

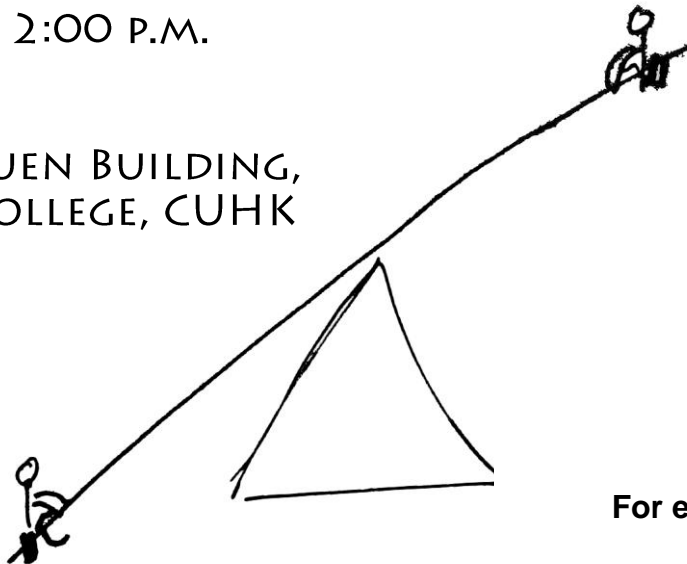
WIVES AS BREADWINNERS: A STUDY OF SPOUSAL RELATIONS IN URBAN NORTHEAST CHINA

(in English)

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ROOM UG02,
WONG FOO YUEN BUILDING,
CHUNG CHI COLLEGE, CUHK



In the past 20 years, many state-owned factories in urban Northeast China became privatized due to the market reform policy. As a result, in many families both husbands and wives working in these factories lost their jobs. The majority of the women were able to find new jobs in the booming service industry and small private businesses, while their husbands had difficulty returning to the labor market. As a result, the wives became the major breadwinner, significantly altering the gender power relations in the family. This study explores the changes in spousal relations in a Northeast Chinese city by examining household finance, domestic division of labor, and emotional life when husbands lost their position as breadwinners. During three months of ethnographic field work, I collected data on married individuals' responses to this situation, and their conflicts and compromises as they interacted with their spouse. I argue that, contrary to conventional belief, the financial relations of the couple do not play a dominant role in determining the state of marriage. Rather, the financial, political, and emotional aspects of marriage constitute a fluid interconnectivity that in turn interacts with the social and cultural milieu, and shape the way the couple carry out their marital life. Thus traditional understandings of power relations in the patriarchal family are found to be inadequate in analyzing gender relations in urban China today, and must be refined by examining the changing subjectivities through gender interaction and bringing both men and women's voices in.

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