberal discourse encourages citizens to improve their own quality and modernity through continued investments in education and consumption, fostering self-discipline (Yan, 2003). The state's "quality" discourse further reinforces the disadvantaged position of women while avoiding issues of systemic and structural gender inequality (Jacka, 2006). Wu (2009) suggests that, during the market transition, gender discourse divides "female quality" into two parts: one based on individualism and modern competitive ability, and the other based on women's special roles in gender relations as body consumption symbols. The former receives strong state support, while the latter benefits from traditional gender discourse and is recognized in global consumption and fashion. The individualistic approach to quality or ability naturalizes gender division and differences between men and women. Women's bodies, appearance, and role consumption are increasingly valued in consumer culture as an indispensable resource for efficiency and opportunity in the market, leading to the commodification and objectification of women's bodies (Wu, 2009).

Between 1980 and 2010, there were three waves of discussion on the "women returning home" debate (Liu and Tong, 2014; Song, 2011; Wang, 1997; Zheng, 1994). The first discussion occurred from 1981 to 1984, focusing on whether a woman's family and career were in conflict, with the central issue being whether women should return to family life or balance both career and family obligations. The second discussion, from 1985 to 1988, revolved around the image of modern women, with debates between the "good wife and loving mother" versus the "career woman". The third discussion, from 1989 to 1992, addressed conflicts in professional women's work and family roles, exploring their causes, expressions, and women's strategies for mitigating role conflicts. Many male scholars criticized women's equal employment rights by attacking the planned economy, claiming that "women's liberation" came at the expense of productivity, and accusing women in the workforce of increasing men's labor hours and fatigue. By the 2001 National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), male members still advocated for women returning home to care for their husbands and children (Jiang, 2001). The All-China Women's Federation opposed this view, asserting that women's right to participate in economic activities should not be sacrificed for economic development. Some scholars argued that the call for women to return home should not only be seen as a temporary economic measure to address employment issues but rather as an important strategy used by male intellectuals to reconstruct gender hierarchies. This discourse expressed deeply held beliefs in male dominance and sought to solidify traditional gender roles (Wang, 2000). The rise of "gender essentialism", which asserts inherent biological differences between men and women, is closely related to the efficiency/rationality theory, quality theory, and the women returning home discourse (Song, 2012).

Transformation in social structure and its influence on gender ideology. While market transformation has strengthened a return to traditional gender discourse, the widespread access to higher education, industrialization, and urbanization has altered the gender gap and

facilitated a shift from traditional gender attitudes to those centered on gender equality. Liu and Tong proposed the “gender status formation analysis framework” to explore how social structures and relations influence gender attitudes in China. The framework identifies three types of social structures and relations that play a key role in shaping gender ideology: first, ascribed status based on gender, age, family background, and other attributes; second, achieved status derived from an individual’s efforts or accomplishments; third, spousal status relationship, shaped through interaction between individuals of different ascribed and achieved statuses within marriage. Factors determinating these statuses in China include educational attainment, employment, and urbanization (Liu and Tong, 2014).

First, higher levels of education reduce prejudice on women. Education’s impact on gender equality can be seen in two ways: 1) it raises awareness of gender issues, particularly among educated women who are more likely to be exposed to Western gender equality ideals and to advocate for equality; and 2) economic opportunities in the market economy that women obtained through their education empower them to push for gender equality. Numerous empirical studies in China have shown that educated individuals are less likely to agree that “men should prioritize careers, while women should prioritize family”, more likely to agree to equal inheritance of property and equal share of elderly care between sons and daughters, and less likely to have son preference in child-bearing and childrearing (Liu and Tong, 2020; Xu, 2016a).

Second, female employment transforms gender ideologies. Women’s participation in the workforce, regardless of the nature of the work or their position, symbolizes their engagement in public life, showing them their social and family value. This leads to a shift in their recognition from “home carers” to “breadwinners”. Working women tend to support equal employment opportunities and are more confident in competing with men in the labor market. Moreover, men with employment also tend to support gender equality (Liu, 2019). Gender roles and division of labor beliefs vary significantly across occupations: professionals are most likely to adopt more egalitarian gender role and division of labor, followed by blue-collar workers, while agricultural workers are most traditional (Liu and Tong, 2014). The gender status practice theory suggests that women’s education and employment can improve their status in both the labor market and family, fostering greater awareness of gender equality (Liu and Tong, 2014).

Third, rural-to-urban migration challenges traditional gender roles. Migration to the urban areas offers migrants opportunities for education, employment, income growth, social networking, and modern lifestyles, which also influence gender ideology and gender relations. Women who actively participate in labor migration tend to have more modern gender views and benefit from more equitable gender relations (Sun and Liu, 2020). Some studies based on national surveys show that rural-to-urban migration is a significant factor influencing the transformation of gender ideology, especially among migrant women. Rural female migrant workers show the most significant shift toward egalitarian gender views (Yang and Zeng, 2016).

As beneficiaries of traditional gender ideologies, rural men change less in gender-role attitudes compared to women, despite their rural-to-urban migration experiences (Xu, 2016b). However, qualitative studies show that male migrant workers make numerous

compromises in their masculinity when facing the economic pressures, adjusting their perception on their roles in caregiving and household chores (Choi and Peng, 2019). Despite large-scale rural-to-urban migration may promote gender equality within Chinese families, these changes may be context-specific and pragmatic, with traditional gender relations potentially reemerging once the forces driving male migrants' compromises dissipate (Tong, 2022).

Gendered division of labor in family

Studies on the path of women's liberation in China have focused on the tension between the revolutionary act of women entering the workplace and the "unfinished revolution" (the stalled revolution) of women still bearing unpaid household labor (Stacey, 1983). On one hand, the binary division between work and family in public and private spheres is a key topic in gendered division of labor research. On the other hand, gender studies aim to break this binary division from a practical perspective. Since 2015, with the increased focus on family in mainstream ideology, gender studies have become increasingly intertwined with family studies. Gender equality practices in men and women's daily lives are manifested in the changing division of household labor. This section primarily discusses women's and gender studies within the context of the family or private sphere.

Continuation and disintegration of patriarchal families

An important topic in Chinese women's and gender sociology regarding family and gender relations is exploring the relationship between women's liberation and the patriarchal family.

The departure and liberation of the new woman. Some historical studies point out that since the May Fourth Movement, intellectual women expressed their social, personal, and class liberation through "leaving home", achieving an awakening of subjectivity. However, this also led to a struggle between the self and the family: on one hand, the departure of women, who demanded liberation, represented true individual emancipation; on the other hand, although leaving home allowed women to temporarily overcome the familial emotional constraints on their autonomy, they still harbored a "mixed longing" for the family, feeling both resentment and attachment after entering society. This emotional conflict trapped women in the emotional dilemma of "liberation". When the new women denied the legitimacy of traditional communities such as blood ties, locality, professional affiliation, and educational connections, they sought to establish new ideal communities (Hang, 2016). New women experience the difficulties in forming ideal "groups" to seek belonging and respond to the relationship between "individualism" and "community" in modernity. In this process, the group of new women continuously fragmented and reassembled, ultimately leading to two paths: one toward a centralized collective, and the other toward absolute individualization. The former became the path for women's liberation under the leadership of the Communist Party in the Chinese mainland

(Hang, 2022). This interpretation of new women's liberation integrates modernity's notion of self-awareness, framing women not as objects of liberation but as subjects pursuing individual emancipation and new community forms.

Gender studies of rural patriarchal families. Some studies focus on the impact of new technologies on patriarchal families. Through historical research, it has been pointed out that Fei Xiaotong's elder sister, Fei Dasheng, was committed to developing a cooperative economy with Chinese rural characteristics. She integrated the economic vitality and organizational power of women's needlework into the development process, conducting a remarkable social experiment for women's participation in rural industrialization (Jin and Yang, 2017). Drawing on Fei Dasheng's historical experience in sericulture reform, scholars have proposed understanding and analyzing the fundamental issues Fei Dasheng addressed in developing rural industries from perspectives such as benefiting farmers, adapting to local natural conditions and traditional economies, and being women-friendly. This further explores the necessity and feasibility of contemporary laborers' skill formation for rural industrial revitalization (Yang, 2021). Studies on the development of rural township enterprises at the beginning of China's economic reform have revealed a distribution pattern characterized by patriarchal families, namely "men first, women second; elders first, juniors second; family members first, then external relations" in the allocation of non-agricultural employment opportunities (Jin, 1998). Agricultural reform has had complex effects on rural patriarchal families: the enhancement of women's status is not at the expense of men's status, but rather establishes more harmonious and equal spousal relationships, increasing women's autonomy in family life (Xu, 2005; Zuo, 2002). Women's advantages in managing household affairs, maintaining family emotional bonds, and engaging in community social interactions have established their dominant position in the family power structure (Li, 2010). With the shift from productive families to consumptive families, women's household status as a decision maker has become increasingly prevalent (Hu, 2017).

By examining the process of rural-to-urban migration, the concept of "mobile patriarchy" has been proposed. China's patriarchal system, rooted in rural society, has its private forms (patrilineal patriarchal families) and collective forms (clan/lineage patriarchy and village collective patriarchy), as well as an overarching public paternalism that is both external to and embedded within it. Patriarchy, like a specter, lingers in Chinese rural society, persisting to this day with remarkable tenacity. Although some of its structures, such as the father-son axis, have become fragile, the three fundamental frameworks of patrilineality, patrilocality, and patriarchy still persist, and village collective patriarchy remains robust. Even if individuals temporarily leave their rural roots, patriarchal families can "drift" with the migrants, even crossing oceans with the tide of emigration (Jin, 2015: 541–542). However, with the shift from the father-son axis to the spousal axis in family structures, the enhancement of women's status has challenged patriarchal authority. The increased importance of affinal relationships and rural women's acquisition of housing property rights have checked and even weakened patriarchal power (Jin, 2015: 565–566). Studies have found that male migrant workers experience "masculine compromise" during rural-to-urban migration. Recognizing their marginal urban position and limited economic resources, especially the crucial role of their wives' economic contributions in maintaining household finances,

they redefine their gender roles and identities, adjusting their caregiving practices and family roles. Some male migrant workers actively reconstruct their multiple identities: good partners, responsible husbands, loving fathers, and filial sons. While maintaining the two foundations of patriarchy—patrilineality and patrilocality—they adopt a concessionary attitude toward the gendered division of labor that traditionally has men as breadwinners and women as homemakers. They redefine filial piety and fatherhood, while striving to maintain gender boundaries and their symbolic dominance within the family (Choi and Peng, 2019).

The dual burden of domestic responsibilities and labor force participation faced by urban women during the socialist planned economy era. In the planned economy, the state consciously integrated gendered division of labor into the large-scale production system when mobilizing female labor. This resulted in women bearing the majority of unpaid reproductive labor, forming a “production-centered, public-private embedded structure” (Song, 2012). The state constructed female identities as industrial workers, agricultural laborers, and dependents/family workers. The “production-centered” collectivist large-scale production system consciously maintained the patriarchal family model inherited from the past. The industrial achievements of the first three decades of the People’s Republic of China were largely attributable to this gendered division of labor and the unpaid reproductive functions undertaken by women. The state delayed its commitment to and realization of the socialization of domestic labor. The pursuit of “selfless” collectivist production forced the public sphere to encroach upon the private sphere, and a compromise was made to preserve the traditional gendered division of labor within the family, where women continued to shoulder a significant amount of domestic work. Due to their unchanged domestic roles, these women subsequently became the first to be laid off during the marketization process.

However, the socio-structural features of “state-family isomorphism” (Zuo, 2005) and “public-private embeddedness” (Song, 2012) during the planned economy era also facilitated women’s balancing of work and family roles. Women’s participation in collective labor contributed to the formation of their subjectivity. In a context where the traditional patriarchal family could not be completely transformed, women’s collective labor outside the home granted them equal pay with men, thereby gaining them respect and recognition, which enhanced their status within the family (Song, 2020). The “equal pay for equal work” labor system disrupted the male sense of superiority inherent in the “male dominance, female subordination” dynamic within the family. Men were unable, and unwilling, to solely bear the responsibility of family support. Women not only became “home managers” but also “breadwinners” (Jiang, 2003).

The division of labor in housework and childcare

During the process of market transition, women faced challenges not only in their participation in paid labor but also in managing the feminization of domestic labor and childcare within a context of marketization. The division of labor in housework and childcare in the private sphere has become a major focus in gender studies.

The gendered division of household labor. With advancements in technology and commodification, the total amount of household labor performed by Chinese women has shown a decreasing trend. However, national survey data reveals that among the working-age population, wives still spend significantly more time on housework than husbands (He et al., 2018), indicating a persistent traditional division of labor. Domestic gender studies also utilize Western sociological theories such as the time availability perspective, the relative resource theory, and the “gender display” hypothesis to explore the inequality in the division of household labor among Chinese couples (e.g. He et al., 2018; Kan and He, 2018; Liu et al., 2015; Yu and Xie, 2011). These studies have found that the time availability perspective and the relative resource theory can explain the variations in domestic labor time between couples in Chinese families: the higher the wife’s economic independence and contribution to family income, the less time she spends on housework, and the more time the husband spends. The “gender display” phenomenon, where women with higher incomes than their husbands compensate by doing more housework to correct perceived gender role deviations, is observed in traditional rural areas or among women with traditional gender attitudes in China. However, no evidence of “gender display” has been found in urban Chinese families.

Tong and Liu’s research seeks to challenge the assumption that housework is tedious and valueless, examining the emotional significance that family members assign to it. They argue that household labor is not merely a service to family members’ emotional and physiological needs but also a means of conveying “love” and “care”. Their research finds that when individuals feel deeper care and affection for their spouses, they tend to engage in more household labor to convey those feelings. When husbands invest more time in housework out of love for their wives, the couple’s division of labor tends to be more cooperative. Conversely, when wives express their love for their husbands through increased housework, the division of labor remains traditional (Tong and Liu, 2015). Some research also focuses on the intergenerational division of household labor among women. The labor division shifts from spousal to intergenerational, with grandparents, especially grandmothers, assisting their children in childcare and daily housework, forming a “post-patriarchal era” (Shen, 2009). However, this may reflect intergenerational inequity, a transfer of family power within women, with older women’s authority weakened and younger women gaining greater power in the family (Tao, 2011).

Studies on motherhood and fatherhood. In the United States, with increasing economic inequality and rising returns to education, mothers’ time with children has continuously increased, forming a middle-class parenting script characterized by “intensive motherhood” (Doepke and Zilibotti, 2019; Hays, 1996). Similar changes in motherhood have also emerged in China. The one-child family structure, educational competitions, and the marketization of education have reinforced the responsibilities of contemporary Chinese mothers, constructing a motherhood based on a “spirit of sacrifice”, where mothers sacrifice their time and energy for the benefit of their children, husbands, and families (FY Li, 2019). Any risks or deviant behavior exhibited by children are often attributed to maternal negligence, reinforcing mothers’ responsibilities through guilt. Parenting magazines in China have tried vigorously to construct a motherhood consistent

with Western middle-class ideals, instructing mothers to understand and follow expert guidance, consume for parenting, prioritize family and children (Tao, 2015), “raise happy children” (Tao, 2018), and devote themselves to their children with sufficient emotions, time, and money (Tao, 2013, 2016). As social mobility has become more rigid, the phenomenon of “maternal competition” has emerged (Jin and Yang, 2015). Mothers not only bear the responsibility of childcare but also become omniscient and omnipotent “educational mom” who meet modern standards, integrating various extracurricular educational resources for their children to gain an advantage in the fierce educational competition (Xiao, 2014; Yang, 2018). Middle-class motherhood practices are increasingly internalized by mothers, characterized by self-monitoring awareness (Chen, 2018). The increasing burdens associated with childcare have become one of the key factors contributing to the intensification of “motherhood penalties” in recent years (Shen, 2020).

However, critics have noted that the middle-class parenting model of intensive motherhood is significantly detached from the daily lives of most working-class people (Xiao and Cai, 2014; Zhao, 2020). Some studies have begun to focus on “mobile motherhood”, which examines the maternal cognition and practices of women in rural-to-urban migration. Taking the maternal cognition of migrant domestic workers as an example, these women’s motherhood encompasses both economic provision and caregiving: economic provision constitutes a significant part of their motherhood, while caregiving remains a source of moral and emotional pressure. This maternal cognition challenges the definition of motherhood as primarily nurturing, opening up the possibility of expedient shifts between the two. Migrant domestic workers’ action strategies include not only “remote caregiving” through modern communication tools but also “periodic migration” to alleviate the tension between the dual facets of motherhood (Xiao and Tang, 2021).

Some scholars point out that defining motherhood as a private choice—a choice between prioritizing family or self, or child-centered versus female self-centered motherhood in a market context—inevitably weakens the public attribute the issue of “stay-at-home mom” possesses. In fact, if childbirth and parenting are considered part of labor force reproduction, maternal practices should no longer be viewed as attributes of the private sphere but as components of social reproduction at macro level. As such, the issue of motherhood should also become a public issue and an integral part of social policy (Wu, 2021a).

In recent years, gender studies in China have increasingly included studies on men, leading to advocates for fathers’ involvement in childcare. Studies have found that fathers’ deep involvement in childcare prompts certain changes in traditional masculinity, leading to a shift from “hegemonic masculinity” to “caring masculinity”. Masculinity traits form a “re-doing gender” through the “capability logic” and “responsibility logic”. On the one hand, fathers who deeply engage in child-rearing practice behaviors and tendencies that are traditionally assigned to women, viewing them as necessary skills to fulfill child-rearing tasks, and internalize child-rearing responsibility into their gender consciousness. On the other hand, by transforming existing gender expectations and forming new interpretive frameworks, these changes are integrated into male characteristics, while allowing certain important values of masculinity to remain stable. That is, “re-doing gender” emphasizes the “explainability” of behaviors, while gender norms and

expectations are themselves transformed (Fan, 2022). Advocating for couples to share childcare responsibilities has been articulated in China's family policy, which is expected to drive changes in the division of labor within households.

Feminization and commodification of care work

The transition to a market economy has pushed reproductive labor into the household. Against an unequal gendered division of labor, household care responsibilities are primarily borne by women. Family strategies for care labor exhibit both feminization and marketization characteristics (Tong, 2017). The state's continuous withdrawal from welfare areas such as childcare, coupled with the intrusion of commodification logic, has exacerbated the pressure on family life and the alienation of women's labor (Li, 2021). On the one hand, women bear the main responsibility for care within the family, engaging in a large amount of unpaid labor. On the other hand, the commodification of care work labor has led to the rise of care industries predominantly staffed by women, such as caregivers, elderly care workers, maternity nurses, child nurses, and domestic helpers (household service workers). Labor in these industries is a form of paid emotional labor with private domain nature, and it interacts with the workers' gender, class, urban–rural divide, ethnicity, and age, resulting in overtime, underpaid, and invisible feminized labor. For example, research on female elderly care workers shows that these workers typically have a high average age, low occupational prestige, and low income levels (Wu, 2021b).

How to reveal the invisible labor of domestic workers? Visibility has become a key issue in gender studies over the past decade. Some studies focus on gendered discipline in domestic workers' labor. From the perspective of emotional labor, various domestic worker training programs require caregiving responsibilities, such as childcare work, where they are expected to "love like a mother" (Su and Ni, 2016). Studies on live-in domestic workers highlight the intrinsic contradictions of this labor form, where paid work in "live-in" services blurs the boundary between public and private spheres, with domestic workers in an awkward position as "virtual family members" or "family-like members" (Ma, 2011; Sa et al., 2020; Liu and Xiao, 2020). However, some research notes that female domestic workers possess their own subjectivity. They use the internet to establish good interactive relationships with clients, exploring new spaces for independence and autonomy in work and life. Under the self-direction of domestic workers, the working environment becomes smoother and friendlier. Based on the norms of China's traditional "acquaintance society", women can establish mutually beneficial production models (Liang et al., 2022).

Conclusion

Since the reconstruction of Chinese sociology, the field of the sociology of women and gender has developed from a relatively marginal position toward a more mainstream and professional one, committing to integrating gender perspectives and women's experiences into the understanding of China's economic transition, family changes, and shifts in social values and attitudes. This article has reviewed three major areas of this field over the past four decades: gender stratification in the public sphere, changes in

gender ideology, and the gendered division of labor in family. Among these, changes in gender relations in education, labor participation, occupation, and income have served as the foundation for shifts in gender ideology. Gender stratification and gender ideology, in turn, determine gender relations in the private sphere. The gender relations in the private sphere will conversely affect women's development in the public sphere and the evolution of gender ideology. For most of the past four decades, studies in these three areas have been framed by the ideological promotion of gender equality during the planned economy era and the market-oriented reforms, which remain central to discussions of gender status and relations in China.

In the last decade, a shift has occurred in Chinese gender research, moving from a focus on women's status and their disparity with men in the public sphere to research on gender equality in the family sphere, or gradually breaking the dichotomy between public and private spheres by exploring the gender relations in the workplace and family. This change has increasingly aligned Chinese gender research with family studies. Future research may continue in this direction and engage in dialogue with Western discussions on the "stalled revolution". However, the role of the state should remain a key focus in this field, particularly regarding public policies that intervene in the private sphere and the relationship between stable and gendered logic.

Future research should also pay attention to gender issues in the context of emerging demographic and social changes. One such issue is the new lifestyle choices among young women in the context of the second demographic transition, such as voluntary childlessness, remaining single, non-marital childbirth, and single parenting. Current research mostly remains descriptive of demographic trends, with a lack of in-depth understanding of aspects such as attitude formation, life experiences, family support, and inter-generational relationships. Another area of focus is the impact of the internet and the digital economy on gender relations, particularly in terms of online consumption and the use of social media, examining how information technology empowers women, affects gender ideologies, and influences gender equality. Gender equality in cyberspace is also an important topic yet to be explored.

Finally, more research is desperately needed on masculinity from a gender perspective. Gender equality in China's public and private spheres has not evolved synchronously. While women's gender-role attitudes have become more egalitarian with increased education and generational changes, the transformation of men's gender-role attitudes has been relatively slow. This asynchronous development is, to some extent, a factor contributing to women's dissatisfaction with gender relations in the family and workplace. In light of the rising social status of women and the promotion of equality, how do Chinese men perceive these changes? How do they respond to shifts in gender relations, and how do their ideologies and behaviors change? These warrant future research to shed insight into the evolving definition of masculinity in this context.

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