

Chapter 2

Rural Chinese Women's Political Participation: Problems and Prospects

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Abstract Since the implementation of the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees in the late 1980s, village election has emerged as a prominent instrument for advancing rural democracy in China. As the wave of democratisation spreads, it instills in villagers an awareness of their rights to democratic elections, democratic supervision, democratic decision making and democratic management. Few women, however, have been elected to villagers committees or assume leadership roles. Based on a project funded by the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Funds for Women, this paper uncovers the social, cultural, economic and institutional obstacles that stand in the way of improving women's representation and participation. The current study echoes the findings of scholars in regard to the limited empowerment of women in rural governance despite electoral reforms and elections. State intervention to address women's role in rural politics has failed to take into account various constraining factors on participation within the context of rural society itself. In the words of institutional economics, when the transaction costs for women's participation are high, women abstain not from voting but from playing a more active role in politics. This is particularly so when the costs of participation based on rational, calculable economic interests far outweigh the benefits of participation, given the lack of organisational support and social networks that empower women in terms of their skills, abilities and self-worth.

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Throughout the world, women’s representation and participation in politics remains low (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2009).¹ China is of no exception. During the Maoist era, the attempt to maintain gender equality by means of female representation and participation at all state organs has masked the historically ingrained and deeply rooted gender gap and inequality in the patriarchal society. The opening up of China and the ensuing economic liberalisation has brought about renewed hope for a more equal society. However, Chinese capitalism couched in the rhetoric of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” has unveiled and sustained the “hidden” gender gap socially and culturally rooted in Chinese society. In this patriarchal society, males have enjoyed a relative advantage over females in the competitive world, where *guanxi* and social connections are also tilted to the advantage of male-dominated social networks, Party apparatus, and capitalist enterprises. Economically and politically, women in China remain in a relatively disadvantaged position in view of the trend of low representation and low participation in the economy and in the political system.

In many ways, the current study echoes the findings of scholars concerning the limited empowerment of women in rural governance despite electoral reforms and elections in rural China. While intervention by setting a higher quota for women’s representation in village organisations (e.g. village assemblies) may help, there are real constraining factors on participation within the context of rural society that have to be dealt with. For example, the opportunity costs and transaction costs of participation in election are some of these factors. As more men and younger women leave for work in the cities, older women are left behind to attend to their children and the aged. In the words of institutional economics, when the transaction costs for women’s participation are high, *ceterius paribus* (i.e. all other delimiting factors taken into account), women abstain not from voting or participation, but from involving themselves in decision making and playing a more active role in politics (on transaction costs, see Weingast 1993; Williamson 1985). This is particularly so when the costs of participation based on calculable economic interests far outweigh the benefits of participation.

This paper will first discuss women’s participation in general before moving on to address the low level of women’s participation in China, particularly in the rural areas despite the implementation of elections and villagers’ self-government. We discuss various obstacles and problems hindering women’s participation. The second section introduces current research on helping to improve women’s participation in village governance within the purview of the Organic Law and the trend of

¹Average female participation in both the lower house and upper house or senate of parliaments worldwide is 18.4 % (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2009).

women's participation in general as well as in Chengjiao township of Guangshui Municipality in Hubei province. The third section is our findings and discussion. We present empirical findings on the 20 villages located within Chengjiao township that confirm in many ways the findings of other studies on the obstacles posed by institutional barriers, social prejudices, cultural norms, the gendered division of domestic labour, to women playing a more active role in village governance. We highlight the importance of context and constraining factors affecting women's participation in terms of their motivation to participate in social organisations. Improving women's status through raising their educational level, helping women to be confident of their abilities and building grassroots women's organisations as a part of civil society, is pertinent for raising the level of women's representation and participation in village politics.

Obstacles to Chinese Women's Political Participation

Historically, in some countries, the process of reaching equal representation of women in political institutions, such as parliament, has taken a long time. For example, in Nordic countries comparatively speaking, the transition to democracy has contributed to a more rapid development as the overall change in society has opened "windows of opportunity" to promote women's participation in political life. As noted in the Millennium Development Goals, women's equal participation with men in power and decision-making is part of their fundamental right to participate in political life, and is at the core of gender equality and women's empowerment (Millennium Development Goal 3 2011).² Women have to be active participants in determining development agendas.

Increasing women's participation in politics and securing their access to political life is of particular importance to democratic development and sustainability. Thus, efforts have to be directed at promoting and increasing women's political participation, bringing them together from different political, social and cultural groups with the common aim of reaching the goal of gender equality; however, reality looks different. The Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), which is collected by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), attempts to measure the extent of gender inequality across the globe and estimate women's relative economic income, participation in high-paying positions with economic power and access to professional and parliamentary positions.³ The data show that Chinese women have a relatively low level of political engagement. As women constitute 50 % of the

²Millennium Development Goal 3 Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women. http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/mdgoverview/mdg_goals/mdg3/, last accessed on 20 June 2011.

³More details can be found at <http://www.answers.com/topic/gender-empowerment-measure>, last accessed 16 June, 2011.

population, a political system can only be considered representative to the extent that it involves women in the democratic process and creates an enabling institutional environment for women to play a useful role in advancing democracy (Clark and Lee 2000).

Gender Gap, Village Elections and Women's Participation

From central to local levels, women are under-presented in all state organisations (Rosen 1995; Zheng Yongnian et al. 2009). Jennings's studies with large scale survey data show the political participation gender gap in the Chinese countryside (Jennings 1998). In Tong's studies (2003), Chinese men fare better than women in media attention, political knowledge, interest, internal and external efficacy, and non-electoral participation; also, higher socio-economic groups were more politically engaged than those in the lower strata. In general, women show less interest than men in politics and are more politically apathetic compared to their male counterparts.

In November 1987, the passing of the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees (Trial) offered some hope of a democratisation process in rural China, where the majority of the population resided (Ogden 2002; Thornton 2008). Hence, the process of grassroots democratisation began with the implementation of village elections gradually throughout Chinese villages in 1988. After 10 years of implementation, the trial law became a full-fledged permanent law in 1998. The 1998 Organic Law put forward important institutional requirements, such as anonymous ballots, direct nomination, and more candidates than seats to be filled (unequal quota elections) (Epstein 1997; Guo Xiaoqin 2003; O'Brien and Li Lianjiang 2000; Oi and Rozelle 2000).

In spite of electoral reforms at the village level, however, women's participation has declined (He Baogang 2007). By the end of 2003, more than 2 decades of implementation saw only less than 20 % of women being elected to villagers' committees as members, and only 1 % was elected to leadership positions, such as being the chair of a villagers' committee, according to the Gender Project Team (2009:91).⁴ As rural economy improves, women face stiff competition from men who return to the village from the cities and the prospect of being marginalised in village governance. In contrast to the pre-reform era, Howell (2006:607) observes that the pattern of numerical under-representation in the reform period is not peculiar to China's villages, as women are under-represented in leadership positions at all levels (i.e. central, provincial, county, town and township and village) of the political system. The next section explores the factors hindering women's participation despite the institutionalisation of competitive elections in rural China.

⁴The project leader of the research team is Professor Liu Xiaohong.

Obstacles Hindering Women's Participation in Competitive Elections

Although village elections have been implemented in Chinese villages for more 2 decades, there is still room for implementing elections that measure up to the electoral procedures of a free and fair election (Pastor and Tan Qingshan 2000). In spite of elections, many rural residents have had little understanding of the Organic Law and its significance (He Baogang 2007). Electoral procedures were also opened to the manipulation of local authorities whose officials might have loathed elections, as elections signaled a new basis of authority premised on popular mandate as opposed to the Party as the traditional basis of authority (Liu Yawei 2000).

The electoral process remains a gendered process with gendered outcomes (Howell 2006:619). The Chinese government and some scholars have lauded the implementation of village elections and how self-governance has brought about significant improvements in women's political status (Wang Zhengxu and Dai Weina 2010). In a study on women's participation in and perception of politics in villages in an eastern county, Rudong of Jiangsu Province, Wang Zhengxu and Dai Weina (2010:3) argued that "[r]epresentation of women in local governance bodies remains low, and women villagers' political aspiration and sense of empowerment remain primitive due to a number of socioeconomic, cultural and institutional factors prohibiting more active participation and stronger presence of women in rural governance." The following lists and presents a brief survey of these factors from the works of scholars and show how they undermine women's participation in general and in village elections.

Institutional Factors

According to Howell (2006:613), the Party "nevertheless is a significant channel, laden with symbolic and often material resources, for promoting particular candidates in election processes." Hence, Party membership is a symbol of power and a right to speak out on policy during Party committee meetings; it is sociopolitical capital. The under-representation of women in the Chinese Communist Party is reflected in the extremely slow renewal rate of Party membership for women, resulting in very few women becoming Party members over the years.

In general, women are under-represented in the Chinese Communist Party, and the domination of men in key institutional positions and the role played by men in the election processes pose considerable institutional challenges for women in the election process (Howell 2006). The importance of Party membership and the significance of gendered social networks have further shaped and curtailed women's participation in village politics. The vague criteria set for selecting and nominating female candidates (e.g. "willingness to serve the masses," "putting energy into work") and the profile of a young, competent and educated candidate for participation in election also discriminate against women, "whose life patterns are more noticeably interrupted by childcare responsibilities" (Howell 2006:612).

Furthermore, Party leaders holding sexist views of women's abilities have also reinforced a Party apparatus favouring male dominance. In her fieldwork in Hunan Province, Howell (2006) reported on the internalisation of biased views concerning women's abilities not just by ordinary male villagers, but by Party/government officials as well. Howell (2006:612) highlights the commonly made statement by male Party leaders such as "what can female cadres do?" (*nu ganbu neng gan shenme?*). Thus male leaders believe that the low education level of females and their lack of general knowledge disqualify them from taking up the role of Party secretaries. Besides implementing quotas to promote women, there should be "greater scrutiny of the way recruitment and promotion procedures within the Party, village organs and government structures discriminate against women" (Howell 2006:619). Therefore, state intervention is necessary for curbing the prevalent social norms and attitudes that disadvantage women from gaining political power and authority.

Socio-economic and Cultural Factors

Studies on political efficacy indicate that those who are better educated tend to have a higher degree of internal and external political efficacy. Education is often taken as an important component of socio-economic status. Tong's research findings (2003) on the gender gap and political participation in China show that (1) higher socio-economic groups are more politically engaged than those in the lower strata, (2) higher socio-economic status women are more politically engaged than those of lower socio-economic status (women and men).

In China, the cultural preference for males leads to a gender prejudice in which males are given preferential treatment over females in many aspects of their lives, resulting in women's lower socio-economic status. For example, in rural China, parents are more likely to invest in the education for males due to the higher return compared to females. Davis, Landry, Peng Yusheng and Xiao Jin's study (2007) in Yunnan villages explicated the gendered nature of parental decisions in regard to investment in children's education. Their findings show that parental and village wealth facilitate enrolment, but parental wealth is far more decisive for girls than boys. Moreover, females are more likely to be sent to cities for low waged jobs instead of being kept in school for a longer period of time. Hence, socialisation and structural theories may serve to explain the persistence of the gender gap in women's political participation, given that education is a vehicle of transmission that perpetuates such a disparity. Tong's research reflects aspects of this truth as seen in the persistence of a gender gap, when passivity and socio-economic status are controlled.

Socio-economic structure of Chinese society and the socialisation process matter in explaining the gendered nature of the division of labour and the sexist perception of women's roles in rural China. Howell (2006:610–12) observes that female candidates in village elections failed to win seats due to their lower education attainment. In general, a competitive female candidate is one who has completed secondary

education (Howell 2006:612). In addition, women's own internalisation of their weak ability, lack of competitiveness and passivity also hinders them from putting themselves forward for elections. As Howell (2006:615) points out:

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.

When prominent positions are all occupied by men, women are relegated to roles associated with their reproductive and domestic responsibilities, namely “family planning” cadre (*jihua shengyu ganbu*). Villagers' committees become “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” (Howell 2006:608–9). The pervasive attitude in relegating women's place in the home and saving the public sphere for men (*nu zhu nei, nan zhu wai*) serve to justify the claim of women's destiny is not in leadership. The cultural norm of placing women's role in the home and men's role in society discredits the significance of women's representation and participation in village affairs.

Bamboo Ceiling Effect, *Guanxi* and Social Milieu

Another problem with women's under-representation in village politics is due to the unintended outcomes of the 1998 Organic Law of Villagers' Committees and other localities' laws on implementation in regard to the stipulation of having an appropriate number of women when no clear quota was set (Howell 2006:612–13). Article 8 of the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees states that the villagers' committee should include “an appropriate number of women” (*funu ying dang you shidang de ming e*) (He Baogang 2007:1–3). Given the vagueness of the clause, local governments have no obligations to follow through. As such, it is up to more progressive local governments who choose to put in place women's role in village politics. This has led to what Howell termed “a bamboo ceiling” effect. In her narration on the implementations in Hunan and Shandong, the pressures on county and township governments to have female candidates and raising villagers' awareness of the issues have led to the casting of a bamboo ceiling on women's representation in view of the vague quota. As a result, ““a certain proportion of women' as in the Law, or as in the case of Hunan and Shandong provinces, ‘at least one woman’ becomes interpreted as a maximum of one. The rope to save women turns instead into a noose” (Howell 2006:612).

Another unintended outcome applies to “Hunan, Hubei and Shandong provinces where the local women's federations have sought to train and encourage the heads of village women's committees to stand for election” (Howell 2006:613). While the Law is well-intended, its vagueness indirectly leads to the selection of a lone female candidate who is often the head of the village women's committee based on her identity as a woman and being considered most suited for taking charge of the birth

control target, which is related to her domestic and reproductive capacity. Thus, Howell argues that all these “limit women’s numerical representation of lone one, thereby casting a bamboo ceiling over women” (2006:613).

Apart from the aforementioned institutional barrier, the challenges posed by *guanxi* and the social milieu are also quite formidable for increasing women’s participation. Village women tend to marry out to other villages. In the new environment, they do not have the advantage of a well-grounded and established social network or *guanxi*. Hence, if they wish to stand for election, they need social capital. This takes time and efforts to cultivate and develop since they arrive in their new villages as social strangers. The social habits of smoking and drinking in a male dominated society also pose as an obstacle to women playing a more active role in society (Howell 2006:615–16).

The changing economic structure of rural China, whereby more older women stay behind attending to agricultural work, present one caveat in regard to women’s participation in rural China. As most men and younger women are out in the cities, older women have to attend to the elderly and the field. Household chores, child-care responsibilities and work all take away a substantial amount of time from women in the villages (Howell 2006:615–16). State intervention to enhance women’s participation may make a difference. Such a difference, however, “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” (Howell 2006:612–13). While more women may vote in election, this does not imply that women’s participation is on the rise or is improving.

The alternative channels of wealth and prosperity could also lead to a change in the mindset and attitude concerning the gains or benefits accrued to participation and political life in the villages. In the pre-reform era, participation and political life could underscore the political correctness of individuals towing the line as politics was in command (on state derived feminism and its implications for participation, see Howell 2002). For many older women in the villages, the “new” context of decollectivisation and economic development has also led to a tendency for rational calculation. Such a “cost-benefit” calculation renders political participation a liability rather than a gain. This is particularly the case if the opportunity cost far outweighs the choice of participation in voting or the transaction costs are simply too high for women. Hence, women’s desire to enhance their abilities is due to their concern with improving their economic circumstances. Instead of taking time out to participate in activities organised by social organisations or Party organisations for socio-cultural or political objectives, they may prefer to engage in activities that help them gain better knowledge or skills, thereby improving their incomes. Moreover, the lack of or shortage of women’s organisations at the grassroots level also poses a challenge to enhancing women’s role and empowering them.

Bringing Gender into Politics Research and Electoral Participation

United Nations Development Funds for Women Sponsored Project

United Nations Development Funds for Women sponsored a project in Hubei province so as to “bring gender into the politics of autonomously administered villages.” In this project, the Women Studies Centre at the Huazhong Central Normal University in China collaborated with Guangshui Municipality Women’s Federation in Hubei Province in a project that lasted from May 2005 to the end of December 2008 to help women play a greater role in village governance. Apart from training female cadres, the project aims to raise women’s consciousness on the effect of traditional gender views and its impact on women’s participation in villagers’ self-government. The research also attempted to understand the impact of government policy and the role of grassroots women’s organisations. All the data in this chapter are from this UNDP Funds for Women project.

The research covers 20 administrative villages in Chengjiao township within Guangshui Municipality. In 2005, 30 villages were merged into 20 villages due to the financial stress of local government. Chengjiao township is predominantly agriculturally oriented and had a population of 46,764 people, among which 50.3 % were working in the cities. Of those working in the cities, 47 % were females 30 years of age or younger.

The research employed both quantitative and qualitative approaches. From 2005, researchers conducted 30 rounds of structured and unstructured interviews with 40 male and female villagers and cadres (including county cadres responsible for setting policy). Survey interviews were executed in 2007 from February to April. Of the 550 questionnaires, 534 questionnaires were completed and returned with an almost equal proportion of male and female respondents (47.8 % of male respondents and 52.2 % of female respondents). A random sampling method was used to collect data, taking into account villagers, mainly men and younger women, who worked in the cities. More women than men were engaged in agricultural work as men only helped out during the harvest period. In the cities, most men worked in the construction industry, while women were engaged in art work or the service industry.

Majority of the respondents are in the 26–45 year-old age group. In general, the distribution of respondents in different age groups mirrors the demographic trend in rural China (*see* Table 2.1).

Overall, the education levels of respondents are quite low, with as many as 46.7 % of respondents having primary/no primary education. Respondents with higher secondary (or above) education levels constitute only 8.3 % (*see* Table 2.2).

Table 2.1 Respondents in different age groups ($N=534$)

Age group	Percentage
18–25	3.8
26–35	27.1
36–45	48.5
46–60	13.7
>60	6.9
Total	100

Source: Gender Project Team 2009. UN Gender Facility Project Terminal Report. *Women Studies Centre, Huazhong Central Normal University: 93*

Table 2.2 Education levels of respondents ($N=534$)

Education level	Percentage
Without primary education	6.2
With primary education	40.5
Junior secondary education	45.0
Senior secondary or vocational	7.1
University or above	1.2
Total	100

Source: Gender Project Team 2009. UN Gender Facility Project Terminal Report. *Women Studies Centre, Huazhong Central Normal University: 93*

Village Elections and Participation in Chengjiao Township

Chengjiao township held its seventh villagers' committee elections in November 2008, which revealed that there were slightly more respondents dissatisfied with the election outcome (39.6 %) than those who were satisfied with the outcome (33.7 satisfied) according to the Gender Project Team (2009:94). Similarly, they also stated that slightly more respondents considered the electoral process unfair (40.2 %), which 35.4 % deemed it fair. Hence, there are still rooms for improving the electoral process and the procedures in election in order to secure free and fair elections.

Both female and male respondents, however, show relatively little knowledge of villagers' self-government (on similar case in Zhejiang villages, see He Baogang 2007:125). The Gender Project Team (2009:95–6) highlights that while 50.5 % of respondents have heard of the law, they have had no idea as to what it entails, and only 8.5 % of the respondents claim that they understand the law well enough. The Team goes on to report that indeed, when asked on a question pertaining to the Organic Law, 5.9 % of male respondents answered correctly, while 6.4 % of female respondents gave the right answer.⁵

⁵ Respondents were asked on what percentage of the vote count was needed for a decision to be passed in the Village Assembly.

Table 2.3 Why did you participate in the last election? ($N=307$) (percentage)

Reasons	Female ($n=157$)	Male ($n=150$)	Total ($N=307$)
The village asked me to take part	37.6	32.7	35.2
Represent my family	5.1	7.3	6.2
Others did so, so did I	13.4	11.3	12.4
It's my right to participate	24.8	24.0	24.4
Election brings benefits	12.7	18.0	15.3
Others	6.4	6.7	6.5
Total	100	100	100

Source: Gender Project Team 2009. UN Gender Facility Project Terminal Report. *Women Studies Centre, Huazhong Central Normal University*: 97

Table 2.3 shows the different reasons for participating in the last election.

In general, most female and male respondents did not exhibit an awareness of their rights when taking part in village elections (*see* Table 2.3). Of the 307 respondents who claim to have participated in the elections, most of them did so because of self-interests rather than an awareness of their rights. Only about one quarter of female respondents (24.8 %) and male respondents (24.0 %) participated in village elections out of an awareness of their rights to do so.

Findings and Discussion

Women's Participation and Gender Gap in Representation

Our findings concur with the perspectives offered by others' research findings as cited above. Indeed female respondents in our data show less interest in village affairs than men; they are slightly more politically apathetic than men. The majority of female respondents (65.2 %) are not so interested or not interested at all in understanding village affairs compared with 49.5 % of male respondents being so (*see* Table 2.4).

In addition, female respondents also show little interest in politics. Given a chance, less than a quarter of female respondents would actively pursue village leadership roles compared with almost a third of male respondents eager to do so (*see* Table 2.5).

As early as the 1980s, researchers and cadres within the All-China Women's Federation (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" (Howell 2006:617). ACWF works at countering sexist attitudes, enlightening women on their ability and providing them with training for specific skills, and ACWF also collaborates with the rural grassroots divisions of the Ministry of Civil

Table 2.4 Are you interested in understanding village affairs? ($N=523$) (percentage)

	Female ($n=244$)	Male ($n=279$)	Total ($N=523$)
Very interested	12.7	19.3	16.3
Somewhat interested	22.1	31.2	27.0
Not so interested	43.1	32.3	37.3
Not interested at all	22.1	17.2	19.4
Total	100	100	100

Source: Gender Project Team 2009. UN Gender Facility Project Terminal Report. *Women Studies Centre, Huazhong Central Normal University*: 97

Table 2.5 Given a chance, would you like to be a village cadre? (percentage)

	Female ($n=244$)	Male ($n=279$)	Total ($N=523$)
Yes, actively go for it	23.3	30.1	30.1
Yes, but take it easy	18.0	17.9	17.9
It does not matter	30.2	24.7	24.7
No	28.5	27.3	27.3
Total	100	100	100

Source: Gender Project Team 2009. UN Gender Facility Project Terminal Report. *Women Studies Centre, Huazhong Central Normal University*: 98

Affairs in establishing institutional barriers to discrimination through the legal framework, their organisational positions and social networks (Howell 2006:612–618). The Women’s Federation of Guangshui Municipality, Hubei Province’s also makes efforts in raising women’s awareness about their rights and in helping them to improve their abilities and self-perception. The following table elucidates the effect of these efforts on women’s representation and participation in villagers’ committee elections.

Looking at the data from the fifth to the seventh turnover elections for villagers’ committees in Chengjiao township, we observe an increase in women’s representation from the sixth turnover election to the seventh turnover election in terms of the number of female cadres (*see* Table 2.6). The decrease in the percentage of female cadres between the fifth and sixth turnover elections was due to the merger of 30 administrative village units into 20 administrative village units.

Compared to men, women in the 20 villages play a marginal role in village organisations. There were 8 villages without female cadres (Information from the field). Our data show a clear gender gap in the number of those assuming the role of authority and decision making in village organisations. Although a quarter of all cadres in the township are females, none of the female cadres assumed the role of a central figure, such as the secretary or vice secretary of the village Party branches. Most female cadres played a role associated with their reproductive and domestic responsibilities, namely, a “family planning” cadre (*jihua shengyu ganbu*). The percentage of women in the Party committee and/or leadership position is extremely low (i.e. 5%). In the sixth turnover election, there was only one female vice chair of

Table 2.6 Representation of women in villagers' committees and women in village leadership role

Date/number of turnover elections	Number of villagers' committees	Number of village cadres	Number of female cadres	Percentage of female cadres	Number of female in leadership position in the villagers' committees or the village party branches
November 2002/ fifth election	30	220	17	7.7	0
November 2005/ sixth election	20	80	12	15	1 female vice chair of a villagers' committee
November 2008/ seventh election	20	80	20	25	1 female chair of a villagers' committee and 3 members of the village party branch committees

Source: Information from the field

a villagers' committee. By the time of the seventh turnover election in 2008, there were 4 female cadres—1 female chair of a villagers' committee and 3 female members of village Party branch committees (Table 2.6). The endeavour herein is to explain the reason for such little progress.

Institutional Barriers to Women's Participation and Representation

Only a small number of women were Party members: 8.1 % of 1,474 Party members in the township (Information from the field). While Chengjiao township aimed to have 30 % for women's representation rate in village representative assemblies, in the 20 villages, only 16.1 % of 752 representatives were women (Information from the field).

Recalling Howell's claim that the Organic Law poses a limitation to women's numerical representation of lone one and henceforth casting a bamboo ceiling over women, indeed, this lone one (a female candidate) in election was clearly stipulated in the 2005 Guangshui Municipality's Sixth Turnover Election Implementation Plan and the Guangshui Municipality Villager's Committee Turnover Election Regulations. It is stated that "there should be 30 % of women making up the villagers' electoral committee and villagers' representative assemblies. Villagers' committee shall consist of 3–5 members. Among them, there should be one female candidate. During election, a seat will be reserved for the village women's committee." Thus, in our research, one male interviewee's rather sexist outlook reflects the

Table 2.7 Do you agree with the view that the government should clearly specify having at least one female cadre in the villagers' committee? ($N=514$)

	Percentage
Strongly agree	11.9
Agree	63.6
Disagree	16.7
Strongly disagree	7.8
Total	100

Source: Gender Project Team 2009. UN Gender Facility Project Terminal Report. *Women Studies Centre, Huazhong Central Normal University: 105*

Table 2.8 Do you agree that having just one female cadre in the villagers' committee is enough? ($N=513$)

	Percentage
Strongly agree	4.7
Agree	41.1
Disagree	43.9
Strongly disagree	10.3
Total	100

Source: Gender Project Team 2009. UN Gender Facility Project Terminal Report. *Women Studies Centre, Huazhong Central Normal University: 105*

bamboo ceiling effect when offering his view on why women seldom go about campaigning activities and canvassing works before election.

The competition of female candidates is a clear-cut issue. There is no need for her (the female candidate) to go about campaigning or canvassing for votes. If it is stipulated that there be one woman.... If she has not done badly so far as a cadre, then, she is most likely the only one (to be elected). Besides, it is not gracious for women to go about campaigning or canvassing for votes. Hence, female candidates adopt a "natural" attitude during election (Gender Project Team 2009:99).

Most respondents agree to the view that the government should clearly specify having at least one female cadre in the villagers' committee (*see* Table 2.7, 75.5 %); however, slightly more respondents (*see* Table 2.8, 54.2 % vs. 45.8 %) disagree with the view that having only one female cadre in the villagers' committee is enough.

But, one should be mindful of a difference between the perception of ordinary villagers and that of village cadres as described above in regard to raising the quota of women in the villagers' committees. When village cadres are probed on the possibility of having 30 % of villagers' committee members being women (i.e. similar to the stipulations for village electoral committees and villagers' representative assemblies), they assert that it would be unfair to male cadres and most villagers would not accept this. This appears to reflect the imperviousness of institutional obstacles or social prejudice in a male dominated society. After all, the view of ordinary people in our data indicates otherwise.

Table 2.9 Did you vote for female candidates in the last election? ($N=309$) (percentage)

	Female ($n=157$)	Male ($n=152$)	Total ($N=309$)
Yes	55.4	44.1	49.8
No	44.6	55.3	49.8
Others	0	0.6	0.4
Total	100	100	100

Source: Gender Project Team 2009. UN Gender Facility Project Terminal Report. *Women Studies Centre, Huazhong Central Normal University*: 101

Table 2.10 Do you agree that “men’s place is in society, while women’s is the family”? ($N=518$)

	Percentage
Strongly agree	7.5
Agree	48.8
Disagree	28.8
Strongly disagree	14.9
Total	100

Source: Gender Project Team 2009. UN Gender Facility Project Terminal Report. *Women Studies Centre, Huazhong Central Normal University*: 100

Cultural Norms and Social Prejudice on Women’s Role in Public Sphere

While 55.4 % of women voted for female candidates, only 44.1 % of men did so, a difference of 11.3 % points (see Table 2.9). And interview data show that many men expressed their view of women as lacking in culture (*mei wenhua*, i.e. without education), good only at playing mahjong, and unfit to be a village cadre. Such notions of women as being “low quality,” passive, lacking in competitiveness also resonate with the self-perception of women themselves. One female interviewee expressed her sense of inferiority by claiming herself as unfit for election and becoming a cadre due to low (i.e. primary) education; she feels that her inability to be articulate also makes her a laughing stock (Gender Project Team 2009:100–1).

Our research shows that the sexist attitude that women’s place is in the home and the public sphere belongs to men still persists as social prejudice against women’s role in the public sphere (i.e. in politics or public affairs).

In Table 2.10, slightly more than half of our respondents (56.3 %) agree to the view that a man’s role is in society, while a woman’s main concern should be the family. However, 43.7 % of the respondents disagree with such a view. While there is no doubt a persistence of a cultural stereotype here, the data could also be indicative of a slight change in such a norm in Chinese society among ordinary people, given a more liberalised social and economic environment.

Table 2.11 Do you agree that women as cadres do well at family planning, but not as the chair of villagers committee? ($N=516$)

	Percentage
Strongly agree	5.4
Agree	34.1
Disagree	49.6
Strongly disagree	10.9
Total	100

Source: Gender Project Team 2009. UN Gender Facility Project Terminal Report. *Women Studies Centre, Huazhong Central Normal University:* 101

An interviewee presented a standpoint laden with such prejudice: women as cadres are suited for the role of taking charge of birth control and conflict mediation, as they have no ability in managing village finance or village economy. Other interviewees, both men and women, have expressed the view that female cadres are better than male cadres in attending to sensitive matters related to birth control. Our data indicate a gradual or subtle change in the perception of women's role in public life due to economic liberalisation and the changing structure and value of Chinese society itself. Table 2.11 shows that majority of the respondents (60.5 %) disagree with the view that women are only suited for playing the role of a "family planning" cadre.

However, in the private sphere, the sexist attitude of women's place is in the home and the public sphere belongs to men may not hold as strongly as it does in the public sphere. In a more liberalised economic environment, the status of women at home has been raised significantly even though their role in politics is still not well-received in rural Chinese society. Table 2.12 shows that the status and role of men and women at home reflects little difference. In regard to the view of either man or woman as the decision maker at home, the difference is a mere 5.4 %. Those holding the view that the role played by both men and women in decision making at home (51 %) should be equal far outnumber those who maintain that women's place is in the home and the public sphere belongs to men (17.6 %) or men should make decisions at home (18.4 %).

Opportunity Costs and Transaction Costs of Women's Participation

The opportunity cost of voting can be elaborated on with our data on the high turnout rate of women who voted in the last election (*see* Table 2.13).

More women (63.9 %) than men (51.9 %) voted in the last election (*see* Table 2.13). There is a difference of 12 % points. In our interviews, female respondents who voted in the last election claim that they were representing their families or households in the election. Their rationale for doing so was purely rational and economic.

Table 2.12 Who is the one who makes decisions at home? (N=524)

	Percentage
Man	18.4
Woman	13.0
Both man and woman	51.0
Women’s place is in the home, the public sphere belongs to men	17.6
Total	100

Source: Gender Project Team 2009. UN Gender Facility Project Terminal Report. *Women Studies Centre, Huazhong Central Normal University*: 100

Table 2.13 Did you personally vote in the last election? (N=523) (percentage)

	Female (n=244)	Male (n=279)	Total (N=523)
Yes	63.9	51.9	57.5
No	35.2	47.7	41.9
Others	0.9	0.4	0.6
Total	100	100	100

Source: Gender Project Team 2009. UN Gender Facility Project Terminal Report. *Women Studies Centre, Huazhong Central Normal University*: 99

Most men who are away earn more than women who stay at home. As a result, women prefer to do the voting on behalf of their family or their husbands so as to avoid incurring a greater loss in terms of a day’s earning (Gender Project Team 2009:98–99). As a result, a higher participation rate of female voters does not imply that women’s role in participation has improved.

While the idea of transactions as a basis of economic thinking could be traced back to John R. Commons (1931), it is frequently thought that Ronald Coase (1937) coined the term “transaction cost” and presented it in his 1937 seminal paper on the nature of the firm. It was only with the publication of Oliver E. Williamson’s *Transaction Cost Economics* (1981, 1985) that transaction costs as costs incurred in a market exchange and subject to price mechanism became widely used. Later, transaction cost economics was used to explain a number of different behaviours, involving not only the obvious cases of buying and selling, but social interactions as well as informal gift exchanges. Cheung (1987) defines transaction cost broadly as any costs that are not conceivable in a “Robinson Crusoe economy,” meaning costs that arise due to the existence of institutions.

Viewed in this light, the obstacles posed by various institutional, socio-cultural and economic factors hindering women’s representation and involvement in rural politics (in terms of authority, leadership role and decision making) increase the transaction costs—social costs, economic or institutional costs—for women’s representation and involvement in rural politics. For example, the need to develop *guanxi* and social connections for women who marry outside their home villages exerts a higher transaction cost than most men who, as natives in the village

Table 2.14 What is your reason for not voting for women? ($N=534$)

	Percentage
Domestic burden hinders women's work	41.0
No female candidate during election	29.2
Do not know enough or understand those women who stand in election	10.3
Women are lacking in leadership ability	10.3
Follow others who did not vote for women	6.4
Reasons not specified	2.8
Total	100

Source: Gender Project Team 2009. UN Gender Facility Project Terminal Report. *Women Studies Centre, Huazhong Central Normal University*: 102

typically, possess the social capital. As Wank's work on *guanxi* (1996) illuminates, the strongest obligations in the *guanxi* system are produced by birth and particularly direct kin on the father's side. Relocation for women, thus, deprives them of a similar stock of social capital which men native to the village possess to draw on when competing for leadership position in village election.

In 2005, the merger of 30 villages into 20 villages in Chengjiao township has had the unintended outcome of disadvantaging women in election, resulting in fewer and larger administrative villages than before. The extended parameter poses a challenge for women who have to work hard at cultivating *guanxi* and establishing their social network in a new environment. Being new and an unfamiliar face in a village, the asymmetry of information and weak institutional support due to weak social connections and networks, the gendered nature of local Party mechanisms (particularly so for women who do not have Party membership), all serve to put women in an unfavourable context (on the importance of context for electoral choice, see Dalton and Anderson 2011). The social context and economic conditions also place women in a disadvantaged position. Contrary to Tong's findings (2003) on the gender gap in China, domestic burden and childbearing do have a dampening effect on political culture and participation following the departure of men to the cities for work. Domestic burdens and the electorates' little knowledge or understanding of women contending in elections undermine women's participation in election (see Table 2.14).

Thus, contrary to the expectation of democracy as empowering women, competitive elections lead to a decrease of women holding public offices (Howell 2006:607). While policies continue to be made by the elite of the central government in Beijing, election of women to the villager's committees may not make much of a difference to policy making concerning women's rights and empowerment in rural China. Regardless of how minuscule the influence or impact of women in villagers' committees is, the need to help women stand for election and improve their representation and participation in rural China remains a task to be fulfilled.

Table 2.15 Annual salaries of cadres in leadership positions

Annual salary for	Amount (Yuan)
Secretary of village party branch	4,000
Assistant secretary of village party branch	4,000
Chair of villagers' committee	3,500
Vice chair of villagers' committee	3,500
Chair of village women's committee	3,000

Source: Gender Project Team 2009. UN Gender Facility Project Terminal Report. *Women Studies Centre, Huazhong Central Normal University*: 102

High transaction costs exacerbated by the gendered division of domestic labour, social prejudices, cultural norms and institutional barriers could possibly deprive women of their rights to participate. Many interviewees are of the view that women who have taken part in elections and participated in village governance do so out of a special privilege, namely that of having their parent-in-laws' assistance in relieving them of domestic burdens and childcare responsibilities (Gender Project Team 2009:102; see also Howell 2006:615).

Moreover, the financial gain from being in a female cadre is particularly not attractive. In a village within Chengjiao township, contrary to the official document of Hubei province which stipulates the same/equivalent salary for the chair of a women's federation (i.e. grassroots women's committee) to that of a vice chair in an administrative village, in reality, the village has not abided by official regulations. Moreover, women receive a much lower (annual) salary compared to her male counterparts (*see* Table 2.15).

Some female cadres remonstrated with the township on this problem without avail. Moreover, female cadres in our interview have had no choice but to accept the village's regulations instead. Howell's studies (2006:614) also point to such institutionalised forms of discrimination: "[W]omen responsible for women's work in villages receive little or no remuneration for their efforts."

Improving Education Level and Skills of Females, Organisational Support and Networking for Women

In our study, most women who stay behind in the villages are in the 30–60 year-old age group. Most interviewees do not venture into the cities due to their lack of skills. They hope for more assistance in the form of information in acquiring a skill in art work or embroidery so that they can help out with the family's financial situation. Consequently, such assistance is hard to come by. The fact that women's participation in social organisations is low does not help. Most respondents indicate that they do not take part in any organisation's activities (*see* Table 2.16, 75.6 %). If they do, most are engaged in mutual aid groups (13 %) or economic cooperatives

Table 2.16 Which of these organisations'/groups' activities have you taken part in? (female respondents only, *n* = 246)

	Percentage
Economic cooperatives	5.7
Mutual aid groups	13.0
Cultural/entertainment groups	5.3
Religious organisations	0.4
Have not taken part in activities by any organisations	75.6
Total	100

Source: Gender Project Team 2009. UN Gender Facility Project Terminal Report. *Women Studies Centre, Huazhong Central Normal University:* 103

Table 2.17 What is the reason for not participating in women's organisations? (female respondents only, *n* = 185)

	Percentage
No such organisations	36.3
No interest	16.2
No idea as to how to participate	7.0
Others forbid my participation	0.5
No time to participate	40.0
Total	100

Source: Gender Project Team 2009. UN Gender Facility Project Terminal Report. *Women Studies Centre, Huazhong Central Normal University:* 102

(5.7 %) or cultural and entertainment groups (5.3 %). Interview data also show that most female respondents are more concerned with their own social and economic well-being; they show a keen interest in socio-cultural activities as well as work that brings about economic gains.

Apart from the need to improve the education level and skills of women as empowerment, there is also a need to address the lack of or shortage of women's organisations at the grassroots level that promote women's social and economic well-being (*see* Table 2.17). Slightly more than a third of female respondents claim that they have not taken part in women organisations' activities because there are no such organisations (36.3 %). Domestic burdens and economic, as well as other activities (Table 2.17, 40 %), took most of their time for participation in women's organisations. At the same time, 16.2 % of female respondents claim that they have no interest in women organisations' activities. There is, therefore, a pressing need to create rural women's organisations as a part of civil society that offer an avenue for empowering women in terms of skills and organisational support, which will also tackle the opportunity costs of participation or reduce the transaction costs of women's participation.

Conclusion

This paper has showed that context matters in determining electoral choice. While the state may intervene to improve women's representation and participation in village politics (e.g. stating the number of female candidates in election or the quota for women's representation in village assemblies), the context as defined by social, economic, institutional and cultural factors may thwart the intention of such an attempt. The unspecified number for women's participation as stipulated in the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees offers a case in point for illustrating the irony that accompanies such an intervention. Instead of ameliorating the long-held social prejudices and cultural norms that discriminate against women and keep them from participation, the failure to empower women in terms of their education level, skills, abilities, self-perception and organisational support perpetuates different forms of discrimination (i.e. social, cultural and institutional) that stand in the way of women's representation and participation.

The transaction costs for women's participation remain high due to institutional barriers, socio-economic structure and social prejudice and cultural norms as discrimination that undermine women's role and status in village governance. Hence, to counter such prejudice on women's role in politics, it is important to improve the education level and to develop the skills of women, thereby enhancing and reinforcing their self-worth. As discussed above, in the private sphere, many may not agree with the view that women's place is in the home and the public sphere belongs to men. Some may also assert that in the public sphere, women can only fit in to the role of a "family planning" cadre, which is related to their reproductive capacity and domestic responsibilities. Still, the prevalent attitude and norm is such that women should not be too concerned with assuming leadership or role of authority in the public arena. To this end, developing grassroots women's organisations as a part of civil society that lend organisational support in skill development and networking will empower women's to develop the ability to take on and play a more active role in politics, thereby reducing the transactions of women's participation.

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