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Women's Entry into Self-employment in Urban China: The Role of Family in Creating Gendered Mobility Patterns

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Summary. — How did family characteristics affect women and men differently in self-employment participation in urban China? Analyses of national data show dual marriage penalties for women. Marketization made married women more vulnerable to lay-offs from state-sector jobs; their likelihood of being pushed into unskilled self-employment surpassed that of any other groups. The revitalized patriarchal family tradition favored men in family businesses and resulted in their higher rates of entering entrepreneurial self-employment. Married women who had the education to pursue entrepreneurial self-employment were constrained by family responsibilities to state-sector jobs for access to family services, and had much lower rates in entering self-employment.

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Key words — self-employment, family, job mobility, gender segregation, Asia, China

1. INTRODUCTION

Studies on self-employment in developed countries consistently find that family characteristics—mainly marital status and number of children—have greater effects on women's participation in self-employment than on men's (Arum, 1997; Carr, 1996; McManus, 2001; Renzulli, Aldrich, & Moody, 2000). The effects of marriage and family also vary across occupational classes within self-employment: women enter nonprofessional self-employment to balance work and family, but enter professional self-employment more for career advancement than for family concerns (Budig, 2006). This line of research, however, has been limited to the context of Western developed countries. Little is known about to what extent these findings of family structure's different effects on men's and women's self-employment participation hold true in different cultural and economic contexts. This limited scope has also precluded the investigation of self-employment participation during rapid social change. When rapid social change transforms both the character of self-employment and the role of family, how do family and gender interact to shape people's entry into the new landscape of self-employment?

Contemporary urban China provides an ideal case to extend this line of research along these two directions. In China, not only family relations and gender roles within family are different, self-employment also presents a social and economic reality markedly different from that in developed countries. While self-employment has always existed as a viable employment option in developed countries, it had been largely eliminated in urban China during the Maoist era and only re-emerged as the reform started to transform the socialist planned economy toward a market economy. Entry into self-employment in urban China is not only a departure from wage employment, but also one from the redistributive sector to the emerging market sector.

Wage employment in China's once dominant redistributive sector differed from that in developed market economies, especially in the provision of family-related social services. As the reform transformed the employment structure, it altered both the economic rewards and family-friendliness of various jobs. Therefore, the motivations and constraints that drove people from wage employment to self-employment—especially the effect of family concerns on women's employment choices—would not only differ from those in developed countries but also evolve as marketization progressed.

China's transition to a market economy brought in changes in family norms and gender relations, chief among them the scaling back of the state's efforts in creating gender equality in the workplace and a revival of traditional gender roles and division of labor within families. Though we can expect that in China, like elsewhere, women's labor-market activities are more significantly shaped by their family roles, how exactly gender roles and family relations mediate people's responses to changes in the employment structure and create gender differences still awaits investigation.

Studies on gender differences in labor-market processes in contemporary China have noted the gender-specific effects of family on job mobility patterns. For example, women's job changes were more motivated by family reasons, but men's mobility more by career pursuits (Cao & Hu, 2007); only women were negatively affected, in both income and employment status, by marriage and family (Zhang, Hannum, & Wang, 2008); the presence of young children only had negative effects on women's income, but not men's (Shu, Zhu, &

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Zhang, 2007); and, among laid-off workers, marriage lowered women's probability of re-employment, but not men's (Du & Dong, 2009). These studies, however, have not examined gender differences in self-employment or the role of family in creating such differences.

This paper addresses this gap. We use data from a national survey to examine how family characteristics affect men and women differently in their entry into self-employment during urban China's market transition over a 19-year span. This paper makes two improvements on past research on self-employment in China. First, this is the first study that uses national representative data to systematically examine gender variations and family effects in entry into self-employment. Second, we disaggregate occupational classes in self-employment and examine the full range of self-employment activities. This helps to better detect gender differences, as women's participation and the effects of family characteristics may vary across occupational classes in self-employment. Previous studies often focused exclusively on either family business, where the household division of labor often excluded women from taking the leading entrepreneurial role (Bruun, 1993; Entwisle, Henderson, Short, Bouma, & Zhai, 1995), or marginalized petty commodity trades, where women outnumbered men (Jacka, 1990). Other more comprehensive studies also failed to address the internal heterogeneity of self-employment or to examine how women's participation varied across different types of self-employment (Davis, 1999; Wang, 2009; Wu, 2006).

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: GENDERED PATHWAYS TO SELF-EMPLOYMENT

Two major individual-level theories explain the entry into self-employment: the choice theory, also known as the class mobility thesis, sees it as an individual's choice to redeem one's special qualities and pursue career advancement; the constraint theory, also known as the disadvantaged workers thesis, focuses more on structural constraints that restrict one's options in wage employment (Budig, 2006). Men and women, however, may be motivated by different sets of choices and constraints in their entry into self-employment. Past research identified several factors that are related with gender differences in entering self-employment in developed countries. Women's deficiency in human capital (Devine, 1994; Kalleberg & Leicht, 1991), less access to financial capital, and greater liquidity constraints (Loscocco & Robinson, 1991), and the smaller number of entrepreneurs in their social networks (Allen, 2000) all contributed to the gender gap in entering self-employment and having business success. The most important factor, however, has been consistently found to be the differential effects of family characteristics on men and women (Carr, 1996; Renzulli *et al.*, 2000).

Women's roles as wives, mothers, and caregivers in the family cause work-family conflicts and constrain their job choice. Many women, to seek work and family balance, select family-friendly jobs in wage employment, which usually are female-typical jobs that are devalued and lower-paid, and suffer a penalty in wages and career advancement (Budig & England, 2001). Women also face employers' discrimination based on the expectation that family obligations lower their productivity. Work-family conflicts and other disadvantages women face in wage employment may therefore push them into self-employment to seek a more family-friendly alternative. In developed countries, self-employment often provides greater autonomy over the time and place of work and gives women

a flexible work strategy to juggle the competing responsibilities from employment and families (Carr, 1996). Two gendered pathways into self-employment emerge: marriage and children increase the constraints women face in wage employment and, subsequently, their likelihood of self-employment; men, on the other hand, enter self-employment mainly for career advancement.

Recent research also stressed the heterogeneity within self-employment and the importance of a disaggregated approach sensitive to this (Arum & Muller, 2004). In the re-emergence of self-employment in developed economies during the late 20th century, for example, both professional and unskilled contingent self-employment grew, while the traditional petty bourgeois activities continued its decline (Arum & Muller, 2004; Kalleberg, Reskin, & Hudson, 2000). This suggests that people who enter different positions in self-employment are driven by different choices or constraints. More specifically, the effects of family characteristics on women may vary across occupational classes within self-employment. Budig (2006), for example, found two patterns in the United States. For women entering nonprofessional self-employment, because their alternatives in nonprofessional wage jobs often lacked employer-sponsored childcare and entailed close supervision and inflexible schedule at work, they chose self-employment to balance family and work demands. For women entering professional self-employment, however, their alternatives in professional wage employment were often comparably family-friendly to self-employment. They entered self-employment to seek career advancement; family factors had as little effect on them as on men.

In different national contexts, many parameters in this equation change. The provision of care services, the relative family-friendliness of self-employment compared to wage employment, the occupational composition of self-employment, and the gender division of labor in families can all be different. Social changes can also alter the relationship between gender, family, and job mobility. Next, we discuss the evolution of self-employment and changes in family life in urban China during the market transition and propose hypotheses regarding how family characteristics shape gender differences in self-employment participation in this new context.

3. RESEARCH BACKGROUND: URBAN CHINA UNDER SOCIALISM

China's socialist state proclaimed gender equality as a key characteristic of the new society it wanted to build. By transforming the economy into one dominated by publicly-owned enterprises coordinated through central planning, the state provided nearly universal employment for working-age women in Chinese cities (Hershatter, 2004). This high rate was made possible by providing affordable family services—including childcare, medical care, pension, and old-age care—to working families in cities through their state and collective employers, the work units. In urban China under the planned economy, domestic care had become a domain of the state (Cook & Dong, 2011). This privileged access to social services made employees in state and collective work units the labor aristocracy in socialist China (Walder, 1992).

While in developed economies access to family-friendly benefits such as employer-sponsored childcare is associated with higher-status, professional occupations, in socialist urban China, it was linked to the ownership and administrative rank of one's employer but independent of one's occupational status. Work units with higher ranks were able to provide better

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