

---

# The impact of economic development on rural women in China

---

*A report of the United Nations University  
Household, Gender, and Age Project*

---

All-China Women's Federation

---

# The impact of economic development on rural women in China

*A report of the United Nations University  
Household, Gender, and Age Project*

All-China Women's Federation



**The United Nations  
University**

© The United Nations University, 1993

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations University.

The map of China is provided for general orientation; the boundaries shown do not imply official endorsement.

The United Nations University, 53-70 Jingumae 5-chome,  
Shibuya-ku, Tokyo 150, Japan  
Telephone (03) 3499-2811 Fax (03) 3499-2828 Telex J25442  
Cable UNATUNIV TOKYO

Typeset by Asco Trade Typesetting Limited, Hong Kong  
Printed by Permanent Typesetting and Printing Co., Ltd., Hong Kong  
Cover design by Takashi Suzuki

UNUP-812  
ISBN 92-808-0812-5  
United Nations Sales No. E92.III.A.2  
02800 P

# Preface

The impact of the world development process on women and family and vice versa is a problem which has received worldwide attention. The United Nations University (UNU), while doing research on human development, attaches importance to the factors of gender and age in the development process, and has accordingly initiated the highly significant Household, Gender, and Age Project. The aims of the All-China Women's Federation in participating in the project are as follows:

1. To make a study, in restropective and prospective terms, of socio-economic changes in China, with special emphasis on the impact of economic reforms on rural women since 1979, their roles in economic development, the patterns of the changes, and the problems arising therefrom. It is hoped that our research findings will be useful to decision makers in China.
2. To apply new research methods in training young research workers on women's issues, and to exchange experience of research work with other countries, developing countries in particular, to promote further development of our research.
3. To contribute to the UNU's global study, particularly its study of developing countries.

This research report is the result of the collaborative efforts of the All-China Women's Federation and the provincial women's federations of Jiangsu and Sichuan. Researchers from the municipalities, counties, and townships in the two provinces did a tremendous amount of field research at different stages of the project, particularly during the general survey and the in-depth survey through questionnaires among the local women of Hengtang and Jiahong townships.

We have all along received support and help from the local governments and the friendly cooperation of the interviewees, their husbands, and the rest of their families. We owe sincere thanks to all of them.

Our particular gratitude naturally goes to the UNU for its sponsorship, guidance, and warm support. Ms. Kumiko Ishikawa has been consistently concerned over the progress of the project. Dr. Eleonora Masini, general coordinator of the project, has given us unstinted guidance and help from beginning to end. Mr. David Kertzer and Ms. Nancy Karweit have given us specific guidance and help at different stages. We would also like to express our thanks to Mr. Feng Fanghui of Beijing University for his guidance and assistance in data analysis.

We are also very appreciative of the fruitful exchange of views with friends from various countries involved in the project. In the process, we have cultivated mutual friendship and understanding.

Project Director: Sun Hejun  
Researchers: Cai Sheng  
Zou Xiaoqiao  
Cui Keping  
Yu Chuyun  
Liu Xiaoping

Research team leaders  
—Sichuan Province: Wang Shuhui  
—Jiangsu Province: Wang Zengli

# Contents

Preface   vii

- 1   **Agricultural development and the changing status and roles of rural women in China**   1
- 2   **The research project**   5
  - 2.1. Objectives   5
  - 2.2. The field locations   5
  - 2.3. Research process, methodology, and instruments   13
- 3   **Analysis of the field survey findings**   17
  - 3.1. Changes in women's formal education   17
  - 3.2. Adult education for women   25
  - 3.3. The impact of economic development on rural women's occupational structure   27
  - 3.4. The impact of economic development on rural women's income   34
  - 3.5. Changes in the marriage situation   36
  - 3.6. Home relocation   42
  - 3.7. Childbirth, family planning, and mother and child health care   44
  - 3.8. Family structure   49
  - 3.9. Family relationships   51
  - 3.10. Intergenerational relations of elderly women   55
  - 3.11. Leisure time   57

## *Contents*

3.12. Changes in women's value concepts, aspirations, and ideals	58
--	----

4	<b>Conclusions and suggestions for decision makers</b>	<b>62</b>
---	--	-----------

### **Appendices**

1. General survey form	65
2. Findings from the general survey	66
3. Quantitative questionnaire	72
4. Life-history matrix	78
5. Qualitative questionnaire	79
6. Time allocation forms	84

# Agricultural development and the changing status and roles of rural women in China

In old China, agricultural productivity was very low, and the small-scale peasant economy was basically a combination of traditional farming and handicraft industry. Under the feudal ownership system, most of the land belonged to a handful of landlords, while the majority of peasants had little or no land. They toiled all year round but seldom had enough to eat or wear. With men constituting the main labour force on the farm, women mostly did supplementary jobs at home such as doing chores, raising poultry, and weaving. Only in certain parts of the country did women do the bulk of farm work. In feudal times, men in China were usually subject to the rule of three authorities: political, clan, and religious authorities. Women, in addition to the three authorities, were dominated by male chauvinism. Under the rule of male chauvinism, a woman was doomed to obeying the rule of the man in her life—her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and her son after the husband's death. These four authorities were the embodiment of the feudal-patriarchal system. Under the feudal rule of men's superiority, women's labour was not recognized by the society. Though they worked all the year round, women were considered dependents supported by their husbands, who controlled the family financial resources. They were viewed as appendages of men and tools to carry on the family tree.

After New China was founded in 1949, along with the social changes in the rural areas, women's status gradually changed. From 1949 to 1957 China conducted two social changes of far-reaching significance. First, land reform was carried out around 1950 and the feudal system of land ownership was abolished nationwide. Rural people, men and women, who had had little or no land got their



## *1. Development and the roles of rural women*

equal share, and women's economic status began to change. All this pounded at the feudal tradition of male superiority. On this basis, the Chinese government began to transform the small-scale peasant economy along the socialist line by establishing public ownership of the basic means of production and the socialist cooperative economy. At the same time, the government organized peasants to conduct large-scale water conservation projects and improved agrotechnology, giving a big boost to agricultural production. During the period of agricultural cooperation, land was owned by the collective. Peasants had only some small farming tools, while larger means of production such as machines and draught animals and equipment were owned collectively. Peasants were paid according to the work points they earned. (But often the points did not accurately reflect either the quality or the quantity of work.) Hundreds of millions of rural women came out to participate in collective labour, which greatly increased their activities and broadened their horizon. Now that the women had their own income by taking part in collective production, they began to realize that they, too, could become income earners instead of depending on men for a living. As a result, their economic status, their political consciousness, and their status in the family and society gradually improved in varying degrees.

But after 1957 inexperience and mishandling of economic affairs put a damper on agricultural growth, and rural development underwent a tortuous path. Grain production was unduly emphasized to the exclusion of other crops; land tillers had little say in planning production; and distribution followed an egalitarian pattern. Everyone was eating from the same "big rice bowl" whether he or she worked hard or not. Vestiges of feudal ideas prevented the implementation of the principle of equal pay for equal work between the sexes. After working a full day, men usually got ten working points while women got eight, in some areas only five or six. And women had additional obligations. While they shared the same lot with men in long hours of low-efficiency farming year in and year out for little material gain, they also had to do heavy household chores, including making clothing and shoes for themselves and other members of the family. Besides, they had to process the grain, because there was no food-processing industry in most rural areas, and, even if there was, most farmers could not afford it. This situation lasted until the end of the 1970s.

After summing up its past experience and lessons at the end of 1978, China began to undertake structural agricultural reform by in-

roducing a contract responsibility system, with remuneration linked to output. That is to say, while collective ownership of the land was maintained, peasant households or individuals became responsible for production in particular areas of farmland, hills, fishponds, or poultry farms, and, after selling their produce to the state according to the quota called for in their contracts, could keep the surplus for themselves. The new economic policies effectively boosted the farmers' enthusiasm for work and raised cost efficiency in agricultural production. In addition, forestry, animal husbandry, sideline occupations, and fishery developed alongside farming. The revival of open markets, reform of the system of state purchase of farm products, and decontrol of farm-product pricing have further promoted a commodity economy and economic activities in the rural areas. At the same time, China's village and township enterprises in the fields of industry, commerce, transportation, construction, and service trades have developed rapidly. These enterprises mainly engage in processing agricultural produce, manufacturing and repairing small farm machines, making clothes, and producing components and spare parts for larger factories. The development of rural enterprises has provided employment to surplus labour in rural areas, women included. Thus, farm dwellers can now work in non-agricultural fields without leaving the rural areas.

Since the implementation of economic reform, rural women enjoy more leeway. They can arrange jobs according to their own age, physical ability, special skills, and other conditions. Nowadays work and household chores are shared rationally by family members, giving full play to women's potential. As women play an increasingly important role in production, their status in society and at home has been steadily enhanced.

China's total agricultural output value amounted to 394.7 billion yuan in 1986, as against 32.6 billion yuan in 1949 and 156.7 billion yuan in 1978 (at prices for the respective years).<sup>\*</sup> The income of farmers has greatly increased. The per capita annual income of farmers (i.e. rural inhabitants) was 44 yuan in 1949, 134 yuan in 1978, and 424 yuan in 1986. During the 29 years from 1949 to 1978, the per capita annual income of farmers increased at an average annual rate of 3.9%. Rural economic reform began in 1978, and between 1978 and 1986 the per capita annual income of farmers increased at an

<sup>\*</sup> All figures for the national and provincial economies in this report are from the State Statistical Bureau.

## *1. Development and the roles of rural women*

average annual rate of 13.1%. In these eight years, 4.9 billion m<sup>2</sup> of new housing has been built in rural areas nationwide, an average of 600 million m<sup>2</sup> completed every year. In 1978 the average floor space per capita for rural inhabitants was less than 8 m<sup>2</sup>; it went up to 17 m<sup>2</sup> in 1986.

The present research deals mainly with the impact of rural economic reform on rural women's education, occupation, family life, and concepts.

# 2

## The research project

### 2.1 Objectives

The research project focuses on economic reform since 1979 as its main topic, with the land reform around 1950 as a subtopic. It studies the impact of social change and economic development on rural women, and puts forward our views and suggestions for the consideration of decision makers.

The following conceptual guidelines were used in the research:

- The *household* is taken as the primary living unit. At the present stage of development in rural China, the household continues to perform production functions.
- Gender* is used as an analytical criterion in the study of changes in relationships within and outside the household.
- Age* is used as an indicator of changes in the household.

The research, based on a survey of women in different age cohorts, using a life-course approach, covers the following areas:

- changes in women's education,
- changes in their employment situation,
- changes in their marriage, family structure, family life, and family relations,
- changes in their thinking and concepts.

### 2.2 The field locations

China is a huge country with a large population. As differences in historical and natural conditions between various regions unavoidably give rise to great discrepancies in economic development, we decided

## 2. The research project



### China

to select field locations from areas of different developmental status to make the research findings fairly representative of the general situation. This approach is also conducive to longitudinal study and comparative analysis of changes and their impact on women. Thus, one field location is in Jiangsu Province, one of the nation's well developed areas on the east coast, and the other is in Sichuan, an outlying landlocked province near the southern border. In selecting the locations, we saw to it that they were representative of the average living standards of the great majority of farmers in their respective provinces rather than the highest standards in that area so that the research results would mirror the actual overall conditions of rural women.

The two field locations selected were Hengtang Township in Danyang County of Zhengjiang Municipality, Jiangsu Province, and Jiahong Township in Guanxian County of Chengdu Municipality, Sichuan Province.

### 2.2.1 Hengtang Township, Jiangsu Province

THE PROVINCE, MUNICIPALITY, AND COUNTY. Jiangsu Province is situated on the east coast of China, on the lower reaches of the Changjiang (Yangtze) River, and is bounded by the Yellow Sea. It covers an area of over 100,000 km<sup>2</sup> and has a population of 62.69 million. It leads the rest of China in industrial and agricultural output value, which totalled 145.8 billion yuan in 1986—26.8 times that of 1949 and 3 times that of 1978. The 1986 per capita annual income of farmers in the province was 561.28 yuan, which is 406.28 yuan over the 1978 figure. New housing is found everywhere across the rural areas, and the average floor space per person is 17.46 m<sup>2</sup>.

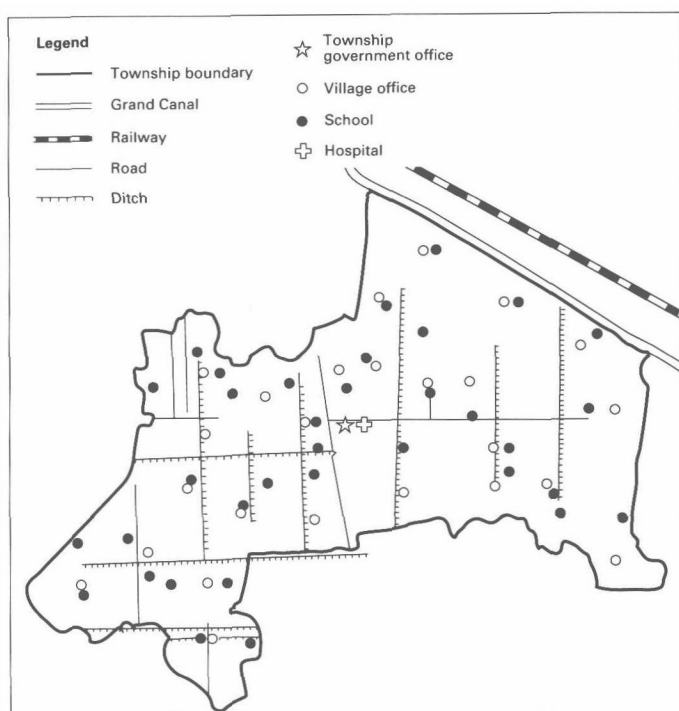
The major farm crops and products in Jiangsu include rice, wheat, rape-seed, cotton, silkworm cocoons, and pigs. In 1986 the total agricultural output value amounted to 24.75 billion yuan, as against 4.21 billion in 1949 and 14.09 billion in 1978. Since 1949 the agricultural output value has increased at an average annual rate of 6%. The rate rose to 14.3% in the eight years after 1978.

Since the rural economic reforms and adjustments in 1979, labour productivity has increased. People previously working on farms have switched to other occupations in increasing numbers, accelerating an all-round development of agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, sideline occupations, and fishery. At the same time, township and village enterprises have developed rapidly. The 1986 output value of these enterprises reached 49.63 billion yuan, making up 41% of the total industrial output value of the province, and was 1.5 times the province's total output value of agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, sideline occupations, and fishery. The commodity-producing sector in Jiangsu's rural economy increased from 20% in the 1960s to 40%–50% in the middle 1970s and more than 70% today. The development of rural industry has given impetus to the growth of small cities and towns.

Zhengjiang Municipality, located in southern Jiangsu, borders on the Changjiang River in the north. The Shanghai–Nanjing railway traverses its suburbs. The municipality covers an area of 3,721 km<sup>2</sup> and administers six counties and districts. It has a population of 2,462,000, with 80% in the rural sector.

Danyang County, 50 km east of Zhenjiang, is one of the counties administered by Zhenjiang Municipality. It covers an area of 1,016 km<sup>2</sup>—of which 73% is flat, 18% hilly, and 9% crisscrossed by rivers and lakes—encompasses 32 townships with 520 villages, and has a

## 2. The research project



**Hengtang Township**

population of 765,300, with 89% in the rural sector. The Shanghai–Nanjing railway traverses the county from east to west.

**THE TOWNSHIP.** Hengtang Township is located in Danyang County, 44 km from Zhenjiang and 7 km south of Danyang. It covers an area of 50.7 km<sup>2</sup> and has 3,000 hectares of arable land.

The township comprises 25 villages, with 10,183 households and a total population of 36,844, including 18,657 females, of whom 13,955 are above 17 years old.

With the Shanghai–Nanjing railway line and the Grand Canal crossing the township, it has convenient land and water transportation. Flat and rich land covers most of the township's terrain. The average temperature is 14.9°C and the annual precipitation is 1,073 mm. The township's main farm products are rice, wheat, silkworm cocoons, pigs, poultry, and fish. Since the 1970s, township enterprises have been set up progressively, and its industrial products are silk, knitwear, clothing, leather, farm machinery, and sculpture. There

**Table 2.1 Annual industrial and agricultural output and per capita income of farmers, Hengtang, 1949–1986**

	Total output (1,000 yuan)	Agricultural output as % of total	Per capita income (yuan)
1949	5,479	100	30
1978	12,983	64.3	182
1984	35,100	54	480
1985	44,775	46.4	494
1986	48,270	40.3	628

**Table 2.2 Education in Hengtang, 1950s–1986**

	Nurseries		Primary schools			Middle schools		
	No.	Children	No.	Pupils	Female pupils	No.	Students	Female students
Early 1950s	3	67	28	873	516	0		
1978	18	548	29	2,910	1,480	5	1,446	433
1985	30	977	28	4,074	1,942	6	1,604	665
1986	30	799	29	3,655	1,767	6	1,408	685

were 33 township enterprises in Hengtang in 1986, with a total of 4,436 workers and managerial staff, of whom 2,946 were women, representing 66% of the total. Each village in the township runs its own factories, with altogether 3,129 workers and managerial staff, of whom 844, or 27%, are women.

Tables 2.1 and 2.2 provide information on economic output, incomes, and education.

In the field of health care, there were only nine self-employed medical men and one privately owned pharmacy in the township in 1949. Unsterilized midwifery caused high mortality from puerperal fever and tetanus. The infant mortality rate then was around 150 per thousand. In 1952 the first township health station was set up, which



## 2. *The research project*

started to popularize modern midwifery. In the early 1960s the health station developed into a hospital, and a number of modern midwives were trained. As a result, the infant mortality rate dropped to 20–30 per thousand. In the late 1980s health service developed rapidly, and the township hospital became better equipped. Now the hospital has 35 doctors, nurses, and other staff, with departments of medicine, surgery, gynecology, and others. It accommodates in-patients. In addition to the hospital, there are 28 health stations in the township, with 54 health workers. Women in the township get annual screening for gynecological diseases. Family planning is well under way. Very few infant deaths occur.

### 2.2.2 *Jiahong Township, Sichuan Province*

THE PROVINCE, MUNICIPALITY, AND COUNTY. Sichuan, a large outlying, landlocked province near the southern border of China, is agricultural and one of the nation's important grain-producing areas. The major agricultural products are grain, oil-bearing crops, pigs, tea, mulberries, silkworm cocoons, and oranges. It covers an area of 578,000 km<sup>2</sup>, 6% of China's total area. Sichuan's vast territory is rich in natural resources, but it does not have much arable land. As it is an inland province with inadequate means of communication, the flow of information is slow and the rich resources have not been fully tapped. Sichuan has a population of 100 million, making up a tenth of the nation's total. It abounds with manpower but labour productivity is rather low. The province's total industrial and agricultural output value in 1986 was 82.37 billion yuan, 18.9 times that of 1949 and 2.3 times that of 1978. The average annual per capita income of farmers in 1986 was 338 yuan.

From 1951 to 1952, land reform was carried out throughout the province, soon followed by a movement to set up mutual-aid teams and agricultural cooperatives. The total output value of industry and agriculture in Sichuan in 1949 was 4.35 billion yuan, 83% of which came from agriculture. In the eight years 1950–1957, the total output value of Sichuan's industry and agriculture went up 1.5 times, increasing at an average annual rate of 12.1%. The agricultural output value alone rose 67.5%, at an average annual rate of 6.7%. However, inexperience and faulty management retarded agricultural growth. In some years, output even declined. As a result, Sichuan, historically known as “the land of abundance,” sometimes had to rely on state subsidy for subsistence.