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Attitudes toward Women's Layoffs during Recessions: Evidence from Chinese Firms

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Abstract

Sociological research has identified persistent disadvantages that face women in hiring and promotion opportunities in firms. This article extends this research on gender inequality to examining firm preferences for women's layoffs when faced with the prospect of an economic recession. Drawing on nationally representative microdata on workers in China, this article reveals that these preferences differ by firm type. Men in state firms report significantly higher odds of preferring to lay off women first, but this effect is even stronger in private firms. As symbols of economic stability, state firms are prohibited from conducting layoffs, creating insulated organizational cultures with traditional gender role beliefs that are resistant to change. Meanwhile, private firms are governed by a firm logic of profit maximization that creates more precarity among workers and compels them, men and even women, to embrace layoffs of fellow women workers to protect themselves.

Keywords

layoffs, gender inequality, women's employment, state firms, private firms

Large bodies of literature in the sociology of organizations, economic sociology, and social stratification observe that women are disproportionately disadvantaged in pay, promotion, and hiring opportunities in advanced capitalist economies (Campero 2021; Cotter et al. 2001; Dwyer 2013; Quadlin 2018; Rivera 2017).

Rates of women's participation in paid work, occupation of middle-management positions, and involvement in political life have gradually risen over the past 10 years to higher levels than ever before in advanced capitalist economies around the world (de Jonge 2022; Ryan et al. 2016). Yet women are consistently evaluated lower than their male counterparts in performance assessments. In a quasi-natural experiment of faculty evaluations, Rivera and Tilcsik (2019) recently find that the same lecture transcripts generate vastly lower scores for female faculty than males. Correll et al. (2020) build on this to describe gender differences in the language (and values) ascribed to women's performance. They find that unofficial behavioral attributes such as "taking charge" are penalized for women but not for men.

Despite the recent rise of diversity initiatives, the hiring of women remains characterized by unique contingencies that predispose them to critique and failure. This is in line with research that shows a significant proportion of promotions offered to women take place when the risk of failure is higher, such as when the firm struggles to stay afloat, culminating in a phenomenon known as the "glass cliff" (Cook and Glass 2013; Glass and Cook 2020; O'Neill, Pruysers, and Stewart 2021; Reinwald, Zaia, and Kunze 2023). Moreover, the degree to which women experience actual advantages in hiring decisions appears contingent on when the job advertisement is explicitly premised on a gender-based preferential policy in China and the United States (Henningsen, Horvath, and Jonas 2022; Jiang 2022).

In conversation with this literature, this article draws on nationally representative microdata in China to investigate the lesser studied scope of firm preferences toward women's employment. China is an ideal context with which to examine these questions because of the mismatch between its level of economic development and gendered attitudes that disadvantage women. A cornerstone of the global economy, China is the only market economy whose GDP (US$30.09 trillion, as of 2022) surpasses that of every Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nation

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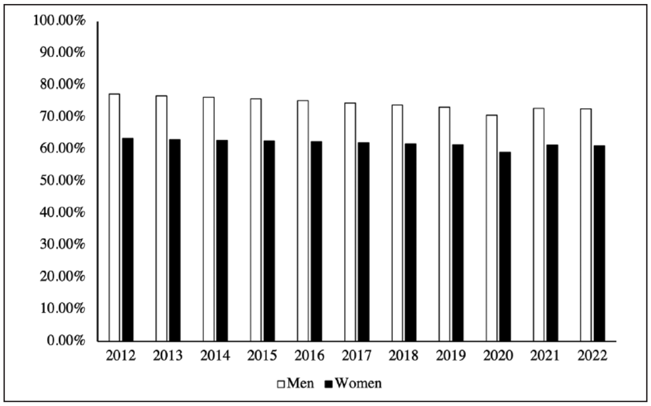

Figure 1. Labor participation rate among men and women in China (2012–2022).
Source: Author's calculations using data from the World Bank.

yet exhibits nearly double the amount of organizational gender discrimination as the OECD average (OECD 2022). Operated by the OECD's Development Centre, the Social Institutions and Gender Index measures discrimination based on the existence of legal frameworks to "promote, enforce, and monitor gender equality and women's employment" (OECD 2022). Compiled on an index from 0 (no discrimination) to 100 (absolute discrimination), the OECD average is 15.3, whereas China's is 27.1. Against the tide of rising women's employment in advanced capitalist economies worldwide, the employment rate for urban women in China, despite its advanced level of economic development, fell from 77.4 percent in 1990 to 63.1 percent in 2000 and to 60.8 percent in 2010 (Attané 2012).

Figure 1 charts the labor participation rate in the country across the last 10 years, disaggregated between men and women. The rate naturally never reaches 100 percent on account of individuals who are unemployed, undergoing job transitions, or outside the working age. Even still, the labor participation rate among men has consistently outpaced that of women: Although the gap between the two has eroded mildly during this time, women's participation has continuously lagged behind that of men by over 10 percent.

Upheavals in the national economy have historically culminated in disproportionately worse and longer lasting outcomes for women, who are laid off more often and face greater barriers to reentry to the job market (Xiao and Asadullah 2020). The few women who manage to become reemployed, furthermore, have been found to be rerouted into the primary labor market with low pay, low occupational status, and little opportunity for upward mobility (Liang and Yu 2019; Tian, Gong, and Zhai 2022; Zang 2020).

This article makes two contributions. First, this article argues that firm preferences for who to lay off when faced with a recession disproportionately target women. It theorizes that women are susceptible to a greater likelihood of being laid off firm-wide and not simply restricted to those in leadership positions. This study paves the way for examining additional pathways through which the gender income gap is exacerbated in advanced capitalist economies.

Second, this study analyzes variations of such gendered firm preferences based on firm type in China. More specifically, it parses out discrepancies in women's employment vulnerability between state and private firms across a large range of demographic and organizational covariates, identifying the micro-level sources of gendered attitudes toward layoffs that target women when firms are faced with an economic recession. This article examines how firm preferences for women's layoffs are shaped by gender and by employment insecurity. In this way, the findings provide unique insights into how and where gender differences emerge in layoff decision-making.

Gender Role Beliefs and Women's Employment in Firms

This article focuses on attitudes that predispose women to greater vulnerability to layoffs, specifically, under the condition of when firms are faced with an economic recession. This vulnerability builds on a growing body of evidence that shows women are disproportionately assessed lower in formal and informal evaluations than men in the same firms by various stakeholders. This study investigates how the prospect (perceptions) of economic distress may be linked to greater preference for laying off women.

Even with the same amount of technical skill as men, for instance, women are implicitly held to higher standards than men. For this reason, top-performing women suffer insurmountable discounts on evaluations of their skills and performances, resulting in significantly greater expectations for future success and less credit for achieved successes (Bosky et al, 2022; Heilman, Manzi, and Caleo 2019; Manzi and Heilman 2021).

Additionally, women suffer from stereotypes about personality traits in firms, resulting in (lower) evaluations that factor in inferences about how affable, sociable, and warm they present themselves (Biernat, Tocci, and Williams 2012; Lee and Huang 2018; Moscatelli et al. 2020). Correll et al. (2020) show that women are additionally "gender policed" for their agency. Women are held to informal behavioral standards such as exhibiting self-deprecation and lack of confidence that precipitate into punitive evaluations when violated (see also Carlin et al. 2018; Heilman and Caleo 2018; Phelan and Rudman 2010). In this way, everyday informal evaluations by colleagues and formal evaluations by superiors alike are tainted by (gender) biases that sabotage perceptions of women's suitability for hire and promotion (Dobbin and Kalev 2021).

What motivates such gender biases in firm evaluations of women at large? An undercurrent of this work on firm evaluations of women, which this article foregrounds, is the explanatory role of the gender of the evaluator. Much of the research that has examined the gender(s) of the evaluated has overlooked the gender(s) of the evaluators. Although ample research has been conducted on the experiences and disadvantages that women report amid formal evaluations in firms, there is a gap in examining the role of gender itself in perpetuating these evaluations. To illustrate, do male evaluators offer different assessments of women in firms than female evaluators?

This article asserts that the gender of the evaluator matters in the outcome of evaluation. We have little evidence about the gender of evaluators when it comes to a firm, in part because of the availability of such data. However, we do have evidence that the gender of the evaluator matters on a parallel issue concerning women's well-being. When it comes to sexual abuse reporting, researchers observe that the gender of the evaluator has a pronounced effect on the outcome of evaluation. Female evaluators of sexual abuse cases are most likely to receive confessions from victims, whereas male evaluators are least likely to receive disclosures (Foster et al. 2019; Kianersi et al. 2020).

These differences are rooted in the cultural biases that are associated with gender roles. In China, a traditional patriarchal system prevails that associates men with dominant attitudes and occupational success, whereas women are associated with qualities of empathy and household duties. Prior to and during the reforms by Deng Xiaoping's "Open Door" Policy in 1978, women suffered from disproportionately low employment rates and representation in office. In Yunnan province, women were not permitted to join leadership posts, occupying just 6.7 percent of bureau chief level roles and 0.6 percent of mayorships in the province (Work Committee for Women Workers 1989). Part of this stemmed from conventional gender roles in Chinese society that assigned women to the household, suggesting that theirs was the task of becoming "a good wife" while careers were largely reserved for men. Women were generally assigned to household labor, precluding opportunities for an education and employment: About 29 percent of women had no time to pursue education because of household chores, 19 percent of women who wanted to work failed to do so due to excessive household chores, and wives who did more than three hours of household chores were 20 percent more numerous than husbands (Work Committee for Women Workers 1989).

Market reforms in the 1980s introduced changes to employment patterns, raising women's representation in the labor market, but gender roles continue to endure and disadvantage women. State control over media and other apparatuses of policymaking was partly responsible for insulating these beliefs from change, promulgating an emphasis on "monogamous heterosexual marriage, with an emphasis on reproduction . . . as the orthodox sexual relationship" (Hu and Li 2019:153; Kong 2016). Yen and Yang (2011) examined East Asian countries and found that Confucian societies like China stress distinct roles for men and women. Thus, women remain responsible for most of the housework and childcare (even for those who work), whereas men continue to be viewed as breadwinners and leaders (Au 2022; Raymo, Park, and Yu 2023). In a cross-national study, Adamczyk and Cheng (2015) find that Confucian society residents are less tolerant than Americans and Europeans. They trace this intolerance to the cultural value of family connectedness, which subsequently propounds divisions between women and men in household and paid work, respectively.

Within this scope, older age is associated with more traditional gender role beliefs in China that assign women out of the workplace, in part because of generational differences in educational opportunities and worse (better) economic conditions linked to weaker (greater) postmaterialist values (Hu and Scott 2016). Opposite to older adults, younger adults are the site of a slow tectonic shift in attitudes and expectations for women's empowerment in the family and greater participation in the workforce, culminating in a generation gap in values (Santos and Harrell 2017).

It is this cultural assignment of gender roles that leads men and women to have different opportunities for upward mobility (Correll et al. 2020; Dobbin and Kalev 2021; Jonnergård, Stafsudd, and Elg 2010). Recent work on digital access finds that despite almost ubiquitous digital technology use in China, women in rural regions are disproportionately gatekept out of opportunities for education, work, and opportunities to learn digital technology (Au, 2024a).

This article extends this logic to assert that the same cultural assignment of gender roles shapes evaluator's perceptions of women's suitability for layoffs when firms are faced with an economic recession. In South Korea, gender attitudes are bifurcated between men and women, evinced by recent backlash against their Ministry of Gender Equality and recent presidential elections. When asked to vote for President Yoon Suk Yeol, a then-conservative candidate who proposed abolishing the Ministry of Gender Equality, 59 percent of men under 30 voted overwhelmingly in support of his campaign—whereas women under 30 were among the least supportive groups, with only 34 percent in support (Gong 2024). As an East Asian nation with strong cultural similarities with China, the South Korean case illustrates the importance of accounting for the gender of the evaluator when discussing inequality in women's employment outcomes, namely, that men are more likely to be supportive of policies against women and women less so.

This article thus focuses on the gender of the evaluators when assessing employment outcomes for women. Because it is well established that women are disproportionately victimized by latent gender biases in firms, this article empirically adds to this work by explicitly focusing on attitudes specifically toward women's employment. This study focuses on evaluations of women's layoffs when firms are faced with the prospect of an economic recession. Doing so offers a clear condition under which firms are pressed to make decisions about employment, offering a vista into firm attitudes toward women versus their male counterparts. It also accounts for the fact that gendered attitudes toward hiring are shaped by perceptions (not reality) of future events and what women candidates can do (Correll et al. 2020). Indeed, firm performance benefits documented recruiting more female managers in China. However, work satisfaction surveys still reveal that women are subject to unfair treatment by colleagues, preclusion from project opportunities, worse performance appraisals, and lower satisfaction in general (Du 2016; Liu, Wei, and Xie 2014; Ngo et al. 2014). This systematic mistreatment has been traced to gendered beliefs about the inferiority of women that hold strong in organizations (Lee 2023). This article further examines the degree to which economic and job resources may affect gendered beliefs about women's layoffs. Economic resources matter for gendered attitudes toward women in the workplace. Resources such as education and income directly predict more acceptance of women in the workplace by reducing (gender-related) prejudice and increasing support for post-materialist values (Scott 2022; Zhang and Brym 2019). They also indirectly improve acceptance of women by offering greater network diversity with which to access a variety of social settings and higher status working environments, such as multinational corporations (Bol et al. 2019). Such environments are typically characterized by greater gender diversity. As a result, firm working environments with a global presence in cross-national markets and a stronger bureaucratic structure, for instance, reduce the amount of personal bias introduced into human resource decisions (Alegria 2019; Eagle, Macy, and Claxton 2010). Education and income thus both predict greater exposure to high-status jobs with a diversity of minorities, including women, which facilitates prejudice reduction in the workplace (Laurence, Schmid, and Hewstone 2018; Piekut and Valentine 2017).

Hukou registrations, a type of registration assigned to individuals at birth based on the location of their household, are another form of socioeconomic resource that may influence liberal attitudes in similar fashion to education and income. The type of *hukou* an individual is assigned determines what access they are granted to social services, welfare, school registrations, and even job eligibility. Two of the best known types are urban and rural *hukou*, whose differences in life chances for their holders have been widely documented in research on China's urban-rural divide for decades (Chen et al. 2018; Wang et al. 2019; Zhong et al. 2022). Rural *hukou* holders lag behind their urban counterparts significantly across the board in terms of educational attainment, income, job status, and even digital skills (Au 2024a; Song and Smith 2019, 2021).

In a similar vein, job resources play a role in shaping beliefs because workers (particularly men) who experience contract instability and wield less managerial power may be more vulnerable and therefore willing to have women depart to preserve their own jobs when their firms face distress.

Varieties of Firm Preferences: State and Private Firms in China

This article goes further to theorize different varieties of gendered preferences for women's layoffs in face of economic distress based on firm type. Defined as how companies are structured (Fligstein and Choo 2005), corporate governance is a coherent set of ideals, prerogatives, and practices that organize firm decisions on capital allocation and as a result, shape worker experiences in everyday operations. Inherent in these classifications of corporate governance by firm type are different paradigms that govern how a firm responds to economic distress, handles gendered preferences, and metes out layoff decisions when firms are faced with an economic recession.

This study focuses on private and state firms, the most theoretically significant ideal types of firms in China, characterized by their models of corporate governance. State firms, which we can classify as state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and collectively owned enterprises (COEs), are majority owned and operated by the government. Despite a growing trend of privatization around the world, government ownership of firms remains substantial in many developed societies (Fligstein and Choo 2005). Although state firms gain from easier lending from banks, their ownership by the state implies that their assets are "public goods," a firm logic that has unfailingly led to overconsumption by consumers (through state-enforced price controls), managers (through job perks), and workers (through lower incentives to perform well).

Private firms are also a salient source of employment in China and the most prevalent by sheer number. Private firms, whether publicly listed on stock exchanges or privately held, are owned by a roster of shareholders who provide a substantial part of their financing. This concentration of ownership into a handful of private owners pushes the firm to prioritize profits over employee well-being, culminating in the rise of shareholder value as a firm logic (Fligstein and Goldstein 2022). It is common for the boards of directors governing private firms to have virtually no employee representation in China, as in the United States (Fligstein and Zhang 2011).

State and private firms have a long and storied history in China's transition to a market economy. After China's modern founding in 1949, the economy was operated in autarkic fashion, positioned against trade as a purportedly self-sufficient system and primarily dependent on agricultural production. Production was determined by the state, in which quantities of products conformed with state-imposed quotas, the prices at which they were sold were determined by state-imposed figures, and entities were prohibited from profiting off excess products (Au 2024b; Pei 2006). Virtually all firms were state-owned, with the possible exception of grassroots communes responsible for farming (but remained controlled by Party representatives).

In 1978, Deng Xiaoping implemented the Open Door Policy that jumpstarted a wave of market-oriented reforms in the nation. It began by returning control of agricultural production to family farms and enabling production in excess of state quotas. Excess products were further permitted to be exchanged in private markets with prices determined by participants, the first embers of privatization. Over time, this privatization extended beyond the agricultural sector to

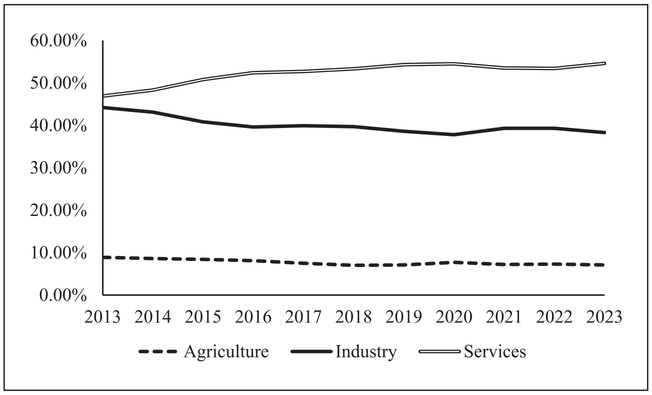

Figure 2. Breakdown of contribution to China's GDP by major sectors.
Source: Au (2024b).

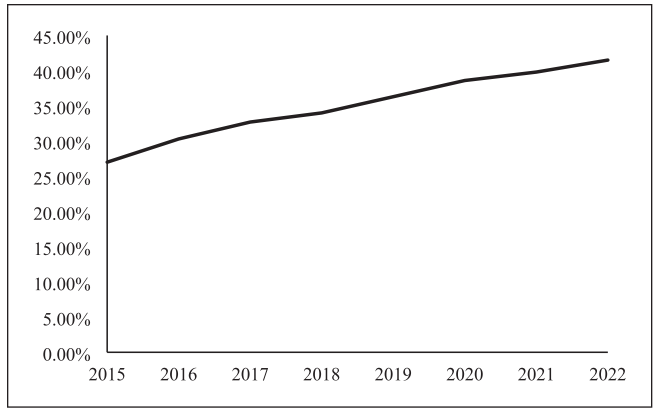

Figure 3. Contribution of China's digital economy to GDP.
Source: Author's calculations using data from Statista (2023a).

industrial production, which would grow to become the backbone of China's modernization and economic growth over the next 20 years (Au 2024b). Manufacturers of consumer goods, for instance, were permitted to profit, sell at market prices, produce based on market demand, and so developed an incentive to compete. Private firms thus sought to improve the quality of their products and democratize their hiring schemes, namely, by hiring for managerial positions based on merit rather than executive appointment.

This competition brought private firms head-to-head with state firms, who were forced to compete in a similar fashion. Over time, the economy tilted away in scale from state-controlled enterprises toward private firms. Certain forms of state-owned enterprises, such as COEs, eventually defaulted when they failed to compete and find means to repay their debt. Even the vaunted "state premium," namely, corporate benefits from maintaining friendly relations with government officials, eventually reversed and became a cost because markets rewarded firms based on their ability to compete.

As China's economy grew toward an advanced market economy (service-based), private firms took the helm as the predominant dispensers of services (Figure 2). The past 10 years are illustrative. Narrowly rivaling the services sector, industrial production's contribution slipped from 44.2% percent to 38.3 percent by 2023, and the former rose from 46.9 percent to 54.6 percent by 2023. The advent of the digital economy became another tailwind for privatization, especially for the services sector. Private Internet firms such as Alibaba, Tencent, and Baidu emerged with digital platforms for consumer use, which even attracted the participation of government bureaus and small and medium enterprises. The wide adoption of digital platforms enabled a national shift to e-commerce, catalyzing online transactions among businesses and consumers and as a result, growing from accounting for 27 percent of national GDP to 41.5 percent by 2022 (Figure 3).

The dialectic between state and private firms rings true today. Recent state efforts to reform the economy have centered scientific and technological innovation in a techno-nationalist agenda for development. As a corollary, hundreds of policies have been issued from 2020 to 2022 to reform Internet enterprises, rendering them incubators of economic growth and social development (Au 2023).

This trajectory of China's market development has created different firm logics in state and private firms. State firms remain core to industrial economy, which has been penetrated by private firms as well. Data from the 2022 China Statistical Yearbook (National Bureau of Statistics 2022) show that of the 28,665,212 firms in operation in 2021, 27,545,002 firms (about 96 percent) are privately owned. Although far fewer in comparison to private firms, state firms nonetheless command a significant portion of corporate assets. Data from the Ministry of Finance show that the assets held by SOEs amount to more than half of corporate assets in the country as of 2022, coming off of the heels of consistent growth of about 10 percent per annum since 1997 (Lin et al. 2020; Wang 2022).

Recent debates about overcapacity in China's industrial exports, including the widely discussed market of energy manufacturing and electric vehicles, is penetrated by a throng of private manufacturers. These private firms, moreover, have implicit approval from the state in the form of extensive subsidies. State firms (and private firms) also regularly partner with private firms overseas, such as joint ventures in the automobile industry, including Dongfeng's ventures with Honda and Nissan or SAIC Motor's venture with Volkswagen. Although there are few differences between state and private firms in their operations' vulnerability to economic downturns, their storied history has led to different firm logics in how they respond to downturns with respect to women. State firms are significant sources of employment and providers of necessities in the Chinese economy. Oil and gas companies in China are illustrative. Unlike their counterparts in the United States and Europe, Chinese oil and gas companies are forbidden from passing on costs of production to the consumer, even at the expense of profit margins (explaining why energy inflation from 2020 to 2022 was marginal in China even when it soared in the United States). This same firm logic that conceptualizes state firm assets as necessities for public consumption is theorized to render them less inclined to respond to economic distress with layoffs (against women).

State firms in China are not altogether averse to layoffs, but evidence shows that they are only inclined to initiate layoffs in the most extreme economic depressions, such as the 1997 Asian financial crisis and the 2007–2008 global financial crisis (Dong and Pandey 2012; Liu and Zhao 2014; Wang and Luo 2019). Barring the prospect of bankruptcy, state firms are much more restrained in their willingness to lay off workers compared to private firms, particularly because the stability of their workforce is a widely monitored proxy for the stability of the Chinese government and economy at large (Guo, Huy, and Xiao 2017; Lin et al 2020).

However, employment stability may also mean that gendered attitudes are resistant to change in state firms. Similar to how beliefs are sedimented in networks, organizational cultures with low turnover are more invested in traditional patriarchal gender roles and resistant to liberal attitudes that are more recent in China. These are what social network scientists refer to as "closed networks," networks whose boundaries are not traversable. As Coleman (1990) classically argued, closed networks enable resources to be preserved and, more importantly, for norms, values, and trust to be reproduced. For this reason, closed networks are ineffective at procuring new information or values because new members cannot enter easily and existing members create dominant reference groups that inspire isomorphism (conformity) from new members (Lin 2001). Because state firms' employment is so stable, veteran cohorts thus become the reference groups to which new cohorts obtain normative guidance on behaviors and attitudes (Erickson 1988). Are private firms different? As the heart of the market-oriented reforms, private firms are governed by a different firm logic, namely, profit maximization. At the firm level, profit maximization practices are meant to benefit managers or shareholders (Mayer 2021). Profit maximization benefits managers first at the expense of all other stakeholders, creating impossible trade-offs for firms attempting to balance the stability of its revenues, employee wages, and prices charged to customers (Bebchuk and Tallarita 2020). Driven to maximize profits and create value for managers and shareholders, private firms are thus driven to rely on layoffs as tools to cut costs and secure higher profits (Fligstein and Shin 2007).

Shareholder value maximization as a firm logic can be extended to an entire market level when we consider, for instance, that private firms are isomorphic. Corporate restructuring decisions such as layoffs as a response to economic uncertainty do not begin or end with one private firm but often cascade across an entire sector and even entire markets (Gathmann, Helm, and Schönberg 2020; Struckell et al. 2022).

Recent vicissitudes in the Chinese economy and private firm reactions are illustrative. In the wake of a slowing Chinese economy amid COVID-19 lockdowns and the policy crackdown on the information technology sector from 2020 to 2023, private firms in the sector were quick to roll out mass layoffs to cut costs and lift profits for shareholders amid falling share prices. Responsible for nearly 30 percent of economic output, layoffs from these private companies, according to Statista (2023b) data, resulted in a surging unemployment rate among youth ages 24 and under, from 13 percent to over 20 percent, stranding new graduates who had long been targets for private firm hiring.

These layoff patterns suggest that workers in private firms are more unstable in their contracts, which may have a subsequent effect on their attitudes toward women's layoffs. Gary Becker ([1957] 2010) seminally argued that private firms are less discriminatory toward women to have an advantage for survival. Becker argued that market competition would create less discrimination because it generates costs to productivity that will detract from profitability. Becker might thus argue that state firms are protected from direct competition and can engage in taste-based discrimination. However, I refresh important points about the Chinese context: Although Becker's observation may be true in Anglo-American societies, recent evidence shows that the Confucianist moorings of Chinese culture and their attendant gender role beliefs have held steady in the paid labor market and household division of labor (Du 2016; Lee 2023; Ngo et al. 2014).

Moreover, this article argues that because private firms are not shielded from competition, workers experience more contract instability, which may motivate gendered beliefs against women's employment. Employees concerned about economic recessions that their firms face will look at employment as a scarce resource, and because they have more contract instability, they will be more likely to support laying off others in bids of self-preservation. Empirical evidence on economic scarcity (insufficient financial remuneration to employees) in organizations reveals much the same: When pressed with significant economic scarcity (especially financial inequality relative to fellow workers), the poorest and least stable workers become burnt out, withdraw from colleagues, and even participate in more labor conflicts (Meuris and Leana 2015; see also Chan and Selden 2014). This effect extends to women when it comes to gendered attitudes against (fellow) women because they have even more scarcity compared to the average worker given that women on the job market are significantly less able to leverage social connections and their resources to procure new jobs compared to men (Lin and Bian 1991).

Data and Methods

Data

This article uses the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS), a nationally representative data set on the general population in China. Administered by the Chinese Statistics Bureau, the survey targets civilian Chinese adults ages 18 or older. The CGSS has regularly surveyed over 10,000 households in China since 2003 to ask questions on attitudes toward institutions, inequality, and material quality of life. The present study draws on the 2017 wave (N = 12,528), which includes attitudes toward fellow workers by firm type. Questionnaires were conducted through face-to-face interviews that lasted 90 minutes on average. The sampling framework followed a multistage stratified design, covering all regional, geo-administrative, and county-level strata (Bian and Li 2012).

Focal Measures

This study uses gender as its independent variable: (0) woman and (1) man. To test for possible preferences for women's layoffs during economic recessions as its outcome variable, this study draws on the CGSS question, "Please indicate the extent to which you agree with this statement: During an economic recession, [the] company should lay off female workers first." This question was part of a unique pilot series of questions about women's status and employment included in the 2017 CGSS that made it unique. The pilot series was meant to gauge attitudes toward women as part of growing awareness of women's rights and well-being. Responses were ordered on a 5-point Likert scale: (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (4) agree, and (5) strongly agree.

To observe the effects of contract instability, this study included the CGSS question, "What is your current employment type (full-time, part-time, etc.)?" Two levels of responses were coded (1) full-time and (2) not full-time (part-time).

To measure managerial involvement, this study uses the CGSS question, "For your current job, what role do you take on in terms of management?" Presently defined as the degree to which a worker is removed from managerial responsibility for someone else's work tasks in an organization, responses were recoded ordinally: (1) only responsible for managing others, (2) both managed by others and responsible for managing others, and (3) only managed by others.

Control Measures

This study controls for other demographic variables, including socioeconomic status, higher education, age group, and *hukou* registration. Socioeconomic status was recoded using the total income an individual received over the past 12 months into the following groupings, based on income classifications from the National Bureau of Statistics of China and McKinsey (Farrell, Gersch, and Stephenson 2006): (1) poor (≤RMB25,000 per year), (2) lower middle class (RMB25,001–40,000 per year), (3) upper middle class (RMB40,001–100,000 per year), (4) mass affluent (RMB100,001–200,000 per year), (5) and global affluent (>RMB200,000 per year). Highest level of formal education was also included. Responses were coded into five ordinal levels: (0) no education, (1) high school or below, (2) technical college, (3) university, and (4) postgraduate or above.

Age was recoded as an ordinal variable with the categories (1) ages 18 to 30, (2) ages 31 to 40, (3) ages 41 to 50, (4) ages 51 to 60, (5) ages 61 to 70, (6) ages 71 to 80, and (7) ages 81 and above. *Hukou* was included as a categorical variable, capturing rural *hukou*, resident but previously rural *hukou*, resident but previously urban *hukou*, and urban *hukou*. This includes a new resident *hukou* that was implemented by select cities in 2014, transferring all urban and rural *hukou* holders into a single registration account for the previous *hukou* registration of these resident *hukou* holders, namely, resident but previously urban *hukou* and resident but previously rural *hukou*.

Additionally, this study controls for organizational and employment conditions. Firm size was controlled for based on the CGSS question, "How many people are employed by the institution/organization where you work?" Responses were grouped into ordinal classifications of firm size: (1) micro firms (fewer than 10 employees), (2) small firms (10–49 employees), (3) medium firms (50–249 employees), (4) large firms (250–9,999 employees), and (5) mega firms (10,000 employees or more).

Analytic Strategy

To separately examine the predictors of preferences for women's layoffs among variegated types of firms, the sample was stratified into two subsamples based on places of employment: state firms (n = 1,097), including SOEs and COEs, and private firms (n = 1,536). This subsample analysis based on firm type captured the size of the main effects on preferences for women's layoffs and lent for comparisons between different types.

Ordinal logistic regressions were conducted on preferences for women's layoffs for each type of firm. Logistic regressions on ordinal conceptualizations produce parameter estimates with high efficiency and low bias, allowing a straightforward interpretation of the odds of support for preferences for women's layoffs on a fine-grained scale (Riedl and Geishecker 2014).

Additionally, the moderating influence of employment insecurity was tested on the main effects. The interaction terms male × managerial involvement and male × contract instability were included to assess the moderating influence of employment insecurity on men's preferences for laying off women.

For at least one demographic (control) variable, 227 missing values were identified among state firms, and 274 missing values were identified among private firms. There were no differences in the distribution of missing values among men and women, suggesting that individual respondents' refusals to answer any one particular question were random with respect to gender. Missing values were handled using

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics on the Worker Composition of State Firms.

	Women	Men
Managerial involvement	2.65 (0.486)	2.59 (0.519)
Contract instability	2.04 (0.193)	2.05 (0.210)
Age group	2.39 (1.059)	2.80 (1.252)
Highest education	2.38 (1.056)	2.18 (1.088)
Income group	2.52 (0.963)	2.64 (0.999)
Firm size	2.08 (0.887)	2.17 (0.974)
Hukou		
Rural	101 (20.61%)	114 (18.78%)
Resident (previously rural)	79 (16.12%)	88 (14.50%)
Resident (previously urban)	97 (19.80%)	142 (23.39%)
Urban	211 (43.06%)	261 (43.0%)
N	490	607

listwise deletion. Multiple imputation for handling the missing data showed the same results.

Socioeconomic and Job Resources by Gender

What are the starting points of women and men in the workplace in Chinese firms? Table 1 outlines the worker composition of state firms decomposed by gender. Several observations are of note.

Both women and men surprisingly experience similar levels of managerial involvement and contract instability. There appears to be little material difference in the average contract tenure (the distribution into full-time and part-time roles) and the level of managerial responsibility afforded to both genders. The average size of the firm that women work in appears to be on par with that of men as well.

Demographically, men and women are also similar. Men and women are reasonably similar in age. However, the distribution of economic resources has palpable differences of note. The distribution of *hukou* registrations across urban, resident (previously urban), resident (previously rural), and rural types is arguably identical among women as among men. In other words, women come from similar residential histories and urban backgrounds, replete with the same access to advantages and disadvantages (e.g., access to welfare, social services, and residential mobility) as men. Women on average even have a sizeable lead in their highest level of educational attainment than their male counterparts.

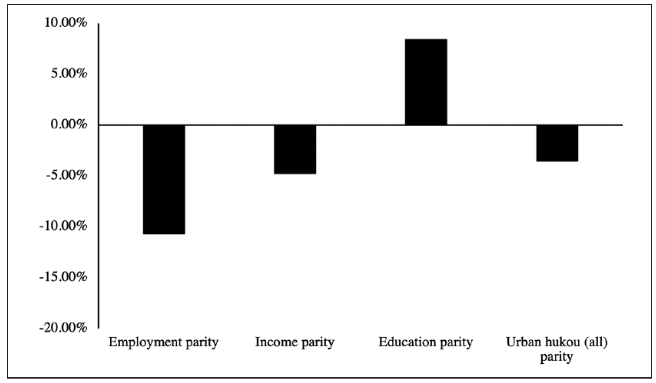

Figure 4. Women's remuneration (left two columns) and credentials (right two columns) compared to men's in *state firms* (women – men). Zero indicates perfect gender parity. Values above (below) zero indicate women outperform (underperform) men.

Figure 4 illustrates this inequality in remuneration and credentials. Despite having 8.4 percent higher educational attainment than men and comparable representation in urban *hukou* (a lag of 3.53 percent), women are 10.67 percent more underrepresented than their male counterparts in firms and lag them in the average income they receive by 4.76 percent.

The same patterns emerge in private firms (Figure 5). Women are again more educated than men by 5.46% and even hail from more privileged urban hukou by 8.04% more than men. Yet, the difference in remuneration worsens: women lag men in employment by 12% and in income by 18.22%.

This paradox facing women, who receive less pay despite higher credentials and coming from comparable *hukou* backgrounds, is telling about the gendered pay gap that cleaves them apart from men. More importantly, this discrepancy tells us about the social location of the gender inequality facing women in state firms in China. This gender inequality is not rooted in differences in childhood resources because women hail from similar backgrounds as men. Neither is the gender inequality rooted in channels of upward mobility because women in state firms possess similar amounts of managerial responsibility and contract instability as men.

Rather, these findings point to a more broad-based form of inequality and one that takes shape after women are enlisted into firms: the distribution of firm resources to women (through their salaries). This reveals an important form of inequality given that glass ceilings and even glass cliffs affect women at junctures of promotion, whereas inequality in firm resource allocation (salaries) suggests firm-wide disadvantages for women across all positions.

This gender inequality widens in private firms. From Table 2, we observe that both genders are comparable in their level of managerial involvement, contract instability, and the size of their employer firm among private firms as they are in state firms. In private firms, women are even more credentialed than men. Not only are women more educated than men, but they also possess superior *hukou* registrations than men.

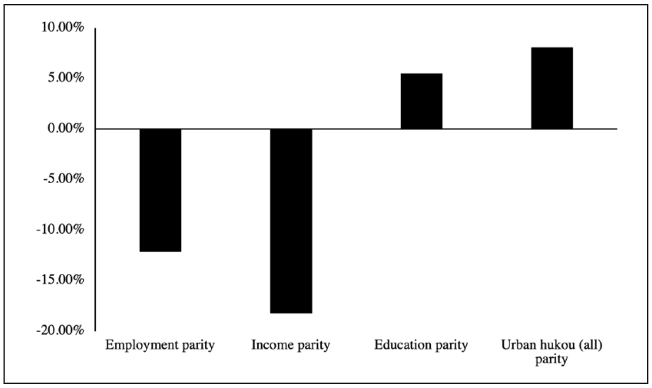

Figure 5. Women's remuneration (leftmost two columns) and credentials (rightmost two columns) compared to men's in *private firms* (women – men). Zero indicates perfect gender parity. Values above (below) zero indicate women outperform (underperform) men.

Women have 5.46 percent greater educational attainment than men, and 8.04 percent more women possess elite forms of *hukou* (urban and resident but previously urban *hukou*) that imply greater access to social services and education in early life. However, women are even more deprived of remuneration in private firms than they were in state firms, lagging their male counterparts by 18.22 percent.

This mismatch of higher credentials and lower income for women in private firms adds to the portrait of gender inequality in firms in China. This mismatch shows that neither education nor even *hukou* registration are sufficient advantages to overturn the gendered discrimination that women experience, as traditionally believed by inequality scholars (Song and Smith 2021) and that again appears to be firm-wide.

Attitudes toward Women's Layoffs by Firm Type

Table 3 presents two-tailed *t* tests comparing attitudes toward women's layoffs among state versus private firms. Comparing the two, we can observe statistically significant differences in preferences to lay off women between the two firm types. We find that when firms are faced with economic recessions, employees in both firms generally disagreed with the statement regarding preferences to lay off women, but those in private firms were statistically closer to agreeing with the statement by an entire Likert level than those in state firms.

The statistical models take a closer look at the differences in beliefs across firm types by examining the predictors of firm attitudes toward women's firm departures against the prospect of economic distress.

Table 4 shows the results for state firms. Model 1 shows that men are associated with nearly double (odds ratio [OR] = 2.231) the odds of believing women should be laid off first compared to women. Men and women have different evaluations of women's suitability for layoffs, namely, that men are more punitive against women than women are. This synergizes with evidence on the relative disadvantages that women face in firms, especially when performance evaluations are conducted by men (Dobbin and Kalev 2021; Jonnergård et al. 2010).

Among the control variables, age is associated with higher odds of such beliefs (OR = 1.153), whereas higher education (OR = 0.852), higher income (OR = 0.880), and larger firm size (OR = 0.875) predict lower odds. The results for higher education and income are important because they potentially suggest that economic resources produce a protective effect among workers, motivating them to oppose gendered beliefs against women and protect fellow workers instead. Similarly, the effect for larger firms may suggest that greater firms may introduce more accountability mechanisms or anonymity with which to protect female workers from gendered beliefs.

These effects largely hold true in Model 2, where we also observe that managerial involvement is nonsignificant. In the full model, Model 3, men are again significantly associated with gendered beliefs, but the effect weakens compared to the restricted models (OR = 1.646). The control effects remain the same from preceding models, but we observe that the protective effects of income and firm size on gendered beliefs become nonsignificant. Surprisingly, neither managerial involvement nor contract instability are significantly associated with gendered beliefs.

To what extent do these effects hold true for private firms? Presenting the results for private firms, Table 5 illustrates new sources of variety in possible predictors of gendered beliefs.

In Model 1, we observe that men are associated with higher odds (OR = 1.653) of gendered beliefs against women. Age is

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics on the Worker Composition of Private Firms.

	Women	Men
Managerial involvement	2.67	2.57
	(0.547)	(0.602)
Contract instability	2.07	2.06
	(0.252)	(0.253)
Age group	2.12	2.36
	(1.051)	(1.232)
Highest education	1.83	1.73
	(1.07)	(1.00)
Income group	2.14	2.53
	(1.033)	(1.111)
Firm size	1.51	1.63
	(0.959)	(0.958)
Hukou		
Rural	279	412
	(41.33%)	(47.85%)
Resident (previously rural)	62	93
	(9.19%)	(10.80%)
Resident (previously urban)	120	129
	(17.78%)	(14.98%)
Urban	211	224
	(31.26%)	(26.02%)
N	675	861

Table 3. Two-Tailed *t* Test Results Comparing Attitudes toward Women's Layoffs in State and Private Firms.

	State	Private	*t* Value	*p* Value
Belief that firms should lay off women first	1.80 (0.028)	2.87 (0.032)	−24.1	<.001
N	1,095	1,532		

Table 4. Regressing Belief That the Firm Should Lay off Women First When Faced with Prospects of Economic Distress in State Firms.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	Exp(B) (SE)	Exp(B) (SE)	Exp(B) (SE)
Men	2.231*** (0.119)	2.229*** (0.119)	1.646*** (0.139)
Managerial involvement		0.910 (0.111)	0.896 (0.138)
Contract instability			1.097 (0.410)
Age group	1.153** (0.053)	1.148* (0.054)	1.142* (0.066)
Highest education	0.852* (0.067)	0.848* (0.067)	0.833* (0.079)
Income group	0.880* (0.058)	0.860* (0.064)	0.985 (0.083)
Firm size	0.875* (0.006)	0.880* (0.060)	1.090 (0.075)
Hukou (reference: rural)			
Resident (previously rural)	1.127 (0.198)	1.116 (0.199)	0.658 (0.240)
Resident (previously urban)	0.001 (0.175)	0.994 (0.175)	0.757 (0.233)
Urban	0.846 (0.141)	0.840 (0.141)	0.926 (0.197)
Male × managerial involvement			1.102 (0.111)
Male × contract instability			0.961 (0.275)
N	1,097	1,097	1,097

$^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$.

also associated with higher odds of such beliefs (OR = 1.151). Unlike state firms, however, there initially appear to be far fewer protective effects for women among the control variables: Only education is associated with lower odds (OR = 0.840) of gendered beliefs, whereas income and firm size are nonsignificant. These effects hold true in Model 2, where we additionally observe that managerial involvement is nonsignificant.

In the full model, Model 3, we observe important nuances compared to the earlier state firm results. Men's gendered beliefs grow in the full model of private firms (OR = 2.245) to a much higher value than that of state firms (in which men's gendered preferences also shrink in its full model). Simultaneously, contract instability in private firms is significantly associated with increases in the odds of these gendered beliefs (OR = 1.898). The outsized odds observed of both being male and contract instability on gendered beliefs by private firms compared to state firms tentatively suggest that precarious employees are inclined to support women's firm departures when faced with distress, likely as an act of self-preservation.

The interaction effect between male and contract instability deserves noting: Rather than predicting higher odds, male × contract instability predicts lower odds (OR = 0.636) of preferences for women's layoffs first. This suggests that contract instability may motivate among women themselves higher odds of preferring to lay off fellow women or, rather, a desire to gatekeep fellow women out of the workplace. Perhaps cognizant of the limited opportunities for women in these firms, employed women fear for the erosion of already scarce resources and choose to sacrifice other women in bids for self-preservation.

Table 5. Regressing Belief That the Firm Should Lay off Women First When Faced with Prospects of Economic Distress in Private Firms.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	Exp(B) (SE)	Exp(B) (SE)	Exp(B) (SE)
Men	1.653***	1.647***	2.245***
	(0.139)	(0.139)	(0.119)
Managerial involvement		0.895	0.902
		(0.138)	(0.111)
Contract instability			1.898*
			(0.253)
Age group	1.151*	1.144*	1.135*
	(0.065)	(0.065)	(0.054)
Highest education	0.840*	0.832*	0.852*
	(0.078)	(0.079)	(0.067)
Income group	0.993	0.983	0.864*
	(0.082)	(0.083)	(0.064)
Firm size	1.089	1.091	0.891
	(0.075)	(0.075)	(0.060)
Hukou (reference: rural)			
Resident (previously rural)	0.659	0.658	1.126
	(0.240)	(0.240)	(0.199)
Resident (previously urban)	0.756	0.757	0.994
	(0.234)	(0.233)	(0.176)
Urban	0.925	0.926	0.846
	(0.197)	(0.197)	(0.142)
Male × managerial involvement			0.930
			(0.078)
Male × contract instability			0.636**
			(0.180)
N	1,536	1,536	1,536

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Moreover, although age is again associated with higher odds of gendered beliefs, the full model shows protective effects from both education (OR = 0.852) and income (OR = 0.864) through lower odds of gendered beliefs. Unlike state firms, where only higher education protected women against gendered beliefs, private firms appear to foster more inclusive work cultures where education and income play important roles in motivating gender egalitarianism but only insofar as workers have contract stability.

Conclusion

Gains in women's employment have been celebrated in advanced capitalist economies over the past 10 years. However, this article casts doubt on the extent and stability of these gains by uncovering firm attitudes toward women's employment amid economic recessions, especially in the case of China.

In general, there exists a gendered mismatch of credentials and income that holds true across state and private firms alike. Women have comparable *hukou* backgrounds to and higher educational attainment than their male counterparts yet receive disproportionately lower income than men. This gendered income gap widens substantially in the case of private firms, where women even have superior *hukou* backgrounds (in addition to higher educational attainment) than men but receive even less income relative to men than in state firms.

Thus, women stand on more lower footing to begin with in terms of their share of firm resources (through their salaries), a gap that appears to be impervious to the typical boons of educational attainment and early life social resources through elite *hukou* registrations and is likely explained by gendered biases against women in China. Moreover, this gendered gap in income appears to be firm-wide given that women possess comparable contract tenures and managerial responsibility as men.

Does this gender inequality extend to women's layoffs when firms face economic downturns? Statistically significant differences emerged between state and private firm employees when prompted about whether women should be laid off first. State firm employees responded between disagree and strongly disagree, whereas private firm employees responded closer to neither disagree nor agree. What might predict differences in such beliefs across the two firm types?

The statistical results find that in addition to standing on lower footing, women stand on more precarious footing.

Women are exposed to increased chances of being targeted in layoffs. This resonates with research showing that ideologies held by male partners of large firms are substantially more influential in hiring decisions than those held by female partners (Carnahan and Greenwood 2018). This study adds to this research on hiring decisions and workplace experiences of women by identifying how gendered attitudes may culminate not only in a mismatch of credentials and remuneration even during economic stability but also gendered layoff decisions during economic recessions.

When faced with the prospect of economic recessions, men are strongly associated with greater odds for supporting women's layoffs first across state and private firms alike. However, the type of firm emerges as a complex social space with countervailing forces that encourage and protect against gendered beliefs against women. In state firms, higher education is a socioeconomic resource that protects women against gendered beliefs. In private firms, however, there is a wider variety of socioeconomic resources that can protect women; namely, both education and income are associated with lower odds of gendered beliefs. This is important because men's gendered beliefs against women's employment are much stronger in private firms than state firms.

However, private firms are subject to one additional constraint: contract instability. Hearkening to the history of state and private firms and their roles in the economy, private firms are prone to conducting layoffs, whereas state firms are not. Because state firms are looked to as symbols of economic stability, they are informally prohibited from conducting layoffs even when faced with quarters of poor performance or revenue contraction. Private firms, however, are governed by a logic of profit maximization and shareholder value creation. When faced with poor performance or revenue contraction, private firms can use layoffs to reduce costs and support profits.

We observe now that this creates contract instability and an attendant effect on gendered beliefs against women's employment in private firms that are not observed in state firms. In private firms, contract instability is associated with nearly double the odds of supporting women's layoffs, even among women themselves, as evinced by the interaction effects. Perhaps cognizant of the limited opportunities for women in these firms, employed women fear for the erosion of already scarce resources and choose to sacrifice other women in bids for self-preservation.

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