

# Division of Household Labor in Post-Socialist China: A Case of the Post-1980s Generation Couples in Guangzhou

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*This paper investigates how the Post-1980s Generation Couples in China organize household labor in their home. The Post-1980s generation is the new post-socialist Chinese generation who were born after the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution and who enjoyed the wealth and prosperity of the new China. They are the products of one-Child policy as well as reform and opening up, and unlike previous generation, they have been under heavy market pressure to survive in the stressful workplace after the dismantling of their old, work-based welfare. By examining the new generation of couples in China, this paper explores the intersection between generation and gender division of labor in the family in post-socialist transformation. Based upon qualitative data from a city of Guangzhou, this paper discusses the three distinguishing features of division of household labor, 1) flexible arrangement, 2) devaluation of housework, and 3) the persistence of patriarchy.*

**Keywords:** *China, division of household labor, the post-1980s generation, Guangzhou, post-socialism*

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## Introduction

China is going through a transformation of epochal significance from a planned economy to a market economy. Today, in the transition from old “socialist man” to a new Homo Economicus, it has become a moral duty to be a self-reliant, responsible and rational citizen of China, for a new Chinese generation who were born after the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution and who enjoyed the wealth and prosperity of the new China, the singletons. They are the first generation of capitalist individuals, born after the beginning of the reform, and thus lacking primary experiences of the old socialist system.

They are also known as the Post-1980s generation (hereafter *80 hou*), which refers to the generation whose members were born between 1980 and 1989. The boundary line of a generation in China, is usually divided by a unit of ten years. As the very first generation born after the one-child policy, *80 hou* is known in China as selfish, “Spoiled Brat Generation.” Having grown up with the development of a market economy brought about by China’s reform and opening up. They are also more individualistic, self-reliant (*kaoziji*) generation surrounded by fierce competition and insecurity brought on by the development of the market economy. This paper investigates how this new Chinese generation organizes household labor in their home. Unlike previous generation, they have been under heavy market pressure to survive in the stressful workplace. Then, what is taking place in their home? Who is doing household, and how? This paper attempts to answer this question by investigating the situation of *80 hou* couples in Guangzhou. Our findings suggest the market economy is one of the contextual factors. Due to the breakdown of old socialist iron rice bowl system, *80 hou* dual-earner families in urban China perceive more pressure and insecurity in the workplace. Long hours of paid work have affected their arrangements of and the meaning attached to household labor. Thus, our proposition is to examine how market pressure and modern style of living have impacted on the gender division of household labor for *80 hou*, the new post-socialist individualized generation. By doing so, we hope to shed light upon the intersection between post-socialism and gender division of household labor.

The following discussion proceeds in four parts. First, we discuss the existing literature on post-socialism and household labor. Second, our method, case-oriented qualitative method is explained in detail. Third, we examine the situations of *80 hou* as the new generation of China. They are the products of one-Child policy as well as reform and opening up. Finally, we

examine the division of household labor for *80 hou* in Guangzhou city. In this part, we focus on three characteristics of post-socialist gender division of labor in the household; they are 1) flexible arrangement, 2) devaluation of housework, and 3) persistence of patriarchy.

## Literature Review

In a special edition of *American Journal of Sociology*, Michael Burawoy (2001) criticized the recent trends in the studies of post-socialism by Ivan Szelenyi and David Stark because of their overestimation of the elite politics and underestimation of working class politics, by arguing “(post-socialist) capitalism may be made without capitalists but certainly not without workers...a small fraction, upgraded, the majority disconsolate and degraded.” Rejecting the assumption that workers become voiceless and irrelevant, Burawoy invites a Marxist analysis of working politics under post-socialist transformation. Though admitting the importance of studying the working class as subjects, this paper also recognizes the danger of neglecting family and community, as commonly shared by the Marxist framework. The analysis of post-socialist transformation needs to pay more attention to the complexity of work and family issues, particularly household division of labor, which we will explore more in this paper.

Household labor is a crucial component in one's life (South and Spitze 1994). Every household needs to perform a variety of domestic duties, such as cooking, washing clothes, cleaning, etc. to manage a “livable” home. Therefore, for families that have neither the resources nor desire to outsource the domestic chores, the household is a site of conflicts, negotiation and cooperation through which household members allocate household work (Bianchi et al. 2000).

A Marxist Feminist, Dalla Costa (1972) discussed the productive nature of household labor, even though women's work in the household is exploited and unwaged under capitalism. The household labor (re)produces the commodity which has both use value and exchange value, even produces surplus value for capitalism. That is, the household labor (re)produces workers for capitalism, and the unpaid household labor is invisible, hidden capitalist exploitation, and this is why we need “wages for housework.” In this sense, the household labor constitutes the foundation, “base” for capitalism, and capitalist exploitation includes gender exploitation of the household labor. The household is a center of social production, not just of consumption.

In the field of household labor, the main issue is whether the gender gap in the housework division has been reduced (Bianchi et al. 2000). Even in modern Western industrialized societies, the division of household labor still remains highly gendered despite women's increasing participation in the labor market (Coverman 1985; Bielby and Bielby 1988; Bianchi and Milkie 2010). Moreover, men's contribution to household labor has been only modest, which means that the division of labor within the household remains relatively unchanged (Gershuny 2000).

Women continue to be (over) loaded by this "second shift" and even "third shift" (Hochschild 1989). Women are responsible for between 70 and 92 percent of domestic labor, with 75 percent being the average (Coverman 1985). Thus, household labor remains highly divided by sex-oriented tasks conventionally considered as "women's work" (such as laundry, cooking, housecleaning, etc., which are usually the most time-consuming). Women still mostly perform these tasks, while "men's work" (e.g., yard work, auto maintenance, which are mostly outdoor household jobs done less often) is mainly performed by men.

Gendered division of household labor in most cases gives rise to an unequal allocation of housework within the family, with couples sharing the housework disproportionately. For example, in her book *the Second Shift*, Arlie Hochschild (1989) holds that women's entrance into the full-time workforce has brought about a "second shift"- the dual burden of paid and unpaid work experienced by working women- to dual-earner families in the United States. She calls the phenomenon of excessive amounts of work for women due to men's comparably lower responsibility for household labor in dual-earner families a "stalled revolution".

One possible explanation for unequal allocation is that household labor is distributed according to the power and income of each partner (Ross 1987; Brines 1994; Gupta 2007). It is also assumed that the partner with more power and income will undertake fewer unpleasant tasks, since one who does household labor depends upon the other for income and economic stability. One of the problems in this perspective is that while women's power may increase in proportion to her income contribution, their abilities to redistribute household tasks do not. Lacking of power and income are surely important factors, but they cannot explain complex dynamics of bargaining, negotiating dynamics of household labor distribution.

Again, while it does appear men participate more in domestic tasks when women become employed, the actual increase is quite small. There is alternative perspective called "socialized gender," or "gender constructionist,"

which sees gender and household labor as social construction. One of most interesting perspective is “doing gender” theory (West and Zimmerman 1987), which argues that gender is made and constructed through social interactions and daily practices. From this perspective, the allocation of household labor actually defines, expresses, and constructs gender relations within the household since gender is “not a set of traits, nor a variable, nor a role, but the products of social doings (1987, p.129),” as well as accomplishment, an achieved property of situated order .

In this sense, Hochschild’s (1989) study reveals how women and men may view their housework as an expression of their gender. Also, in *Time Bind* (1997), she discusses the reversal of home and work – work becomes home and home becomes work. This implies that the logic of workplace, the notion of efficiency penetrated into home, while workplace has become more “homey” place. There has been deskilling of the household labor, as well as devaluation of the work of raising children, to be parents due to lack of recognition and emotional stress at the household.

As for China,<sup>1</sup> a sociologist, Zuo Jiping (2009, 2012) conducted a number research on the household division of labor for elderly Chinese couples in Beijing. In her paper about presocialist China (2009), Zuo interviewed the generation born prior to socialist revolution, who were born in the 1930’s, and her theory was the revised version of intersectionality which examines the intersection of generation and gender dimension of patriarchy. One of her findings is the trends of women’s growing domestic-role orientation, that is, with marketization and withering away of the work-based welfare; women tend to identify more with their domestic responsibilities, less with their workplace like in pre-reform era when they were regarded as “work-unit person.” As labor becomes increasingly commercialized and competitive in post-socialist context, women are losing their social role as workers, coming back to the household. This paper attempts to test her findings in the most marketized context in China, a city of Guangzhou with younger generation of couples. By examining the new generation of people, this paper explores the intersection between generational and gender division of labor in family in post-socialist transformation.

We consider the 80s Generation as the new post-socialist individualized generation, thus it would be an idea case to examine the intersection between

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<sup>1</sup> This paper employs a case-oriented qualitative research with data from one city in China, thus comparison with other countries goes beyond the scope of this paper. For the comparison between China and the US, please see the article by Liang and Powell (2001), “Work-family Conflict in Contemporary China: Beyond an American-based Model.”

generation and the gender dimension of patriarchy, in other words, we would like to investigate the intersection between post-socialism and gender division of household labor in the most marketized city in China, Guangzhou.

## Methods

The method used in this study is participant observation and in-depth interviews conducted in the year 2015. For this study, interviews provided critical, first-hand primary information about division of household labor between couples. In-depth interviews with twenty people were conducted, and for interviews, we made efforts to build close rapport with interviewees. Conducting interviews in China like building a relationship or friendship, so we need to manage, value, and respect the relationship, and any information they shared with us. All of our interviewees are college-educated working in private sectors, representing the new, modern Chinese generation while old generations did not have chance to go to college, and mainly employed in the state sectors as workers. We also conducted a few hours of observation in each household, but our main data is from interviews. The interviews were typically in the form of informal conversations on the issues of family, spouse, parents, and the division of labor in the household, in most cases, informal, free-chatting with food and drink in their home proved most beneficial. The interviews themselves are always exciting adventures and wonderful learning experiences. When couples were chosen, they were not interviewed together. At the same time, interviews are limited, since the data we have obtained mostly focuses on how they “talk” about household labor not necessarily how they “do” household labor for 24/7. For this, follow-up interviews were conducted for clarification and additional information. Nevertheless, we do not intend or claim to provide “the best” way to describe the division of household labor, but our limited data is one way to make sense of what is going on the household in post-socialist China.

By focusing on their family situations and life experiences, we tried to understand how macro-level social changes and micro-level personal experiences intersect. In this sense, this paper follows the qualitative research tradition of the extended case method advocated by Michael Burawoy (2009). Unlike the type of ethnography used in anthropology, the extended case method in sociology deploys participant observation to understand people’s everyday lives in socially and historically specific contexts, and to locate them

in the larger macro structures of the world. Therefore, the extended case method would be a useful tool with which to trace the historical and structural changes of people's daily lives by connecting micro-level analysis with its macro-level dimensions (Burawoy 2009).

The first author as *80 hou* from Guangdong, visited the houses of interviewees, and conducted in-depth interviews with them. Then, the first author and the corresponding author had frequent meetings to discuss the findings and the direction for the future research. The first author is in charge of data-collection, and the corresponding author is in charge of writing for this paper.

## A Location: Guangzhou

Guangzhou has been the front-runner of the reform and opening of China for almost forty years. Guangzhou has the advantage of proximity to overseas Chinese capital in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Southeast Asia. Also, Guangzhou's distance from Beijing and proximity to overseas Chinese reduce involvement from the central party-state and create an ideal place for experiments of reform and the introduction of the market economy. In the initial period of the reform (1979-1983), the central state lacked sufficient capital to promote the economic activity in Guangzhou, so that foreign investors (mainly overseas Chinese) received the preferential policies and autonomy. This has resulted in more *laissez-faire* like system in Guangzhou not like Beijing and other northern cities. The social development in Guangzhou has been based on the principle of pro-market and less state involvement. Thus, Guangzhou is an ideal location to examine the new generation of individual couples and their families since it represents several "new" China – market, commodification, urban, modern, and the proximity to Hong Kong and Taiwan.

The metropolises such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou have been the most attractive places for *80 hou* to settle down. The term "*Bei Shang Guang* (北上广)" thus emerged, coined by the mass media and referring to the three economic powerhouses -Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou- in China abbreviated by their first Chinese characters for convenience.

The reasons why Guangzhou was chosen as the site of investigation are two-fold. First of all, Guangzhou, alongside other major coastal cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen, represents the new "modern" China that has come about since the enactment of the 1979 reforms by Deng Xiaoping. As

China has become more open to international culture and liberal ideas, Guangzhou's position as the testing ground for economic reform has resulted in considerable exposure of these modern ideas to its people. In addition, with its geographic and linguistic proximity to Hong Kong, its residents have been influenced by Hong Kong's popular culture, which has made Guangzhou a place famous for its openness. As a result of direct investment from overseas Chinese, it has also been a springboard for international trading. These cultural exchanges, revolutions, and reforms make it an ideal site to see what forces are shaping modern China. Second, as it is one of the most cosmopolitan commercial cities in China and has attracted a great number of *80 hou* from all over China to work, Guangzhou provides an ideal location.

### The New *80 Hou* Generation in Urban China:

Dramatic changes that have taken place in China since the year of 1979, particularly in family formation resulting from the birth control policy implemented by the Chinese Communist Party. These changes have also brought about great transformations in the family structure and the division of labor within it. First, household sizes have progressively shrunk. The average number of family members dropped from 4.41 in 1982 to 3.16 in 2008. Second, family structure has undergone a shift from large extended families living together to small nuclear families living independently. In comparison to 1982, statistics from 2012 show that small family units have come to comprise the majority of urban Chinese families (Zuo 2016). Therefore, a majority of *80 hou* families are nuclear families.

As the first generation born following the implementation of the one-child policy, most *80 hou* children grew up during a period of changing family dynamics and family formation. Many were born into "4-2-1" families, earning the nickname "Little Emperor" (Marshall 1997) or "the Spoiled-brat Generation" (Gooding 1998) as the sole (1) recipients of seemingly excessive amounts of attention from parents (2) and grandparents (4). A growing body of news details gloomy stories of the strains in marriages of Chinese *80 hou*. One survey<sup>2</sup> conducted among 2337 married *80 hou* suggested that 55.2% had experiences of quarrelling with their partners over who does what at

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<sup>2</sup> "Over half of *80 hou* couples had even quarreled due to housework division: housework division has become a problem in *80 hou* marriages (*China Youth Daily* August 10, 2010)."



home.

What may distinguish *80 hou* from the previous generations of dual-earners is that they are a more post-socialist “*self-reliant*” (Won 2004) generation. The uncertain potential of jobs in the market economy has surrounded *80 hou* with competition and insecurity due to the breakdown of the “Iron Rice Bowl” in China – the destruction of guaranteed life-time job security, medical benefits, housing, education, and other social welfare previously provided for all public workers. Below is a very popular post on the web that describes the burdens on the shoulders of *80 hou*:

“When we were in primary school, college education was free;<sup>3</sup>  
By the time we entered college, primary education had become free;

Before we entered the job market, jobs were assigned and guaranteed by the government;

By the time we entered the job market, we had to bang our heads against a brick wall in order to secure a job that can narrowly tide us over;

Before we started to make money, housing was assigned and guaranteed by the government;

By the time we started to make money, we found that home prices were far beyond us;

Before we entered the stock market, even idiots made a profit; ;

By the time we entered the stock market rashly, we found in the end that we are actually idiots;

Before we reached marriageable age, one riding a bicycle could get a spouse;

By the time we wanted to get married, it is improbable to get a spouse without a decent house and a car;

Before we started dating, people were concerned with feelings and emotions;

By the time we start dating, people are concerned with money;

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<sup>3</sup> “Post-1970s, Post-1980s, Post-1990s – The enhanced Chinese generation gap” <http://www.ministryoftofu.com/2012/03/post-1970s-post-1980s-post-1990s-the-enhanced-chinese-generation-gap/> Retrieved November 11, 2016.

Before we started job hunting, one with primary education could be a leader;

By the time we started job hunting, one with a college degree can only clean restrooms;

Before we considered having a baby, others could procreate a bunch;

By the time we considered having a baby, none can have an extra one.”

In the past few decades, most *80 hou* have stepped into adulthood and have moved on from the campus to the labor market. In this process, they came across numerous unprecedented pressures – a harsh employment situation, soaring housing prices, and an international financial crisis in 2008. The *80 hou*, who were originally labeled as “the generation of Spoiled brats”, were turned into struggling, disadvantaged groups such as slaves to mortgage (房奴, *fang nu*), slaves who are forced to sacrifice quality of life to buy a car (车奴, *che nu*), Child Slaves (孩奴, *hai nu*), that is, hard-working parents who would do everything to ensure their children’s well-being, as well as Ant Tribe (蚁族, *yi zu*)<sup>4</sup> in the discourse of the Chinese mass media. They are supposed to enjoy the prosperity and wealth of post-socialist China, but they are actually suffering from unstable job conditions and insecurity of the market, which are also reflected in their lives in their household.

## Division of Household Labor for *80 hou* in Guangzhou

Most of the previous research on the division of household labor in China is related to the status of women, taking whether or not women have decision-making power as a major index to measure the status of wives within the family (Zuo 2016). At the same time, women were called on to step out of the home to keep with the needs of national economic development. Many scholars of Chinese studies and feminism have pointed out that the notion of gender equality received an unprecedented boost in the socialist revolutionary movement through the promulgation and vigorous implementation of the marriage law both institutionally and ideologically. Women, especially those from urban areas, have been encouraged to participate in employment and social activities, since women are believed to achieve liberation through

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<sup>4</sup> Ant Tribe (蚁族, *yi zu*) is a vivid metaphor of the groups of low-income college graduates who settle in a compact community, which is seen as the fourth disadvantaged group in China, most of which are *80 hou* graduates.

social production. Women are supposed to “hold up half the sky.” However, there are some limits as well. Women were more likely to be assigned to auxiliary posts while men were assigned to managerial and technical ones. In terms of income, the average income of women in urban areas had reached 77.5% of that of men in 1990, while two decades later in 2010, the percentage only amounted to two-thirds (67.3%) of the average male income (Zuo 2016). Moreover, together with the differences in income, women were also working a slightly longer hours, on average 9.6 hours per day in 2010 compared to 9.0 hours for men (Attane 2012).

While Chinese women are encouraged to work outside, it still remains to be seen whether Chinese men can, consistently, also be encouraged to step into to take more on part of the household responsibilities. This is an empirical question which needs more exploration. In this section, we discuss multiple characteristics of post-socialist work-family relations in Guangzhou. These relations entail flexible arrangement, devaluation of housework and persistence of patriarchy.

### *Flexible Arrangement*

One of our interviewee, Ms. X expressed non-rigid, very flexible arrangement of household labor.

“Generally the division of household labor in our family is satisfying because we share the chores quite equally and flexibly, not in the way the generation of my parents does. Basically (in my family growing up) only my mom shares all the housework while my father earns money outside.”

Unlike in the past, people in our study find their time is really limited and bind in the very competitive market economy. There are so much pressures from marketized workplace in post-socialist China. The ways they share housework in their families are claimed to be “*quite flexible*”, meaning the housework usually is done without any scheduled arrangements. Mr. Z’s comment represents the most common description of this kind of spontaneous, non-planned arrangements.

“Whoever has time to do it does it.”

In addition to available time, the people interviewed also identified sharing of housework based on personal preferences and skills as a factor in their

division of household labor, just as Ms. H explained why she is mainly responsible for cooking while her husband is responsible for doing the dishes.



FIG. 1.<sup>5</sup>—Six Faces of the Dice

“My husband used to be responsible for cleaning with his roommate when he was studying abroad. That’s good for us because I like cooking but hate cleaning.”

There was an interesting episode when we interviewed Ms. B. When talking about the flexible arrangements of housework within their family, she suddenly fetched a six-sided dice to show us (see Figure 1), on which six specific choices, including cleaning the floor (擦地), doing the laundry (洗衣), staying idle (呆着), cooking (做饭), cleaning the dishes (洗碗), and grocery shopping (买菜), are printed. Sometimes, they decide who does what by throwing the dice. She takes it as a way to arrange the chores when she “indeed does not feel like doing the housework” and “for fun”.

There may be several possible explanations for why these *80 hou* dual-earner couples are not apt to have the household labor done routinely within their family but rather arrange it flexibly, in most cases it actually means less frequently. In the city like Guangzhou, there are demands for longer working hours at workplace, and they are expected to be “serious” players who are willing to show their commitment to stay longer at the workplace. Consequently, they spend not much time at home. Owing to the pressure of their workplace, they have to work overtime from time to time. In the busy life of urban workplace, their time at home is very limited. As Ms. H said,

“Actually throughout the day, there are only very few hours when we are

<sup>5</sup> In order to show the six faces of the dice, we downloaded this picture from Google. The dice is almost the same as the one Ms. B showed us.

active at home. Therefore we do not have many chores that need to be dealt with.”

The less time spent at home results in a decrease in the time they have to face the housework and thus also decreases the perceived necessity of doing the housework in the first place.

## Devaluation of Housework

As we interviewed 80 *hou* dual-earner couples and listened to their stories, we found that they seemed to have conveyed one message in common: they felt too busy thus not having time for housework, just as Mr. K has described - “*we are fussing up and down*”- to do the housework routinely. For another example, Ms. S, it is impossible to cook every day at home. She said,

“...And the fact is that most of the time you even don’t have time and the right mood to do that. If you need to cook at home you’ll also have to first go the supermarket to prepare the ingredients. For us who usually finish work at almost seven, it is not realistic to cook every day because when the food is on the table it usually is almost 9 o’clock.”

She is usually more active sitting in front of the computer checking and answering emails after work in the evening- the time when her customers go to work. Time is really precious for her, thus no time to rest even at home. For her, when paid work has to be dealt with even at home, the housework is totally a time-exploitative, exhaustive labor that she wants to avoid. These people are facing pressure from the workplace, and the notion of “good man” or “good woman” is not somebody who is good at housework, but somebody excels in the market economy.

“After work the only thing I want to do at home is just to take a rest. It is not necessary for some of the household labor to be done every day. Just imagine that when you finish a whole day’s work, coming back home tired like a dog, and have to cook, however delicious the food is I would definitely lose my appetite.” (Ms. S)

For many couples in our study that felt overloaded by the paid work at workplace just as Ms. S did, household labor therefore is viewed as work that is not necessary for them to perform routinely.

Ms. K argued,

“Nowadays many people (of our generation) are doing white collar brain-work outside while the household labor is a simple physical work. No one would be willing to give up the brain-work to choose the physical work in which you have to devote your physical strength while not getting paid. The reason why many women of the previous generations were willing to do housework is because they were not highly educated and did physical work both outside and within the family. For them, there exists not too much difference in the value of both types of labor. But for modern women, household labor is a kind of cheap, labor which is not appreciated.”

For her, household labor is “a cheap, simple, physical labor” which is not worthy of investing time and energy, compared with the white collar brain work. Similarly, Ms. S also de-prioritizes housework in term of an activity deserving time investment.

“Home should be a place for recreation and relaxation, not a place for another work.. When I finally have time to take a rest I don’t have any motivation to do the housework at all.”

Apparently, for her, home is a place for the rest, not for another work. In this sense, workplace is her first priority and home is where one has to make oneself ready for work next day.

In the era of “knowledge-based, informational economy,” demand for simple physical labor that was common in the past has been replaced in the market by demand for intellectual and technical labor. As “value” is attributed to work done at workplace in the market economy, there seems to be less interests and even devaluation of work at home. It is natural that people think more highly of the labor in the labor market as it is more “valuable,” “recognized,” and beneficial than that within the household. The labor outside household has “exchange value,” while housework only has “use value.” The new generation naturally internalized the market perspective of “useful labor,” which result the devaluation of work at home. Ms. K’s comment summarizes this kind of sentiment.

“I would not choose to be a full-time housewife even though my husband’s income can support the whole family because I will be disconnected from

society. The current society keeps changing every day. I would rather be working outside than stay at home.” (Ms. K)

Research has found that a high proportion of dual-earner couples in China, particularly those with children, encountered serious difficulty in combining their work and family responsibilities (Geurts and Demerouti 2004). For example, during March 2nd to 8th in 2015, *New Daily* in China conducted a survey among 80 *hou* parents, which has attracted the attention from over 73,6000 80 *hou* netizens and 2072 of them responded. Even though over half of the respondents chose “quality time with the children” as the best expression of love for their children, nearly 70% of them have no time to be with their child due to their long paid working hours. Unlike Zuo’s study (2012) of old generation of women in Beijing who went through the process of domestic-role orientation, young women can not withdraw themselves from workplace in highly competitive market economy. In addition, recent news reporting that the pattern of “zero housework (*ling jia wu*)”<sup>6</sup> is now prevalent in many 80 *hou* families in urban areas continues to pop up.

## Persistence of Patriarchy

“Even though I was educated to be independent, I still can feel the power of traditional norms. The life of my mom, and many other mothers born in the previous generation seem to keep telling me that, ‘you are a girl and should act like a girl,’ ‘you should marry and have babies; ‘you should play the role of both a good wife as well as a good mother.” (Ms. K)

Under patriarchy, women as wives and mothers, are required to perform their responsibility of taking care of their families (Croll 1983, 1995; Robinson 1985, Wolf 1985). The image of women as good wives and good mothers has been further affirmed and reinforced through the mass media (Robinson 1985).

As Hochschild (1989) suggested in her research that women felt more responsible for the home, it seems that the women in our study still feel that doing the housework is an obligation for women, even though changes are underway. Under the high intensity of paid work at workplace, the household

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<sup>6</sup> “Zero housework” is a newly created term referring to a new life style in which young couples liberate themselves from the housework sharing by outsourcing the household labor in their family to the housekeeping service sectors.

labor becomes an extra burden, which they tried to avoid. However, for some men who are more involved, doing housework is a delightful option, a pleasant choice without pressure. Among our interviewees, their attitude toward housework are not same, depending upon their gender. Women are more likely to see housework as “obligation,” while some men see housework as a form of leisure. This can be understood that household labor activities are not always perceived as work, but that in some specific situations, some activities may be perceived as leisure or at least include some component of leisure, such as child care and gardening.

In some of men’s accounts, their involvement in the division of household labor is a matter of choice, like “*a delight of life* (Mr. S)”. Mr. H also told us he “*felt a sense of fulfillment*” when he “*has the housework done ‘well’*”. The interesting point here is that several husbands are declared better at housework than their wives, either by themselves or by their wives. One wife told us that she refused to learn how to cook and even if someday she made progress, she would keep it a secret because she was afraid that once she mastered cooking, the housework would naturally fall onto her shoulders. She likes to avoid housework.

This issue becomes more visible when the couple has a baby. When talking about his lesser involvement, Mr. K kept addressing his role as a breadwinner rather than a caregiver when faced with frustration about his lack of experience and knowledge in childcare. This corresponds to Coltrane (1989)’s finding suggesting that most fathers remain in a “helper” role. Here, our previous discussion of “flexible arrangements” reveals limited implication; it is not really “flexible” for women with a child.

“When my daughter was ill, usually it was my wife who took a day off to take care of her. It is more reassuring for mothers to take care of children when they are ill. You know, kids usually cry a lot when they feel uncomfortable. It is hard for people without patience like me to coax a kid. What’s more, you have to pay a lot of attention to food and drink for an ill child. I do not know much about these...but my wife is an expert at this. Besides, there are too many people helping out at home. They are picky when I want to help. But if I sit there idle, I will be criticized for not helping. When I want to give suggestions, the seniors are more experienced. Therefore, sometimes I just think it would be better to earn money outside.”

Compared with his wife’s intensive mothering who “falls into” the child care in most of her time, he is apt to involve the child care in his activities - to



maintain his own time. The division of child care between them mirrors the separation of “women’s work” and “men’s work” that structures their way of socialization, which in reverse affects the construction of mother as ultimately responsible for babies and fathers as more peripheral to them. In this way, we can see that individual parents may be involved in creating gendered transitions into parenthood. And either their behavior or consciousness is connected with the interactions and institutions in which their lives are embedded.

Ms. K felt a sense of identity as a woman when developing mothering practices like other mothers through social communities because she felt she was more caring and concerned about what is good for her baby. And the flood of mother-oriented social products has fueled her “parental consciousness” (Walzer 1998) in her daily life. She felt she is more responsible for child care because women are more skilled.

“There is not much (in child care) he can help out with. Women are usually more skilled and more responsible than men. Men are usually just helping (but not managing).”

This understanding of gender differences has rendered some women to undertake more housework even without negotiating with their husbands.

“It always ends up that I have to redo the housework even though he shares. He does not mind being messy.” (Ms. H)

A Chinese sociologist, Zuo (2016) argues that it has been demonstrated that women at every income level generally perform a larger share of the household labor than their husbands. In addition, according to statistics released by *Family and Career Values of Contemporary Educated Women in 2014*, it is suggested that Chinese women, on average, complete 190 minutes’ worth of housework every day while Chinese men by contrast spend 49 minutes on housework per day.<sup>7</sup> The contrast between the increasing demands of the reconstruction of the gender relations and the still persistent gender inequality of the division of household labor within the Chinese family has prompted to think whether these changes mentioned above have given rise to changes in the pattern of the gender division of labor within 80

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<sup>7</sup> “Chinese Women Still Outworking Men at Home” <http://www.womenofchina.cn/womenofchina/html/1411/2106-1.htm>. Retrieved, November, 11, 2016.

*hou* dual-earner families. Under the slogan of “We have two hands and we are not going to stay idle at home (*wo men ye you yi shuang shou, bu zai jia li chi xian fan*, 我们也有一双手, 不在家里吃闲饭),” women in China indeed have to sacrifice for the whole family. The patriarchy is alive and well in the 21<sup>st</sup> century post-socialist China, even when it has become “flexible,” for working couples, but for working parents, it is not flexible anymore.

## Conclusion

In *Women's Work in Rural China: Change and Continuity in an Era of Reform*, Tamara Jacka (1997) investigated the status of women and gender division of labor in post-reform China. In this book Jacka pays close attention to social-cultural construction of the conceptual dichotomies between outside/inside, heavy/light, and skilled/unskilled work as sources of unequal gender division of labor. Unlike Jack's case in rural China, our case of young generation in Guangzhou reveals more “flexibility” in these dichotomies, however, in spite of this flexibility, the patriarchy is not dying yet.

In this paper, we find three main features of household labor from *80 hou* in the city of Guangzhou. We first discuss flexible arrangement of household labor, but at the same time, women see it as “obligation,” while men see it as “a matter of choice, even leisure.” When we scratch the surface of “flexible” arrangements for working couples, we find the persistence of patriarchy (*dananrenzhuyi*). The practice of patriarchy and the idea of “heroic mother and happy wife” may be dying, but it is dying hard to still recognize household labor as mainly women's work, while men are just “helping out.” This is particularly true for child-raising for working parents.

Another feature is the devaluation of housework. What we find is that they are under tremendous pressure from their workplace, facing insecurity and uncertainty of the market economy, thus not much time for household labor. In this sense, Zuo's study (2012) of women's domestic-role orientation has some implication for our study, since women's domestic-role orientation has more validity for working mothers than women without children. In addition, some of our interviewees see the housework as a cheap, simple, physical, unpaid labor not worthy of their precious time. Household labor has only “use value,” but not “exchange value,” thus are wage-less, non-productive labor for them.

However, Marxist Feminist Dalla Costa (1972) raised a critical question of “productive” nature of housework. In their argument, household labor has

social power of producing workers for capitalism. Household labor not only has “use value,” but also is the “base” to maintain capitalist market societies. Dall Costa goes one step further to argue that household labor indeed has exchange value, and even produces surplus value (workers) for capitalism. Thus, household labor can be productive in the market society and we need a new thinking of “wages for housework.”

In March 2010, the proposal of “pay for household labor” put forth by Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference member Zhang Xiaomei of the National People’s Congress and Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference created a sensation across the nation. According to Zhang, household labor produces economic value of up to 120,000 RMB (approximately \$20,000 USD) per household annually. Some would find this idea absurd, but it is time to find a way to maintain the balance between home and work, and to recognize the true value of household labor.

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