

# Women's Political Participation in China: in whose interests elections?

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*This article takes up the issue of women's political participation in village committees in China. Of interest is the decline in and continuing low level of women's political participation in village governance structures in the reform period, and particularly following the widespread introduction of competitive village elections since 1988. The dominant explanation given for women's numerical under-representation in village committees, and in politics more generally, focuses on women's lack of self-confidence, which inhibits them from standing as candidates, and on the enduring drag of 'feudal' attitudes, which construct women as inferior to men, and therefore not capable of leadership. These two factors combined have in turn a material effect, as son-preference advantages boys in access to basic schooling, who thus, particularly in poorer rural areas, end up with higher levels of education, and greater opportunities in waged employment. The common solution adopted by the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), China's largest women's organisation, lies in a two-pronged attack: first in the ideological realm, targeting men and women's sexist attitudes and concomitantly promoting a discourse of equality, and second, in the material realm by raising women's skills. It is argued here that this dominant text on women's under-representation in village committees masks a more complex conjuncture of variables that shape women's position in local politics. Social practices, economic structures, institutional norms and procedures, and political culture all prey on, revitalise and reproduce gendered notions of the appropriate place of women and men in political life.*

## Introduction

The idea of competitive elections for political positions is a fundamental tenet of a democratic polity. Competitive elections provide the citizen not only with choice

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but also a means to hold leaders to account, the ultimate sanction being the ousting of unpopular, incompetent or corrupt leaders from public office. Democratic competition assumes an even playing-field, where differences of class, gender, wealth and ethnicity are bracketed. However in practice power differentials embedded in social and economic inequalities create barriers of entry to political participation. This is true not only in established liberal democracies such as the UK, USA, and Germany but also in liberalising socialist regimes such as China.

This article takes up the issue of women's political participation in village committees in China. Of interest is the decline in women's political participation in village governance structures in the reform period, and particularly following the widespread introduction of competitive village elections since 1988. The dominant explanation given for women's numerical under-representation in village committees, and in politics more generally, focuses on women's lack of self-confidence, which inhibits them from standing as candidates, and on the enduring drag of 'feudal' attitudes, which construct women as inferior to men, and therefore not capable of leadership. These two factors combined have in turn a material effect, as son-preference advantages boys in access to basic schooling, who thus, particularly in poorer rural areas, end up with higher levels of education, and greater opportunities in waged employment. The common solution adopted by the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), China's largest women's organisation, lies in a two-pronged attack: first in the ideological realm, targeting men and women's sexist attitudes and concomitantly promoting a discourse of equality, and second, in the material realm by raising women's skills. It is argued here that this dominant text on women's under-representation in village committees masks a more complex conjuncture of variables that shape women's position in local politics. Social practices, economic structures, institutional norms and procedures, and political culture all prey on, revitalise and reproduce gendered notions of the appropriate place of women and men in political life.

This article begins by sketching the emergence of village elections in the reform period and the impact of these on female representation in rural politics. The next section focuses on the conjuncture of variables affecting rural women's participation in political office. In the final section we examine recent attempts to resist rural women's exclusion from the political domain and the challenges facing women in doing so. The article draws upon extensive fieldwork in three counties in Hunan province carried out in 2002 and 2003.

### **The representation of women in rural politics**

The consolidation of Deng Xiaoping's power in 1978 paved the way for fundamental reforms in the rural economy. The decollectivisation of agriculture, the introduction of the household responsibility system and the opening up of agricultural markets changed not only the structure of rural economies but also social and political life. With the declining importance of ideology and Deng Xiaoping's endorsement to 'get rich quick', the incentives to engage in politics began to weaken. Rising economic wealth brought with it new avenues of power, success and status. However, with the

breakdown of the former commune system of governance and the lack of an established alternative model, a plethora of governance arrangements mushroomed across China's rural areas. Though the new 1982 Constitution incorporated the idea of direct elections to village committees, and a year later village committees and township governments replaced the old structures of the People's Commune, there was still in practice no unified or regularised system of rural governance.<sup>1</sup> In some areas village governance structures had weakened or even collapsed as villagers concentrated their attentions on tending their private plots. For township authorities this created severe difficulties in raising taxes from villagers and in implementing Party directives such as family planning targets or grain procurement. In other areas there were serious problems of rural unrest as local authorities extracted excessive and unwarranted fees from farmers. Clan rivalry, corruption, extreme localism, rural unrest and a vacuum of leadership and authority pointed to a crisis of rural governance.

Aware of the growing diversity in governance structures across rural areas, the disjunctures between old political and new economic institutions, and the perceived threat to stability of rural riots and protests, senior leaders within the Party such as Peng Zhen, Deng Xiaoping and Hu Yaobang along with key advocates within the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the ministry responsible for administering village elections, began to actively promote the regularisation and standardisation of competitive village committee elections from the mid-1980s onwards. However controversy within the Party as well as resistance from township and county cadres concerned about the loss of power and control led to considerable delays in the introduction of relevant legislation and its initial experimental status.<sup>2</sup> The National People's Congress finally passed the experimental Organic Law on Villagers' Committees in November 1987, taking effect from June 1988. From this point onwards the idea of village committees began to take off. In November 1998 the law was further amended, and made permanent, thereby dampening any further fundamental disagreement with the new system of rural governance. By the turn of the millennium nearly all villages in China had held at least one round of elections for village committee positions, and in more pioneering provinces such as Fujian and Zhejiang

1. Jude Howell, 'Prospects for village self-government in China', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 25(3), (1998), pp. 90–91.

2. Those in favour of competitive elections argued that these provided a way of ousting corrupt and incompetent leaders and promoting younger, more educated and competent leaders, who enjoyed local support, into positions of power and authority. In this way the Party could not only achieve more effective governance at the village level but also rejuvenate and enhance its legitimacy at the grassroots. They also allowed villagers to be more involved in decisions affecting their villages, thus thwarting the tide of political apathy. A more legitimate and accountable leadership would in turn make it easier for the township authorities to extract resources and maintain social order. Those against competitive elections feared the upward spread of demands for elections, the election of leaders that the Party could not easily control, and unabated rural unrest. For further details about support and opposition to competitive village committee elections see Kelliher Daniel (1997) 'The Chinese debate over village self-government', *The China Journal* 37, January, pp. 63–90, Li and O'Brien (1999), O'Brien, Kevin (1994) 'Implementing political reform in China's villages', *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 32, July, pp. 33–59, O'Brien Kevin and Li Lianjiang (2000) 'Accommodating "democracy" in a one-party state: introducing village elections in China', *China Quarterly* 162, pp. 465–89, Jakobson (2004) 'Local governance: village and township direct elections', pp. 97–120 in Jude Howell (ed) *Governance in China*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., Lanham, Boulder, Shi Tianjian (1999) 'Village committee elections in China: institutionalist tactics for democracy', *World Politics* 51, 3, pp. 385–412, and Wang Zhenyao (1996) 'Village committees: the foundation of the Chinese democratisation (unpublished manuscript), pp. 1–12.

were well into their third or fourth round of elections. Moreover, some villages had begun to experiment with elections for leadership of the Party branch,<sup>3</sup> and some townships such as Buyun in Suining City, Sichuan province, had initiated the competitive election of leaders.<sup>4</sup> Though there is still considerable variation in election procedures and practices across China's 930,000 villages,<sup>5</sup> and though problems such as clanism, vote buying, the refusal of township authorities to accept elected leaders, continue, the practice of competitive elections for village committees has now been established and regularised. However, with power often lying in the hands of the unelected Party branches,<sup>6</sup> competitive village elections do not yet hail the coming of a democratic era in China, though they may serve as a vital stabilising factor in a process of rapid socio-economic change.<sup>7</sup>

The village elections in China have drawn considerable attention from researchers, journalists and politicians both within China and outside. Yet despite the substantial literature on this subject in Chinese and English, surprisingly little has been written about women's participation in village committees, village Party branches, village groups or village assemblies. This is not just because of the lack of gender disaggregated data on village committee members but also because the issue has not gained sufficient political attention for it to trigger investigation, study or analysis, let alone prompt the systematic collection of gender disaggregated data.<sup>8</sup> Although in many villages the Party branch continues to be the most authoritative and powerful political institution, the village committee nevertheless has several functions, which are significant in the everyday lives of both men and women. These include not only the implementation of Party directives from above relating to grain procurement, taxation and family planning, but also the development of the village economy, maintenance of social order, mediation of disputes, women's work, infrastructural development, and public health. As women take prime responsibility for childcare, domestic activities, care of the elderly, and increasingly in many rural areas of China, of agricultural labour, the decisions enacted in village committees, and the resources committed, bear directly upon the quality of women's lives.

Yet women are numerically under-represented on village committees, not least because in the context of competitive village elections, they are less likely than men to be nominated as candidates and even less likely to be voted for as members or chairs of village committees. According to Article 8 of the Organic Law on Villagers'

3. Li Lianjiang, 'The politics of introducing direct township elections in China', *China Quarterly* no. 171, (2002).

4. Li Lianjiang, 'The two ballot system in Shanxi Province: subjecting party secretaries to a popular vote', *The China Journal* no. 42, (1999); Linda Jakobson, 'Local governance: village and township direct elections', in J. Howell, ed., *Governance in China* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), pp. 97–120.

5. According to the Carter Center China Village Elections project, village elections have occurred in some 700,000 villages, reaching 75% of the population. Available at: [www.cartercenter.org/documents/nondatabase/chinavillagefactsheetpdf](http://www.cartercenter.org/documents/nondatabase/chinavillagefactsheetpdf), accessed 17 December 2004.

6. Kevin O'Brien and Li Lianjiang, 'Accommodating "democracy" in a one-party state: introducing village elections in China', in Larry Diamond and Ramon H. Myers, eds, *Elections and Democracy in Greater China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

7. Jean Oi and Scott Rozelle, 'Elections and power: the locus of decision-making in Chinese villages', in Diamond and Myers, eds, *Elections and Democracy in Greater China*.

8. It is noteworthy that none of the selected EU/China research projects take up the issue of gender in village elections, even though the issue was raised in the original design mission documents (see: [www.chinarural.org/euchiprogram/research.html](http://www.chinarural.org/euchiprogram/research.html), accessed 5 December 2004).

Committees, the village committee should include 'an appropriate number of women' (*funu ying dang you shidang de ming'e*).<sup>9</sup> Available statistics suggest that only 1% of village committee chairs are women and 16% of village committee members are women.<sup>10</sup> Though there is some inter- and intra-regional variation, in general men outnumber women on village committees, with one woman on a committee being the norm. In some villages not a single woman has been elected to the village committee. In the 14 villages in one town we visited in Hunan province, there was not one female head of the village committee, and only one female village Party secretary. This town in turn fell under the administrative authority of a large city, which covered 771 villages. Amongst these villages, there were only five female village committee chairs, making up less than 1% of the total.

Though the lack of gender disaggregated data prevents an accurate tracking of women's participation over time, available evidence suggests that women's participation in village committees has declined over the last 30 years. Compared with the politically charged days of the Cultural Revolution, when women in urban and many rural areas were swept up in the tide of political activism, assuming leadership positions in campaigns and revolutionary organs, women's participation in rural political institutions in the reform period has diminished. The new revolutionary committees of that era opened up opportunities for women's political involvement, with women receiving training in political leadership. In Shanghai, for example, women accounted for 22% of the revolutionary committees in 1973<sup>11</sup> and in some areas women made up 50% of cadres at lower levels.<sup>12</sup>

This pattern of numerical under-representation of women in positions of authority and the decline of representation in the reform period are not peculiar to China's villages. At all levels of the political system, from the national level down to county and township, women are under-represented in leadership positions. Of the 24 members in the Politburo in 2004, only one is a woman, namely, Mme Wu Qi.<sup>13</sup> Of the 198 Central Committee members elected at the 16th Party Congress in 2002, only five were women, accounting for just 2.5%.<sup>14</sup> Women fare better in the National People's Congress (NPC), where they account, as of 2004, for just over one fifth of delegates. However, only two out of 15 vice-chairs and 21 out of 160 delegates on the NPC Standing Committee are women, making up just 13% in each case of the total. In over five decades of Communist Party rule, there has never been a single female General Party Secretary. At the county and township levels male domination of leadership positions prevails. To illustrate, in a county government in Hunan

9. It also requires there to be 'a member or members' from minority populations'. See Organic Law on Villagers' Committees in Jiangsu Sheng Min Zheng Ting, *Cunweihui xuanju gongzuo zhinan* [Village Committee Elections Work Manual] (Jiangsu Province Civil Affairs Bureau, 1995), p. 4.

10. Fan Yu, 'Cunweihui xuanju: nongcun funu fazhan de jiyu yu tiaozhan' ['Village committee elections: opportunities and challenges for rural women's development'], in China Women's Research Conference and UNIFEM, eds, *1995 Shijie Funu Dahui Wu Zhou Nian Yanjiuhui* [1995 Beijing Plus Five Conference] (Beijing, 2000), pp. 273–275.

11. Elisabeth Croll, *Feminism and Socialism in China* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 327.

12. Joan Maloney, 'Women cadres and junior-level leadership in China', *Current Scene: Developments in the People's Republic of China* 8(3–4), (March–April 1975), pp. 17–18.

13. See [www.china.org.cn](http://www.china.org.cn), accessed October 2004.

14. Du Jie, 'Women's participation in politics in the transition to a market economy in China. Progress in high level politics since 1995', unpublished paper for UNRISD Contribution to *Beijing Plus Ten*, June 2004.

province, as of 2003, there were only two female town and township governors out of a total of 35, accounting for a mere 6%.<sup>15</sup> The decline in women's numerical representation in village committees is mirrored also at the national level. The last woman to serve in the Politburo Standing Committee was Jiang Qing, Mao's second wife, during the height of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>16</sup> The number of female delegates in the 10th NPC elected in 2003 fell by 1.5% compared to the previous congress. Female representation in the NPC peaked at the 4th Congress in 1975, with women accounting for 22.6% of delegates and 25% of NPC Standing Committee members, figures that have not been attained since.<sup>17</sup>

Apart from the numerical under-representation of women in village committees, another recurring pattern is that women are usually assigned portfolios associated with their reproductive and domestic responsibilities. Whilst men tend to be allotted tasks such as economic development or infrastructural construction, female committee members are given charge of women's work, family planning, or health. Village committees are thus sites through which gender relations are played out and reproduced, and where gendered private roles come to determine men's and women's public roles. The social construction of family planning as a matter for women and not men results in women always being assigned this responsibility at the expense of other tasks such as economic development which are not regarded as exclusive and essential to their sex. Indeed county and township committees responsible for organising village elections have encouraged villagers to put forward female candidates in the final voting round so as to ensure compliance with family planning targets set from above. Women thus gain their positions on the village committees not by virtue of their recognised general competence, but because of the necessity of having a woman to carry out family planning. Illustrative of this pattern is one village we visited in Ning Xiang County, Hunan province, where there had only ever been one woman on the village committee since elections were first held in 1987, and this woman was always the head of the women's committee, bearing responsibility for women's work, family planning and raising women's economic status. This gendered division of labour around public roles is mirrored also at the national level where senior female political leaders tend to be assigned portfolios relating to women and children. For example, after the Liberation of China, Long March veterans such as Cai Chang, Kang Keqing and Deng Ying Chao were given charge of portfolios concerned with women and children, rather than say defence, transport or trade.

The gendered nature of village committees is reflected not only in the differential assignment of tasks to men and women, but also in the way men and women are positioned in the hierarchy, thereby empowering men and women differently. Men head 99% of all village committees in China. That men occupy the highest positions of power and authority in village institutions, be these the village committee or the Party branch, reflects a similar weave at higher levels of the Party/state hierarchies. Where women are

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15. Interview, April 2003.

16. In fact, at the 9th Party Congress in 1969 Ye Qun (wife of Lin Biao) and Jiang Qing (wife of Mao Zedong) were the first women ever to be elected to the Political Bureau. See Yuan Yi Ming, *Zhongguo Dangdai Funu Baike Zhishi Quanshu* (Beijing: Zhiming Ribao Publishing Company, 1997), p. 1472.

17. Ding Juan, 'Analysis on the track of Chinese women's participation in the government and public affairs', unpublished paper given at the *Sino-British Symposium on Women's Political Participation*, Beijing, October 2000.

found in politics, they are usually deputy provincial, county or township governors, deputy mayors, deputy premiers, and deputy village chairs. So whilst there are female vice-premiers to the NPC, there is no female chair. The first woman to become a provincial governor was Gu Xiulian in 1983 in Jiangsu province, and the first female provincial Party secretary was Wang Shaofen in 1985 in Jiangxi province. In the capital city of Hunan province, as of 2003, women accounted for one out of six mayors, that is 17%, one out of 13 Party committee members, 8%, 68 out of 400 provincial People's Congress delegates, 17%, and only one out of nine People's Congress Standing Committee members, 11%.<sup>18</sup> In one township under the capital city, there was not a single female member of the township leadership team and not a single female Party secretary. Of China's 6,000 mayors in all cities and counties, women account for only 500, that is less than 10% of the total, and most of these women are deputy mayors.

How can we then explain the numerical under-representation of women in village committees? Why is it that the introduction of choice has worked against women rather than being an opportunity for women to gain greater ground in the local political arena? Why do women on village committees get assigned portfolios deemed compatible with their reproductive and domestic functions? In the next section we explore the complexity of reasons underpinning women's low representation on village committees.

### Explaining women's low representation in village committees

Gender researchers have put forward a combination of reasons explaining women's numerical under-representation in politics. These include not least gender socialisation, structural factors such as the gender division of labour in the economy and household, gender ideology, and political and institutional barriers.<sup>19</sup> Though all these variables contribute in varying degrees to women's under-representation in village committees in China, the introduction of village elections has brought to the surface the challenges of enduring negative attitudes towards women, the weakness of state intervention through ideological means to fundamentally alter gender stereotypes, the institutional barriers to women's greater participation in politics and the male political culture dominating politics at all levels. In this section we explore the complex intermeshing of these factors that results in keeping women out of positions of power and authority at village level.

Sexist attitudes towards women's participation in politics remain deeply entrenched in rural China, despite the over four decades of state gender ideology that proclaims the equality of men and women. Sayings such as '*nu zhu nei, nan zhu wai*' ('women live inside, men outside') capture well the pervasive attitude that women's place is in the home, the public sphere belongs to men, and therefore that women's destiny is not in leadership. The political campaigns to bring women into waged employment in the 1950s, the ideological narratives of the Cultural Revolution period that sought to erase the notion of any differences between the male

<sup>18</sup> Interview, Civil Affairs Bureau, provincial Organisation Bureau and provincial Women's Federation, April 2003

<sup>19</sup> Joni Lovenduski and Vicki Randall, *Contemporary Feminist Politics. Women and Power in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Vicki Randall, *Women and Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1987); Dorothy McBride Stetson and Amy G. Mazur, eds, *Comparative State Feminism* (London: Sage, 1995)

and female sex, and the appointment (rather than election) of women to positions of authority in village organisations aimed to undermine ‘feudal’ notions of women as inferior and less equal to men. However, the introduction of choice by village residents in the selection of leaders has opened up a sore wound, laying bare the enduring social beliefs about the appropriate roles in the economy and household of men and women, and the relative superiority of men over women.

These social beliefs are manifest in the way both government officials as well as rural residents, whether male or female, describe and explain the differences between men and women, and particularly the reluctance of villagers to nominate and vote for female candidates. Recurring notions are women’s ‘low quality’, their passivity, their lack of competitiveness, and their disinterest in public matters as their lives, identities and consciousnesses gravitate around their families. Interviews with township and county female government officials, and female village leaders carried out in Hunan province in spring 2003 revealed how these beliefs and attitudes were internalised and surfaced both as factual statements and explanations. For example, the vice-President of a city Women’s Federation in Hunan province pointed to women’s ‘low quality’ (*funu suzhi di*) as a contributory factor to their low level of political participation. In her words, ‘Women village cadres play a minor role. It is very difficult for women to become Party secretaries. They don’t have enough ability. Their quality is lower than that of men’s—that is their education level, their general knowledge’. Not only does women’s own internalisation of these ideas hinder them from putting themselves forward for election, but the attitudes of male leaders, who occupy most positions of authority in the Party/government hierarchies, can also act as a barrier. The head of a county-level organisational bureau in Hunan province recounted that male leaders commonly made statements such as ‘what can female cadres do?’ (*nu ganbu neng gan shenme?*). His key point was that the attitude of the local Party secretary, whether at county, township or village level, to the promotion of women, could be central to whether women move into decision-making positions and also up the bureaucratic ladder.

The recurring refrain of women’s supposed ‘low quality’ is problematic on two fronts. First, it focuses on the individual woman, and especially the rural woman, as the source of both the problem and its solution. Second, it masks the way in which other structural, institutional and political factors shape the engagement of men and women in local politics. To expand on the first point, the ACWF devotes considerable energy to raising the ‘quality’ of women through training programmes and dedicated campaigns. In the new market-oriented economy of the reform period the ACWF at all levels organises training programmes for rural women to acquire specialised skills such as growing fruit trees, pig-raising, and chicken-breeding. Its long-running ‘Four Selfs Campaign’ aims to raise ‘women’s self-respect, self-confidence, self-reliance and self-development’. Whilst son-preference has worked to favour educational opportunities for boys over girls in rural areas, particularly in poor and remote locations, leading to measurable differences in educational progress for boys and girls, the constant focus on girls and women as the site of correction detracts attention from addressing the underlying problem of son-preference, and deeply entrenched sexist beliefs, norms and practices. Ironically the constant thrust to improve women reproduces the notion that women always ‘lack’ certain qualities and skills compared to men.



This institutional focus on women has its roots in a state gender ideology that has operated with a unitary focus on 'women' rather than a gender analysis that takes the relations between men and women to be socially constructed. State-derived feminism in China, that is, the complex combination of official gender ideology, practical strategies and institutional arrangements used to advance women's status,<sup>20</sup> builds upon the work of Engels, Lenin, Marx and Mao on the 'woman's question', which links women's subjugation to historical and material forces. In the context of state socialism, collective ownership and planning of the economy, the material underpinnings of women's subjugation are therefore removed. The traces of women's subjugation that surface in the persistence of sexist attitudes belong thus to the realm of ideology. It is therefore in this realm that such attitudes are to be challenged. At the same time accepting that 'feudal thinking' remains and continues to influence the educational opportunities of women, the ACWF seeks to subvert this through campaigns aimed at enlightening women about their capabilities and enhancing women's skills through training. This dominant paradigm that is circulated through the primary agency of the ACWF shapes the way that women's under-representation in village elections is understood and the kind of remedies that are to be applied to the patient. This then brings us on to the second point, namely, that such analysis has the effect of masking the way institutional, structural and political factors also shape women's participation in politics and therefore impeding changes in these areas.

Male bias in nomination and selection processes, the importance of Party membership, the 'bamboo ceiling effect' of vague quotas, and institutional discrimination against women as reflected in differential salaries and pensions, and gendered differences in career trajectories are but some of the institutional factors that shape women's participation in politics. The impact of male bias arises out of male domination of key political institutions in the Party/government and at village level, and the procedures for nominating and selecting candidates. Key institutions related to the election processes are dominated by men and by Party members. The village election committees at township and county levels, which guide and supervise the village elections, the village Party branches, the village groups which often put forward candidates, the village assembly, and household heads, are all predominantly male. Given that women are under-represented in the Party and the significance of gendered social networks which glue together the male-dominated institutions, women face considerable institutional challenges from the very beginning of the election process. Furthermore, due to the variability in nomination and selection procedures across China's villages, there is considerable scope for gendered processes to intervene.<sup>21</sup> To illustrate, in some villages it is the heads of households, who are usually male, that nominate candidates initially. In other villages it might be the heads and representatives of village groups, who again are predominantly male, that make the initial nominations. In some villages when it comes to the second round of whittling down the number of

20. For a full analysis of state derived feminism and its implications for and effects on female political participation see Jude Howell, 'Women's political participation in China: struggling to hold up half the sky', *Parliamentary Affairs. A Journal of Comparative Politics* 55(1), (2002), pp. 43–56.

21. In an attempt to standardise practices and improve transparency, the CCP Central Committee and State Council issued in July 2004 the 'Views of the General Offices of the CCP Central Committee and State Council on strengthening and improving the systems of making village affairs public and exercising democratic management'. See *China People's Daily*, (13 July 2004), in *Summary of World Broadcasts*, (30 July 2004), p. 8.

candidates to two more than the number of vacant positions, the village election committee, village group heads and representatives, which again are mainly populated by men, decide on which candidates should go forward to the final round.

Unclear selection criteria also open up the space for gendered attitudes and beliefs to affect the nomination of candidates. When asked about the desirable attributes of village leaders, township officials and incumbent village leaders referred to vague notions such as 'willing to serve the masses', 'putting energy into work', 'should love doing things'. At county and township level election organising committees often stipulate the requirements for candidates, promoting thereby a particular profile of candidates. Typically a candidate should be young (between 18 and 45 years of age) so as to rejuvenate village bodies, educated (usually with at least lower secondary school education), competent (as proven by the economic success of their own household), and have good moral behaviour (as seen in the lack of a criminal record and compliance with the family planning policy).<sup>22</sup> These criteria potentially discriminate against women, whose life patterns are more noticeably interrupted by childcare responsibilities.

Aware that enduring social prejudices were hindering women's participation in politics, the central government inserted Article 9 into the temporary 1988 and then permanent 1998 Village Organic Law, whereby village committees were required to have 'an appropriate proportion' of women. In 1999 the Ministry of Civil Affairs circulated a document 'Suggestions for the Guarantee of a Proper Portion Among Members of Village Committees'. The vagueness of the clause in the Law renders its implementation difficult as there is no obligation on provincial, county or township governments to interpret this either as requiring all village committees to have female representation or to have more than one woman on such committees. Progressive local governments taking up this issue, such as Shandong and Hunan provinces, introduced local regulations in 2002, which specified that the law should be interpreted to mean 'at least one woman'.<sup>23</sup>

Though the 1988 and 1999 Village Organic Law, the 1999 Circular and the provincial regulations adopted in places such as Hunan and Shandong have increased the pressure on county and township governments and villages to put forward female candidates and to raise villagers' awareness of the issue, they have also had unintended consequences. First, in practice the vague quota has cast a bamboo ceiling on women's representation. So 'a certain proportion of women' as in the Law, or, as in the case of Hunan and Shandong provinces, 'at least one woman' become interpreted as a maximum of one. The rope to save women turns instead into a noose. Local government officials and village leaders become satisfied if one woman has been elected to a committee, and there the saga ends. In the three counties we visited in Hunan province most village committees had one female member, but few had more than one. To illustrate, in a township in Xiangxi prefecture in Hunan province, only one out of ten villages had more than one woman on the village committee. State intervention can make a difference, but

22. Ministry of Civil Affairs Research Group on Direct Village Elections System, *Zhongguo Nongcun Cunmin Weiyuanhui Huanbie Xuanju Zhidu* [Study on the Election of Villagers' Committees in Rural China] (Beijing: Chinese Society Publishing House, 1993).

23. See, for example, Document 16, issued by Hunan Province Civil Affairs Bureau and Women's Federation in 2001, *Guanyu zai cunminhui huanbie zhong baozheng cunweihui banzi zhong you shidang nuxing cengyuan de yijian* [Suggestions on Protecting an Appropriate Number of Female Members on Village Committees in the Elections for Village Committees].

that difference is in turn limited by social norms, attitudes and practices that underlie intervention processes, particularly in a context of decollectivisation and the availability of alternative channels of wealth and prosperity.

The second unintended consequence relates to the efforts of the Women's Federation and local Civil Affairs Bureau to promote female candidates for positions on the village committee. In Hunan, Hebei and Shandong provinces, for example, the local Women's Federations have sought to train and encourage the heads of village women's committees to stand for election. This in turn has led to experiments in competitive elections for the position of head of the women's committee, with the aim of making the committee more representative and legitimate. The outcome is that the one woman on the village committee tends also to be the head of the village women's committee. This not only limits the range of 'women's interests' represented but also again links women's political participation to their particular identity as a woman. Given that the head of the women's village committee often doubles as the family planning person, then the entry-points for women into politics continue to be shaped by women's reproductive roles. This in turn is exacerbated by the fact that villagers will be encouraged by the village election committee to select a woman candidate so that family planning targets can be achieved.<sup>24</sup> Together this reinforces the notion that women can only enter politics if they come as representatives of their gender, rather than say their class or ideology, and justifies the allocation of only gender-related portfolios to women. Thus the vagueness of well-intended legal measures to ensure the participation of women in village elections, coupled with pressure to select someone to take charge of family planning targets, combines to limit women's numerical representation to a lone one, thereby casting a bamboo ceiling above women.

Though Party membership is not a criterion for standing as a candidate for election to the village committee, the Party nevertheless is a significant channel, laden with symbolic and often material resources, for promoting particular candidates in election processes. Though there are successful candidates who are not Party members, they are strongly encouraged afterwards to join the Party. In this way village elections serve as a means both to rejuvenate and re-legitimate the Party. Moreover, Party membership is usually essential for promotion up the hierarchies of the Party/state. Even though non-Party members can and do stand for village elections, the majority of village committee members belong to the Party. However women are significantly under-represented in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Indeed, women's participation in the CCP is even less than in other parties in China.<sup>25</sup>

24. In some villages we visited in Hunan province, the family planning person was tokenistically counted as on the village committee, even though they had not been selected as a candidate, because otherwise the committee would have no female members. This ambivalence became obvious when asking about the numbers of village committee members and their identities.

25. It is noteworthy that the percentage of female members of the Chinese Communist Party is the least of all political parties in China. According to Guo Li, 2001, 'A tentative analysis on disposition of gender proportion in the leading body at all levels' in *Supplement of 2001 'Collection of Women's Studies'*, published by Collection of Women's Studies, Beijing, cited in Du Jie, 2004, 'Women's participation in politics in the transition to a market economy in China: progress at high level politics since 1995', draft paper for UNRISD Contribution to 'Beijing Plus Ten' 2004) the Friendship Association of Taiwan Democratic League had the highest proportion of all women in political parties in China, with women accounting for 64% of total membership, whilst the Chinese Peasants and Workers Democratic Party came second, with 47%. Available figures put female membership of the Chinese Communist Party at around 15% as of 1998.

As indicated earlier, only five out of 198 members of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party are women, a mere 2.5%, whilst only one out of 24 members of the Politbureau is a woman. In Changsha city, the capital of Hunan province, as of 2003, there was only one woman out of 13 members on the provincial Party committee. Similarly at township and county levels a similar pattern of under-representation prevails. For example in Ning Xiang County, Hunan province, as of 2003, there are only 5,850 female Party members out of a total of 58,625, accounting for just 10%. Similarly in the villages under a township in Liuyang City, Hunan province, only one out of 14 village Party secretaries is a woman. Aware of the under-representation of women in the Party, Liuyang City Party Committee issued a document in 2002 requiring that women made up 20% of Party representatives in the city and surrounding areas. However without any clear strategy for implementing this and for moving beyond a minimum of 20%, it will take some time before there is progress in this area. Given that women are under-represented in village Party branches, they lack a significant institutional channel for promoting them in village elections.

Even if women do get into positions of power and authority, they continue to face institutionalised forms of discrimination such as lower salaries, less favourable pension entitlements, and fewer opportunities for promotion. Women responsible for women's work in villages receive little or no remuneration for their efforts. In one village we visited in Feng Huang County, Hunan province, the head of the women's committee, who was also a village committee member, received less than all other village committee members, on the grounds that compared to the Party secretary, family planning person, village head accountant and secretary, she was not a 'main cadre' (*zhu ganbu*). Though family planning cadres are better paid than women committee heads in villages, they both receive less favourable treatment in relation to pensions. Key people in the village committee and Party branch, such as the village head, Party secretary and accountant, are entitled to a pension after 20 years of service. However, neither the family planning cadre nor the head of the women's committee are entitled to this benefit. The undervaluing of women's contribution is reflected also in their lower status. In March 2002 Hunan provincial government issued a circular that reaffirmed the 1989 policy requirement that grassroots women cadres should have the status of section-level cadres after eight years of work experience and three years of assessment. Nevertheless, this has still not been widely implemented, not only because of a failure to treat this with urgency but also because of an apparent lack of pressure from higher levels of the ACWF.

Finally, the gendered pattern of career trajectories also shapes the way women and men progress up Party/government ladders and participate in village political structures. First, as there are fewer women in leadership positions in villages, women tend to get assigned responsibility for women's work and/or family planning. Often women are on the village committee precisely because higher levels of government require the implementation of the family planning policy. Being locked in this way into women's work and/or family planning, women do not get opportunities to develop other skills and experience which are more highly valued and considered important for assuming top leadership positions. Second, at township and county levels women tend to be assigned to the local Women's Federation or given

responsibility for family planning work. As the status of the Women's Federation is lower in the pecking order of government departments and mass organisations, women are held back in their careers, whilst young men advance directly up the civil service/Party ladders. Third, given the emphasis upon relative youth in promotion criteria, women are again disadvantaged as in their late twenties women are bearing and rearing children. When faced with work that requires extensive travel around villages and townships, women with young children struggle to manage both work and domestic demands, or decline these tasks, accepting that this will constrain their promotion. By the time their children mature into adulthood, women are in their mid-forties and approaching retirement. As women civil servants retire five years earlier than their male counterparts at the age of 55 rather than 60, they again miss out on promotion to more senior positions. At village level pressure from above to promote younger candidates again works against older women, who free of childcare responsibilities, could now take on the tasks of village committee membership.

Apart from these institutional constraints, women's participation is also shaped by various structural factors, such as the gendered division of domestic labour, marriage practices, lower educational opportunities for girl-children, women's positioning in the waged economy, and gendered boundaries of mobility. With the decollectivisation of agriculture and rural–urban migration, the farming of land has increasingly been left to women. As women take prime responsibility for domestic affairs, and increasingly take on agricultural work and side-line activity, they have even less time to participate in village governance processes. The gendered division of domestic life makes it easier for men to participate in village public affairs. As domestic work does not have neat boundaries of time, it can be difficult for women to participate in village election meetings that are held at lunch-time or in the evening, when children need attending to and food preparation is underway. The absence of child-care facilities during village assemblies or village elections again militates against women's participation. The centring of women's lives around the household in turn contributes to a perception amongst village leaders, many villagers and government officials that they are less concerned with the outside world, and therefore less capable of understanding public affairs.

As in many parts of China rural women move into the husband's household, not only do the parents invest less in their daughters' education and futures, but village leaders also do not devote much attention to the development of leadership skills amongst young girls and women, as they are destined to leave the village. In the new village women are seen as strangers. As a result women lack the social networks built up during childhood through school, family and friends that men can mobilise to rally support in elections. They have to start again to build up networks of friendship, trust and solidarity that men have cultivated through schooling, friends, work and family ties.<sup>26</sup> Women are thus disadvantaged when it comes to standing for election as they have less 'social capital' to draw upon, compared to men with several decades of

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26. As David Wank points out in his discussion of *guanxi*, the strongest obligations in the *guanxi* system are produced by birth, and particularly direct kin on the father's side. The engendering of *guanxi* as well as women's relocation to their husband's village work thus together to disadvantage women in developing a similar stock of social capital to draw on in village elections. See David Wank, 'The institutional process of market clientelism: *guanxi* and private business in a south China city', *China Quarterly* no. 147, (September 1996), pp. 820–838.

accumulated networks of solidarity and support. As one female village committee chair in a county in Hunan province explained, it takes a long time for women marrying into a village to win the confidence of other village residents.

In addition to these structural factors, a male dominated political culture plays a key role in keeping women out of politics, be this at village, provincial or national levels. At stake here are political cultural practices such as heavy drinking, toasting and smoking, which function to nurture and consolidate bonds of male solidarity and are interpreted as indicators of leadership ability. These practices pose a problem for women leaders as smoking and drinking are in general seen as inappropriate for women and undermine their reputation. Women are thus placed in a no-win situation. If they participate in smoking and drinking, then they risk sullyng their reputations; if they do not engage in drinking rituals, then they risk failing to build up their networks of influence and power. That political culture is a serious gender issue in politics was apparent from our interviews with women leaders at township, county and village levels. For example, a female township vice-Party secretary in Hunan province describes her experiences of working in a male-dominated work environment as follows:

Women's status is not high. Higher levels require lower levels to have women cadres but, for myself, I am not pleased about being promoted because of the family burden ... and I don't like the work environment. ... At county, township levels, other cadres look down on women ... they think they are not convenient ... they discriminate against us. They feel it is not convenient because we don't drink. The environment, the culture of drinking ... we don't like this but sometimes you have to join in.<sup>27</sup>

In some villages in order to protect their reputations women village committee members will make explicit efforts to avoid any ambiguity in their interactions with men. For example, the head of one village committee in Hunan province related her strategy as follows: 'I avoid staying alone with men. I keep the conversation short. I take care of my actions. I don't go out on my own to discuss with a man'. The pervasiveness of a male-dominated political culture involving practices that have the potential to damage women's standing places an additional burden on women seeking to engage in political life.

Enduring sexist beliefs and norms, gendered divisions of labour in the economy and household, institutional policies and practices, and political culture and values all combine to varying degrees in villages to create barriers to women's greater numerical representation. Is there any room for optimism? As will be discussed in the next section, there are several reasons to hope that the future might be more optimistic.

### **Resisting women's subjugation in rural politics**

Though the introduction of competitive village elections has led to a decline in female representation in village committees, this trend is also meeting with some resistance, both from within the ACWF and the relevant department of the Ministry of Civil Affairs and from rural women. Already in the mid-1980s academic

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27. Interview, April 2003.

researchers and cadres within the ACWF began to draw attention to the declining numerical representation of women in Party/state structures at all levels and in both urban and rural areas.<sup>28</sup> Some Women's Federations had already begun in the late 1980s to introduce measures such as minimum quotas for women, stimulating in turn a debate about the pros and cons of quotas for women. In Heping District of Shenyang city the head of the Women's Federation even challenged the notion of quotas as ceilings and managed to raise the representation of women in the local People's Congress from the quota of 25% to 31.7%.<sup>29</sup>

As competitive village elections swept across China's villages in the 1990s, some cadres in national and local level Women's Federations began to meet and plan ways of countering the downward spiral of female representation. The Women's Federation of Qianxi County, Hebei province was one of the first to set up training sessions in 1999 for potential female village committee chairs and members.<sup>30</sup> Other provincial and city women's federations also began to introduce specialised training for rural women to enter political leadership positions in villages. These training sessions provided opportunities for women from a diversity of villages to share experiences, learn about the political system, and gain confidence.

Apart from training, some progressive Women's Federations such as in Shandong province and Hunan province have introduced local measures to promote women's participation. For example, in Hunan province a joint document was issued by Hunan provincial Women's Federation and the Rural Grassroots Section of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, which interpreted Article 9 of the national Village Committee Organic Law to mean that there should be at least one woman on a village committee. Some counties in Hunan have also issued their own directives echoing the substance of the provincial document. Local level officials involved in the village election committee are thus obliged, in theory at least, to ensure that every village has female representation. A similar initiative was taken in Shandong province, where the local Women's Federation and Civil Affairs Bureau jointly issued a document, requiring there to be at least one woman on the village committee. As a result the numbers of women on the committee increased after the next elections. As mentioned earlier, in some provinces such as Hunan, local officials have seized this opportunity to introduce competitive direct elections for the heads of women's committees and to then promote this woman as the candidate for a village committee position.

In a workshop organised by the Ministry of Civil Affairs in August 2004 in Beijing, academics, NPC delegates, female village committee heads and cadres from national and provincial Women's Federations came together to discuss ways of increasing female representation on village committees. Inspired by the reservation

28. Ma Lizhen and Ji Xiaocun, 'Report about a work conference on training women cadres for selection and promotion', *Zhongguo Funu*, (October 1990), pp. 11–13; Tamara Jacka, *Women's Work in Rural China. Change and Continuity in an Era of Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 88; Guo Donggui, 'Why do women cadres lose elections?', *Chinese Law and Government: Women and Politics in China* 26(6), (November–December 1993), pp. 7–18; Li Xiaojiang, *Eve's Transcending: a Theoretical Outline of Women's Studies in China* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Press, 1988); Wang Qi, 'State–society relations and women's political participation', in Jackie West, Zhao Minghua, Chang Xiangqun and Cheng Yuan, eds, *Women of China. Economic and Social Transformation* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1999), pp. 19–44.

29. Gordon White, Jude Howell and Shang Xiaoyuan, *In Search of Civil Society. Market Reform and Social Change in Contemporary China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 88.

30. Interview, Director of Civil Affairs, Qianxi County, August 1999.

of one third of seats for women in India's village councils, a proposal was put forward at this meeting to amend the Villagers' Committee Organic Law so as to ensure a minimum quota of women.

All these initiatives suggest that progressive women within the ACWF and the rural grassroots division of the Ministry of Civil Affairs are resisting the numerical under-representation of women in village committees and using their organisational positions, social networks, and the legal framework to establish institutional barriers to discrimination. However laws, regulations and measures are only as good as their implementation. There the crux of the problem lies. For without pressure from above local level officials are not likely to pay much attention to such directives.

Though state-derived feminism perpetuates paradoxically the myth that women are less able than men through its singular focus on women as the subject of change, it is also the case that women's consciousnesses are fluid, variable and not wholly open to capture. Women do not readily accept that their 'quality is low' and do not internalise forever, or continually, stereotypic attitudes that position them as inferior to men. This became evident in interviews with village women leaders, who expressed not only confidence in their own self-worth, but also clarity about the extent of male prejudice in society. For example, one female village head in Hunan province described the discrimination she encountered but still maintained a sense of her own self-worth and the capabilities of women:

On the whole men don't trust women and despise women. Some men are not very civilised and say women ... even if they improve their abilities, they still discriminate against women. If you haven't had the experience of being in contact with them, you can't believe they could despise you—many people see women as less capable as men. They need practice to show women can do as well as men. This is a difficulty in my work. Many women are capable. Also there are things men can't do. Men will say but 'you're not a man' ... I don't mind speaking. I'm not afraid of anything. ... Whatever men can do, I think I can do. I have self-confidence. First you have to believe in yourself.<sup>31</sup>

Finally outmigration over the last 20 years from poorer, agricultural areas to richer, industrialising coastal areas has reaped vast changes in the structure of village life. On the one hand male outmigration has often left women wholly responsible for less well rewarded agricultural labour. This has in turn opened up channels for women to enter village positions. However, some researchers and government officials then explain women's leap into leadership positions by the absence of any male competition. The underlying sexism in such interpretations leaves women in a no-win situation: if they become the head of a village committee, it is only because there are no male competitors; if there are male competitors, then the fact they do not succeed shows that they are less suited to leadership. On the other hand, there is also considerable female outmigration. Such women may stay for several years working in assembly-line factories in Guangdong or Fujian. Though their conditions of work are harsh, they also gain new skills and knowledge, fresh perspectives and wider horizons. No longer can the argument be made that 'women lack outside experience' and therefore are not suitable for village leadership. This generation of young

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31. Interview, April 2003.



women, who may at some point return to their villages, provide some optimism that village politics could change in the future.

However, from the research we carried out, it is clear that it will still take time for attitudes to change as gendered social norms continue to be a constraint on women's participation. For example, in the run-up to the 1998 elections in a village in Xiangxi prefecture, Hunan province, eight out of 27 female candidates (30%) had worked outside compared to 12 out of 34 male candidates (35%), a slightly higher proportion but hardly sufficient to explain women's low representation in leadership positions. Similarly in Luo Yixi township, Guzhang County, Hunan province, women constitute about half of all migrant workers. Yet only one village head in the township is female and only two out of 17 Party secretaries are female. In any case, the lack of outside experience does not mean that women cannot learn the skills of leadership. The excuse of 'lack of outside experience' becomes in turn a way of denying women the opportunity to acquire appropriate skills and experience.

## **Conclusion**

In this article we have proposed that political choice through the ballot paper is a gendered process with gendered outcomes. Without state intervention, enduring social norms and attitudes that are disadvantageous to women gaining political power and authority are likely to prevail. This has been reflected in the declining numerical participation of women in village politics. However, state intervention in China has in Communist Party tradition, as manifested through ACWF discourses and policies, targeted primarily the individual woman as the main focal point of change. In doing so it has paradoxically reproduced sexist litanies that portray women as always 'lacking' some quality or another. Moreover, because state intervention has not grappled with masculinity, not least due to the absence of any gender analysis, patriarchal and sexist attitudes to women have persisted and worked to keep political positions a male preserve.

The recent attempts to turn this around and make democratic elections work for women provide some glimmer of hope that the situation might ameliorate in the future. This will require not only the introduction of quotas and positive measures to promote women, but also greater scrutiny of the way recruitment and promotion procedures within the Party, village organs and government structures discriminate against women. It will also require fresh analysis of the structural constraints that face rural women such as the lack of child-care facilities, and the timing of elections and village meetings. Perhaps most challenging of all will be the need to examine the culture of politics, and in particular the exclusionary effects, both for women and men, of a political style that relies on heavy drinking, smoking and banqueting.

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