



THE IMPACT OF REFORM ON WOMEN'S WORK
AND GENDER DIVISIONS OF LABOUR
IN RURAL CHINA,
1978-1993

A Thesis

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by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the impact of reforms introduced by the Chinese state since 1978 on women's work and gender divisions of labour in rural areas. The aims are first, to understand the mechanisms through which certain gender divisions of labour have changed, whilst others have been maintained, and second, to explore the relationship between gender divisions of labour and other aspects of gender relations.

In pursuing these aims, I have integrated an analysis of material causes and effects of gender divisions of labour with an examination of the values and meanings surrounding those divisions. I argue that gender divisions of labour in rural China are constructed and operate through a number of conceptual dichotomies. The dichotomies which I focus on as being of particular importance are between 'outside' and 'inside' domains of work, and between 'heavy' and 'light' work. In some instances a dichotomy between 'skilled' and 'unskilled' work also operates. In each of these dichotomies the second element is seen as associated with women and is, in important ways, devalued and made secondary to the first element, which is associated with men.

My contention is not that the actual work of women and men in rural China falls strictly into separate categories according to these dichotomies. Rather, the dichotomies can be thought of as sets of values and assumptions shaping the work opportunities and choices of women and men, the ways in which

work is recognised, and the ways in which gender identities are maintained.

Since 1978 reforms initiated by the state have involved radical alterations to the organisation of work and the kinds of work undertaken by women and men in rural China. In the process, the particular types of work defined as 'outside' or 'inside', 'heavy' or 'light', 'skilled' or 'unskilled' have changed. At the same time, however, the dichotomies themselves and the values attached to each element of the dichotomies have been maintained, and indeed, reinforced.

This combination of reinforcement and change in values and assumptions concerning work and gender identities has been central to the maintenance of some existing gender divisions of labour and the construction and legitimation of new divisions. This process has, in turn, meant that overall, the reforms have not led to an improvement in rural women's status. Rather, certain aspects of women's subordination have intensified and others have been altered or broken down, only to form new patterns of subordination.