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GENDER INEQUALITY AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN URBAN CHINA

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Abstract This article proposes an interpretation of changes in patterns of gender inequality in urban China in terms of the specific interrelationships of production and reproduction in Chinese work-units (*danwei*). The historical background of the structural conditions for gender inequality in pre-revolutionary Chinese society is sketched out, emphasising the lack of institutional separation of household and enterprise. The communist *danwei* is a multi-functional organisation which combines productive and reproductive functions. This structure has been conducive to the relatively greater gender equality which has been achieved in communist China. The reforms of recent years introduce pressures to separate productive and reproductive functions, which are likely to erode the trends towards greater gender equality.

Key words: China, gender, inequality, production, reproduction, household.

Introduction: Production, Reproduction and Gender Inequality

If one of the aims of the Chinese communist revolution was to liberate women from past oppression, it is generally recognised that this revolution remains 'unfinished' (Andors 1983; Wolf 1987; Stacey 1983; Kuang *et al* 1992). Nonetheless, even if gender inequalities in urban China remain considerable, there has also been a major transformation of the relative social position of men and women during this century, and especially since 1949. In his survey of evidence relating to gender inequality in China, Whyte (1984) argued that patterns of gender inequality in urban China at the end of the 1970s bore many similarities to those in both capitalist and socialist developed industrial societies. But he also pointed to some interesting differences: wage differences between men and women in urban China seemed to be less marked than elsewhere, occupational segregation by gender seemed less, and, although women in Whyte's own sample did most of the housework, they did seem to have 'an unusually high degree of control over family funds' (1984:237). He also noticed that gender inequalities were least pronounced among the youngest age groups. Some of these differences between China and other societies have also been found in analysis of comparative survey data carried out by a group including the present writer (Sheng, Stockman and Bonney 1992).

However, relatively little systematic sociological attention has been given to the structural conditions and transformations which might underlie these

patterns in gender inequality, their magnitudes and variations. Following the thesis usually attributed to Engels, to which the Chinese Communist Party is doctrinally committed, the key variables are often held to be the degree of participation of women in the labour force and the degree of socialisation of domestic labour. Those sceptical of Engels's thesis usually point out that the former of these two factors has little effect in and of itself, beyond increasing the total burden of work which women have to bear. The latter process, it is often argued, has not proceeded very far in any socialist society, with the exception of China during the commune movement and the Great Leap Forward of 1958–1961, when community services of all kinds were introduced to replace household-based drudgery. But this movement to socialise domestic labour had only a short life-span.

This paper aims to explore these questions at a more general level, following up debates concerning the basic structural transformation of society which accompanied the growth of capitalist industrialisation in western societies. One of the most fundamental social structural features of modern capitalist societies is the institutionalised separation of a private, family sphere and a public sphere of organised social action. Max Weber (1968:162) was perhaps the first major sociologist to lay weight on this structural division in society, seeing in the separation of the household and the enterprise one of the main structural preconditions for the development of a capitalist economy with rational capital accounting. In Weber's writings one finds the emphasis laid, not so much on the spatial separation of home and workplace, but on the difference in the basic social principles, and normative and legal frameworks regulating action in each context.

This institutional separation of the private household from the public enterprise embodies another fundamental distinction in modern capitalist societies, that between productive and reproductive activities. In pre-capitalist forms of social economy, this distinction could not be clearly made. In such societies, with work centred on what Brunner (1968) called 'the whole house' (*das ganze Haus*), or the more or less extended family household (Segalen 1986), all members of the household were engaged in necessary activities, with labour divided according to age and sex, which could not clearly be differentiated into what later comes to be seen as the distinct spheres of production and reproduction. The principles of capitalist accounting and the capitalist labour-contract make such a distinction possible and even necessary. The employer is only interested in those aspects of the employee's activities which go to produce commodities that can be sold on the market to realise value in the form of profit for the owner of capital. In return, the employer pays a wage, determined by the complex processes of the labour market, which is to serve as the material basis for the life of the employee. How this life is arranged, how the worker is fed, clothed, housed, kept clean and even possibly sane, and into what social relationships the employee enters in order to meet these ends and to reproduce the collective

body of workers in the next generation, is of no concern to the employer. They are the private affairs of the workers, to be managed in their own way.

As has often been argued in recent years by a great variety of sociologists of different theoretical persuasions (Delphy 1984; Mann 1986; Tilly and Scott 1989; Walby 1990; Kreckel 1992), this socially and historically produced distinction between production and reproduction lies at the heart of gender asymmetries and inequalities in modern capitalist societies. For a number of reasons, not least of which is the age-old association of women with child-rearing and housekeeping, the reproductive sphere has come to be seen as the preserve of women, while the productive sphere is dominated by men. Even in recent decades, during which women, and especially married women, have markedly increased their involvement in the labour market, they have nonetheless retained primary responsibility for reproductive activities within the family household: cooking, cleaning, shopping, looking after children and other dependants, and so on. Sociologists have, on the basis of this common ground, sought to trace relationships between women's primary responsibility for reproduction, on the one hand, and their relatively disadvantaged position within the sphere of employment, on the other. Analyses of processes of gendered segregation in the occupational structure, or of the dual burden of paid work and unpaid housework, and of many other aspects of gender asymmetry and inequality in modern capitalist societies, come back to the basic institutionalised distinction between production and reproduction, and the structural separation of the private and the public, the household and the enterprise.

This paper takes this framework for the discussion of gender inequalities in modern capitalist societies, and uses it as a benchmark for the theoretical analysis of gender inequalities in contemporary China. The focus of attention will be on the extent to which these structural and institutional divisions are also to be found in contemporary state socialist Chinese society and on the question of whether sociological analysis of gender inequality in China should pay attention to such basic structural factors.

Gender Inequality in Pre-Revolutionary China

Before the end of the imperial era, the structure of Chinese rural society approximated closely to the model of agrarian patriarchy as summarised by Mann (1986:41ff). The vast majority of the population of China lived in the countryside and gained their living from agriculture. The land was typically worked by relatively small family units, with a clear division of labour based on gender. Women were 'inside people', responsible for the internal functioning of the household. The corollary is that men were responsible for the external relations of the household as well as for outside work in the fields.

Thus marketing was the preserve of men, as were kinship, religious and political activities. The affairs of the clan, the temple and the village were in the hands of men.

To a very variable extent, both regionally and temporally, working people also hired themselves out to employers, especially to farmers with greater land holdings, as wage workers. The temporary and occasional nature of hired labour stands in contrast to the permanent dependence on capitalist labour contracts which is the fate of more proletarianised workers, whether agricultural or industrial; the predominance of peasant farming, for self-sufficiency and for the marketing of surplus, reveals the failure of a capitalist dynamic to take root in the Chinese countryside. There was, therefore, little basis for a sharp distinction between (paid) productive labour and (unpaid) reproductive work, such as was described in the introduction to this paper, which could overlay the admittedly sharp distinction of gender roles in Chinese rural society.

The structure of urban society in imperial China was, from the point of view of gender inequality, not greatly different. The wider society was much more stratified than was the case in the villages, because the upper strata and classes were more heavily represented. But this whole structure could be described without mentioning gender, since it was also a patriarchal structure, excluding women and confining them to activities inside the household. There were also large sections of city populations who, although employed for wages, were not using those wages to support families in which reproductive needs were met on a private basis. Instead, many men and women were living and working in contexts which did not clearly distinguish between production and reproduction. Single and married male apprentices and journeymen, who might be sojourning in the city, lived on the job in the master's household (Skinner 1977). Similarly, servants, both male and female, lived as part of the households to which they were attached.

In addition, as Max Weber had already pointed out, mercantile and business enterprise did not rest on a clear accounting distinction between the finances of the business and those of the household. Instead, he argued, business association and credit were to a large degree dependent on the kinship group, and directed towards the financing of family members' preparation for the imperial examinations and, if successful, for bureaucratic office, out of which the whole kinship group might expect to benefit (1968:380). More recent research has cast doubt on the universal validity of Weber's generalisation and revealed the growth of rational capital accounting in Chinese commerce (Rowe 1984). But the majority of businesses remained 'near perfect examples of the "household economy" ' (Rowe 1989:39), suggesting a lack of clear division between business and household accounts and finances. Once again, this stands in marked contrast to the more strictly capitalist orientation of trade and commerce which appeared much earlier in the West, with a stricter division between capital accounting in the business

seen as a legal personality and income-expenditure accounting in the household to meet private family needs.

To sum up, the main structural conditions underlying gender inequality in late imperial China include the following: (i) the patriarchal family and kinship system; (ii) the exclusion of women from all significant extra-familial occupations, including crafts, mercantile trade and commerce, and, of course, the imperial civil service; (iii) the lack of a widespread institution of the capitalist labour contract and capital accounting; (iv) the low degree of institutionalised differentiation of productive and reproductive activities.

Capitalist Industrialisation and Gender Inequality

It might be thought that the development of modern industry in many Chinese towns and cities from the end of the nineteenth century would have changed this situation drastically, and introduced the 'normal' capitalist distinction between capitalist production and private reproduction. To some extent this appears to have been the case, but in the fifty-year experience of capitalist industrialisation the separation of household from enterprise had many anomalies and was far from complete.

First, the growth of modern factory production was indeed very rapid but, as it started from a very low level, continued to employ only a small proportion of the workforce of cities (Hershatter 1986:43–48; Honig 1986:23; Riskin 1987:17). Second, the workforce in modern capitalist industry was disproportionately female. This was not necessarily the case from the initial establishment of factories, but the experience of employers with male workers, especially the difficulty of maintaining control and preventing political activity, and also because they could pay women less than men, led them to substitute women workers as far as possible. This process proceeded fastest in Shanghai, China's largest industrial city. As early as 1929, 61 per cent of the workers in Shanghai's industries were women, and in the largest industry, the cotton industry, 76 per cent were women (Honig 1986:24–25). In the northern city of Tianjin, however, the feminisation of the workforce occurred later and more slowly: in the cotton mills, for example, women were only 9.14 per cent of the workforce in 1929, and it was 'not until the Japanese occupation, and the Japanese takeover of millownership, that the percentage of women rose to 39 per cent, and in 1947 it was barely one-half' (Hershatter 1986:55).

From the present point of view, what is striking is the fact that many of these new industrial workers, and especially the women, were provided with housing, clothing and food by the factory, and lived in factory dormitories. Both of the recent major studies of Chinese urban industrial workers in the pre-communist period discuss this topic in some detail. Honig, for example, in her study of women in the Shanghai cotton mills, shows how women

recruited as contract labour were controlled and restricted by these terms of employment. 'She had no options – she lived where the boss told her to live, she ate the food he or she provided, she left the dormitory only when the contractor allowed her to' (1986:105).

From the point of view of the contract workers, this system of course did not involve a normal capitalist labour contract, since they did not receive their wages, which had to be handed over straightaway to the contractor, and it is also clear that the reproductive functions of shelter, clothing, cooking, cleaning, and so on, were not carried out on a private family basis. On the other hand, it is also clear that many other women workers, who were not recruited into the contract labour system, did receive their wages, and did use these wages to contribute to the maintenance of private family households in which the domestic labour of reproduction was carried out by household members (Honig 1986:132–165).

Some non-contract labourers also lodged in factory accommodation, as Hershatter shows in her study of Tianjin industrial workers. In a manner similar to the early industrialisation of Britain and other western countries, the cotton mills of Tianjin were:

> planned communities complete with a full range of welfare services. The Yu Yuan Mill, for example, was lauded in government and academic surveys for its dormitories, dining hall, clinic, schools for workers and their children, consumers' cooperative, bathhouse, athletic field, and martial arts society, as well as its paid maternity leave, disability benefits, funeral subsidy, and the bonus paid to workers so they could purchase melons in the summer (Hershatter 1986:165).

Not that this paradise was either universal or charitable. As Hershatter points out, this closed environment was the employers' attempt to impose factory discipline, and it was an attempt that was vigorously resisted. No more than a quarter of mill workers were in fact dormitory residents in the 1930s, and even those who were registered as such often found other private accommodation where they could be more free from company controls. Nonetheless, these employers had, in their efforts to control their workforces, created a model that could be built on by their communist successors. Hershatter (1986:167) points out that the role of factory dormitories began to change as early as 1946, when mills reopened after the end of the war with Japan. More families moved into factory housing, which became less a strategy of employers' control, and more a useful service to workers and their families.

These forms of industrial community catered for only a small proportion of the total population of pre-communist Chinese cities. The majority of the workforce would, as before, be engaged in pre-industrial activities of handicrafts, trade (including retail shops, stall-keeping and peddling), personal services, transport and communications, and a significant proportion of the urban population lived in great poverty with no regular source of livelihood.

Even in the modern industrial sector, the majority of workers lived in households which, in relation to their employers' business, must be considered as private.

Production and Reproduction in the Communist Urban Work-Unit (Danwei)

It is not feasible within the compass of the present paper to follow the twists and turns of Chinese urban industrial development since 1949. Instead, this section will examine the nature of the organisation which, by all accounts, plays a major role in the lives of urban workers, namely the work-unit (*gongzuo danwei*). It will also cast a brief glance at the short-lived phenomenon of the urban commune.

The *danwei* is a unique form of organisation and is the basic building block in Chinese urban society. A *danwei* can be a factory or factory complex, an administrative agency, a school or university, a hospital, a publishing house, or any other of a host of apparently specialised organisations. Almost all urban Chinese belong to a *danwei*. The operative word here is 'belong'; as Hebel and Schucher (1991) rightly stress, the concept of 'membership' is fundamental to understanding the significance of the *danwei*. Up until the reform process was launched a decade and more ago, it was an unchallenged basic principle of social life that, once an individual was allocated to a *danwei*, he or she remained a member for life. Unlike the case of a capitalist enterprise, employment in which is eventually terminated by retirement if not sooner, membership in a *danwei* is not affected by the capacity of the member to continue to perform specialised work functions. Whether ill, disabled, or retired, a worker continues to be a member of the *danwei*.

The *danwei* is thus not merely (if at all) an enterprise in any sense current in western societies. Every *danwei* does have a specialised function in production, administration or service provision. But this specialised function by no means exhausts the responsibilities or social functions of the organisation. Li Hanlin, one of a number of writers (Lu 1989; Hebel 1990; Hebel and Schucher 1991; Henderson and Cohen 1984) who stress the multifunctional nature of the *danwei*, identifies the following categories of functions performed by the *danwei*:

- *political* functions, including ideological propaganda, implementation of political decisions and political and social control;
- *specialised* functions e.g. production of goods, delivery of medical treatment, etc.;
- *socialisation* functions, inculcating specialised and political role-expectations in members;
- *educational* functions, including the specialised training and upgrading of members' qualifications, and the primary and secondary schooling of members' children;

- ⋆ *social security and social welfare* functions, including the provision of services, the improvement of material conditions, the provision of housing, and support for the elderly;
- ⋆ *regulation of private affairs*, such as family planning and birth control, finding jobs for children of members, mediation in marital discord, brokering marriages, and cultural provision for free time;
- ⋆ *participation in local development*, through 'friendly' interaction with local government (Li 1991:161–168).

It is not surprising that the *danwei* is often referred to as a 'small society'. One of the key social identities of any individual is membership of the *danwei*. Every member has a status within the hierarchical structure of the organisation, and a location within a network of personal relationships centred on the unit. In many large-scale work-units, individuals can meet almost every normal requirement which the Chinese economy and society can provide within the confines or under the auspices of the *danwei*.

In practice, work-units vary considerably in the degree to which they can embrace the whole lives of their members. Work-units can seldom provide housing, for example, for more than a proportion of their members, and many *danwei* members must rely on housing supplied by the city government or live in privately owned housing. Andrew Walder, drawing on the results of the 'One Thousand Households' survey carried out annually in Tianjin, charts the degree to which the respondents' families lived in housing of different kinds. About a third of respondents in the 1986 survey lived in housing provided by the work-unit of a family member, forty-four per cent lived in housing provided by the city government, and just under a fifth lived in privately owned housing. However, asked about the possible source of a future apartment, two thirds of those respondents who could envisage such a possibility felt that it would most likely be provided by a work-unit. Although there was no clear association between the size of a work-unit and the percentage of respondents living in housing provided by the work-unit, there was a significant relationship between the provision of work-unit housing and the rank of the work-unit, with the highest-ranking units providing seven times the proportion of housing compared with the lowest-level units (Walder 1991:6). Similarly, Walder found great variations in the extent to which work-units provided a variety of services, with 86 per cent of units offering meal halls, showers and a health clinic, while a quarter or less offered a sports field, a barber shop, or a free bus service.

Nonetheless, despite this great variety in the scope of work-units, it is clear that in general the Chinese urban *danwei* does not correspond to the ideal type of the capitalist enterprise. First, the system of life-long membership of the *danwei* contrasts sharply with the employment contract in capitalist enterprises. As the economic reformers have often bemoaned in recent years, *danwei* membership substitutes for the formation of a labour market, as, of course, it was intended to do by those who felt that they were engaged in the building of a socialist society in which labour would cease to be a commodity.

From the point of view of the *danwei*, labour is merely one of the activities of members, not their sole function. Second, although the 'non-productive' functions of the *danwei* clearly can be seen as a cost which a poorer work-unit might not be able to afford, the minimisation of labour costs is not and cannot be a prime objective of *danwei* management. Although it would not be accurate to identify the *danwei* as a complex form of household, expenditure on some such 'non-productive' functions does bear some resemblance to the living expenses of a private household attempting to maximise its living standard within the constraints of its income. *Danwei* accounting is thus more like the income-expenditure accounting of a household or non-profit making association than it is like the profit-and-loss accounting of a capitalist firm. Third, the activities which in capitalist societies would be classifiable as 'reproductive', because they are not accounted for in the profit-seeking enterprise of the firm, are in China not clearly separable from the substantive, or 'productive', purpose of the *danwei*. Thus, for example, a proportion of the time of administrators in a branch of a work-unit might be spent in attempting to solve the housing problems of members whose family circumstances had changed, a matter which in most capitalist enterprises or other employing organisations in capitalist societies would be treated as the private affair of the employee and his/her family and none of the organisation's 'business'.

However, it would be wrong to maintain that there is no distinction between the *danwei* and the households of its members, or to suggest that the *danwei* is one large complex household. Members of work-units do still live in private households and carry out many household activities on a private family basis. A high proportion of workers live in apartment blocks situated at some distance from the unit in which they work, whether or not their housing is provided by the work-unit. So, apart perhaps from their mid-day meal, much of their daily life outside working hours is carried on independently of their work-unit. But even if the family lives in rooms on the premises of the *danwei*, there is still a boundary between the member's household and the *danwei* as an organisation. In terms of the division of space, the territory of the household is still bounded, even if the degree of privacy afforded by walls and doors is not very great, and even if some components of the household's space, such as cooking facilities, have to be shared among several households. Furthermore, many household functions can be and are carried out on a private family basis, even if the *danwei* also offers facilities collectively. For instance, the cooking and eating of meals can be either a private household matter or a collective activity within the *danwei*. Those who live within the *danwei* compound may eat some of their meals in unit canteens, or collect cooked food from canteens to take back to their rooms to eat. But, partly for reasons of expense, partly for reasons of family cohesiveness, partly because of food preferences, families may prefer to cook their own food in the kitchens either within or attached to their own

apartments. The budget of the family household also remains distinct from that of the *danwei*. Although many needs may be met collectively and consumed as social goods, thus forming part of the social wage, many other needs are not met collectively, but rather, as is typically the case in commodity societies, purchased on the market. The money wages which must sustain households are typically very low, but, due to the fact that a higher proportion of needs are met collectively than is common in capitalist societies, and to the fact that even those goods which are commoditised are nonetheless subsidised by some level of government or by the work-unit itself, standards of living of families are actually higher than might be expected on the basis of the money wages themselves. The relationship between the socialised budget and the household budget is markedly different from that common in capitalist societies, but this by no means signifies that the distinction has been eliminated.

The boundary between the private household and the *danwei* can be thrown into sharp relief by casting a brief glance at an alternative urban structure that emerged in Chinese cities in 1958, blossomed quickly and equally quickly disappeared – the 'urban people's commune'. Designed as an 'integrated unit of administration, living, and production' (Schurmann 1968: 393), urban communes were urban units capable of meeting in a socialised manner all the needs of the members, whose numbers could run into the tens of thousands. Organised around a nucleus of a productive unit, such as a large factory, a commune would also comprise agricultural brigades, public canteens, kindergartens, nurseries, wet-nursing stations, schools and even a university, as well as administrative departments taking on all the functions of local government and the management of the productive activities. The intention was to collectivise all aspects of life in order to raise production and build a socialist society. This meant that the distinction between private household and public organisation was blurred to a considerable extent,

> Collective life, it was said, replaced individual life. Families contributed their tools to the commune. Meals were taken in common in the public dining hall. With more people eating collectively, the commune was able to cut its coal costs by 50 percent. Collective shopping made it possible to cut down on the number of sales people. Children spent more time in nurseries and kindergartens. . . . The ordinary citizen found himself (*sic*) in the grip of a new way of life. Private life was decried as old-fashioned, women were mobilized for labour, and collective life supplanted home life. The street, not the home, became the central focus of daily life (Schurmann 1968:388–392).

Further research would be needed to ascertain the degree to which Schurmann's generalised description fitted the reality in different actual urban communes, but it is clear that, in intention at least, the urban people's communes implied an even more radical fusing of public and private, of household and organisation, than is seen in the structure of the *danwei* and its relation to the households of its members.

Gender Inequality and the Danwei

Let us briefly recall and slightly develop the argument concerning the structural conditions for gender inequality in capitalist societies that was alluded to earlier in the paper. The capitalist opposition of capital and labour, and the capitalist labour contract that brings the two into relation, implies a sharp separation of the realms of production and reproduction. Reproductive activities belong to the private sphere, to be managed by private family households; they are none of the enterprise's 'business'. All the enterprise wants from the worker is his or her capacity to labour, all that the enterprise gives in return is a wage. Any involvement in managing or subsidising the affairs of the private household will appear to the enterprise as an unnecessary cost. Any interference of the affairs of the private household in the smooth running of the enterprise's business will be seen as a departure from optimum productivity, the enterprise wants employees who will be able to give their full attention to the goals of the enterprise during working hours without being distracted by private family matters. Under these structural conditions, women, because of their long-standing association with household affairs, will appear to the enterprise as less than optimal employees. Women are judged typically unable to devote their attention exclusively to the business of the enterprise, because of their responsibility for family concerns, a responsibility which can under certain circumstances become an over-riding or at least a distracting consideration. Thus women can only be employed to the extent that there are compensating advantages to the employer: if they can be paid lower wages than men for performing the same work; if they can be employed on certain segregated tasks at lower rates than it would take to attract men into them; if they can be employed under certain less advantageous conditions, of hours, wages, or security of employment, because their income is not intended to be sufficient to support a family household, or if they are more disposable and subject to enterprise control than men would be. Women thus are present in the labour market to a lesser degree than men, typically earn less than men when they are employed, and work under less favourable conditions of employment (wages, hours, job security, promotion opportunities, etc.) than men. Furthermore, although they also work far more than men at their responsibilities within the family household, the work they do in the household does not earn them income, and therefore 'does not count'. Not only are women less financially independent than men, they also tend to have less power and autonomy within the family household, on the principle that 'he' who has more income has more say. The structural conditions that separate production from reproduction thus contribute to women's less advantageous position both in the public and in the private spheres (Kreckel 1992:246ff).

How does this argument appear in the light of the Chinese conditions we have sketched out? First, virtually all women in urban China between the age

of completing full-time education and the age of retirement are in the labour force, and are members of an urban work-unit (State Statistical Bureau 1988:224ff). Second, virtually all of these women are in full-time work; there are no established arrangements for part-time work in China. The bare consequence of these two facts is the complete contrast between the pattern of economic activity of Chinese women and the pattern typical of capitalist industrial societies. Despite considerable variations, it is no caricature to suggest that the female population of working age in capitalist societies is distributed at any given moment into approximately equal thirds: those who are full-time housewives; those who are employed part-time; and those who are employed full-time. In China the first two categories are almost non-existent; nearly all women of working age work full-time.

It is evident that the structure of the *danwei* does not pose any obstacle to the labour force participation of women. Far from it; one of the policy objectives of the Chinese regime has been to encourage women into the labour force. As Schurmann (1968:395ff) points out, one of the major purposes of the urban commune movement of 1958–61 was to draw women into the labour force outside the home, from which they had traditionally been largely excluded, and the drive to mobilise women into the labour force continued apace in subsequent years. The Chinese Communist Party was committed to a programme of equality of men and women (Croll 1978), and the language of gender equality was to the fore in this labour mobilisation effort, although for many years to come the older generations of women were not touched by this movement out of the home and into the work-units (Davin 1976:163ff), and even today there are many elderly women who have never worked outside the context of the family. The younger generation, and certainly those born after the establishment of the communist regime, have been drawn into the labour force by, if nothing else, the low wage policy of the government, which makes it next to impossible for a family to survive on a single wage.

This by no means excludes various forms of gender-related segregation in work. Of these, perhaps the most significant is the degree to which women are under-represented in the relatively advantaged state-owned sectors of industry and over-represented in collective work-units, which are on average smaller and less able to provide their members with services and benefits on the same scale as state work-units (All China Women's Federation 1991:239; Whyte 1984:217). Horizontal occupational segregation is also present, though, to the extent that markedly different industrial and occupational classifications allow comparison, relatively less so than in comparable societies (State Statistical Bureau 1988:476ff; Whyte 1984:221ff). It is difficult to find comprehensive statistical data on vertical occupational segregation, but the fact that the earnings gap between men and women increases with age is an indicator of the presence of this form of segregation too. Younger women in all major occupational groupings earned in 1988 on average approximately 90

per cent of men's earnings, reducing to around 80 per cent in age-groups over 40 (All China Women's Federation 1991:320).

Thus, crude measures of gender inequality in urban China reveal no greater inequality than in industrial capitalist societies, in fact possibly greater equality, and a marked reduction in inequality over the period of the building of the communist regime, up to the mid-1980s. The thesis of this paper is that the relatively less sharp separation of productive from reproductive spheres in urban China, as embodied in the structure of the *danwei* outlined above, has provided one of the most important structural conditions underlying the degree of gender equality that has been achieved since the 1950s. First, the abolition of a labour market and the establishment of lifetime membership of a *danwei* means that labour is not (or not only) considered as a 'cost' from the point of view of the leadership of the work-unit, and thus allows almost universal adult participation in the work force for both men and women. Second, the welfare and 'household-like' activities of the *danwei* help to provide the conditions which make this universal female labour force participation practicable from the point of view of families.

This thesis could be elaborated at length, but for present purposes it may be illustrated by reference to one, though perhaps the most sensitive, aspect of reproductive activity, namely child care. In capitalist societies it is often held that it is the absence of publicly provided child care facilities that poses the greatest obstacle to the employment of mothers of young children. Capitalist societies vary greatly in this respect, but generally speaking it is not easy in capitalist societies to mobilise political and economic support for such provision. The major bases of organised political and economic power, for example corporations and employers' associations, trade unions, and state and governmental agencies, are all more concerned with issues of production and satisfied to keep issues of reproduction at arm's length (Kreckel 1992:273ff; New and David 1985:330ff). In particular, capitalist corporations have to be convinced by arguments appealing to increased productivity before they are prepared to consider providing child care facilities for employees.

In China, the situation is quite different. Walder (1991:15) found that 66 per cent of work-units provided a nursery, and this facility was one of the most commonly provided benefits. It is considered to be part of the members' social wage as a member of the work-unit, and is usually cheap because subsidised by the unit. This by no means implies that parents can always find a place for their child in a *danwei* nursery. For those children who cannot (or cannot conveniently) be placed in a work-unit nursery, there are also facilities provided by the city government (though these will be more expensive) or by the street residents' committee (though these will be less well staffed and equipped). Together, these three forms of child care facility provide for over 60 per cent of urban Chinese children below the age of six (Sheng 1991:30). It is clear that associated with the thorough mobilisation of

women into the work-force has gone a recognition of the need to provide child care. Child care may still be seen as primarily women's responsibility, but the *danwei*'s involvement in child care is significant, and can be seen organisationally in the typical *danwei* by the existence of both a Women's Committee, which oversees all aspects of women's interests and rights, including child care, and a Welfare Department, the remit of which includes the administration of the nursery and kindergarten (Li 1991:154ff). This is simply one example of the general point that has been stressed: that the multifunctional *danwei* takes on responsibility for many functions which in capitalist societies would be left to the private affairs of the family, and the organisational structure of the typical *danwei* also reflects this, including departments for education, housing, health care, family planning and birth control, and social security, as well as for welfare and women's issues (Li 1991).

Gender Inequality in the Period of Reform

Before concluding, it is necessary to raise the question of the stability of the system described in the previous two sections of the paper. How irreversible, or otherwise, is the structure of the *danwei* with its combination of productive and reproductive functions, and with its consequences for the patterns of gender inequality? What changes are under way as a result of the post-Mao reforms?

Nothing is stable in Chinese society. Although for the purposes of clarity of argument this paper has slid over the twists and turns of political and economic policy in China since the establishment of the communist regime, this procedure necessarily oversimplifies the complexity of developments in that country. Far from there having been a continuous policy line underlying the construction of the urban *danwei*, it is far more plausible to analyse developments since 1949 in terms of competition and tension between a number of different lines and different conceptions of socialist society (Solinger 1984). These fluctuations of policy and power configurations also have consequences for the general pattern of social inequality, both in the sense that different 'visions of socialism' generate different primary bases for inequality (Stockman 1992), and in the sense that violent shifts in policy have long-lasting consequences which affect different cohorts of the Chinese population differently (Davis 1992; Davis-Friedmann 1985).

The economic reforms introduced by post-Mao leaderships have been intended to raise the efficiency of productive enterprises by subjecting them to market 'disciplines'. Enterprises would be expected to maintain their own financial independence without subsidy through the state plan. Enterprises which were unable to become profitable in these market conditions would go bankrupt and cease to function. A labour market would be established, with

enterprises experiencing the act of hiring labour as a cost. Enterprises would have to use labour efficiently and would thus have to reduce markedly the degree to which they are 'over-manned', as the reformers see it.

These reforms have met considerable resistance at many levels, their implementation has turned out to be extremely problematic, and the extent to which they have taken effect is very patchy (White 1993). Nonetheless, the consequences for the structure of the urban *danwei* have begun to be discussed, together with the impact on gender inequalities. If labour became a cost to the *danwei*, and had to be used 'efficiently' (by the definition of market microeconomics), those responsible for *danwei* leadership would want to shed many of the non-productive functions of the work-unit. The more the *danwei* is constrained to behave like an enterprise, the more the multi-functional nature of the pre-reform *danwei* is seen to contain contradictions (Hebel and Schucher 1991; Yang 1989a). It would become increasingly problematic for the *danwei* leadership, required to make the unit profitable, to treat the workers as 'members' rather than as 'employees'. Put the other way round, it is precisely the 'membership' status of the work-force that constitutes one of the major obstacles to the implementation of the market reforms. But if the relationship between the *danwei* and the workers were to come to be governed by something like a capitalist labour contract, the *danwei* leadership would 'rationally' expect to shed responsibility for reproductive functions, shuffling them off to the private families of the employees, or to the state.

It is not difficult to see how such developments could contribute to an increase in the degree of gender inequality in the sphere of work. As the pressure mounts on work-unit leaderships to make 'efficient' use of their labour force, the argument that the employment of women is less 'cost-effective' than the employment of men will grow in attractiveness (Jacka 1990:10ff). In 1988, there was an intense discussion in the Chinese media concerning the employment of young married women with children, and the more reform-minded social scientists and administrators argued that such women should 'return to the home' to look after their husbands and children, thus helping to solve the problems of labour surplus and under-employment in Chinese work-units. Calculations were done on the relative productivity of men and women and the relationship between their lifetime output and their lifetime earnings (Kuang *et al* 1992:76ff). At the same time, much stress was put on women's contribution to the building of socialist society in the family sphere as good mothers to future socialist citizens. Although this line of argument was strenuously resisted, especially by women's organisations, and although some academics believe that the 'return to the home' line has been shown to be too extreme and impracticable (Kuang *et al* 1992:62ff), evidence is accumulating that women are indeed losing their hold on relatively advantaged positions in some state-sector work-units, for example through transfer to jobs requiring fewer skills and carrying less rewards (Jacka 1990;

personal communication from Professor Xu Anqi, Shanghai, September 1992). If the argument of this paper is correct, this should be seen as the predictable outcome of a further restructuring of the relationship between production and reproduction, between enterprise and household.

Conclusion

No attempt has been made in this paper to provide a comprehensive account of all the social conditions affecting gender inequality in contemporary Chinese society. A more thorough account would have to pay attention to features which, for reasons of space, have had to be ignored here. For example, consideration would have to be given to the internal structure of Chinese families, and to the question of whether traditional patriarchal forms might have been modified. Family and household arrangements which have emerged in Chinese cities, especially those which allow the grandparental generation to assist their children in bringing up their own children and in managing household affairs, constitute a further significant difference between China and most capitalist societies in the relationship between production and reproduction, and can have an effect on patterns of gender inequality.

Patterns of gender inequality are also affected by other aspects of social inequality and stratification in general, such as access to education (Hooper 1984; Bauer *et al* 1992). Furthermore, little research has as yet been carried out on gendered aspects of variations in the capacity or opportunity to display and profit from 'redness' or revolutionary 'virtue' (Shirk 1982, 1984; Yang 1989b), or on the role of gender in the operation of networks of personal connections and contacts which the Chinese use to gain access to scarce goods and services, and which are widely referred to as *guanxi* or *guanxiwang* (Gold 1985; Walder 1986). Such 'status' or 'political' aspects of social inequality no doubt have gendered features which would be well worth further investigation.

Rather, this paper has followed through the implications of one major perspective which has become widely accepted in western sociological work on gender inequality. This paper has argued that a specifically Chinese configuration of production and reproduction has played a major role in providing the structural conditions for the considerable reduction in gender inequality in China under the Communist regime. In western capitalist societies a sharp institutional separation of production and reproduction, the former located in the capitalist enterprise and the latter in the private family, has laid a structural basis for widespread and common patterns of inequality between men and women. In China, the timing and nature of the transition to urban industrialism, together with the goals and methods of the Communist regime, have provided a structural basis in which the social

functions of production and reproduction are by no means so clearly separated into different institutions, with the consequence that many of the pressures generating and maintaining gender inequality in western capitalist societies could be resisted in China. The Chinese urban work-unit (*danwei*) is the linch-pin of this structural basis, and present-day market-oriented reforms to the structure of the *danwei* may be expected to result in a slowing down or reversal of trends towards greater gender equality.

It is a striking feature of generalising or comparative sociology that sociological ideas generated in the milieu of one type of society, with its distinctive structural and cultural characteristics, can nonetheless make a contribution to the understanding of social processes in societies of a quite different flavour. It is hoped that this paper has provided an example of this aspect of sociological work, using a framework of ideas developed mainly in western capitalist societies to provide some insights into the workings of the urban society of Communist China. This kind of transmission of sociological ideas is reciprocal, and strengthens the case for communication and co-operation between sociologists working in very different societies, a process to which this author, through his collaborative work with Chinese sociologists, is attempting to make a small contribution.

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