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VILLAGE ELECTIONS IN CHINA: RECENT PROSPECTS, NEW CHALLENGES

Jude Howell

THE GRADUAL INTRODUCTION of competitive village elections across China has drawn considerable attention from policy-makers, scholars and analysts both within China and abroad. The idea that non-Party members could stand for office and that villagers themselves could directly elect their own leaders seemed to suggest a seismic change in the way Chinese politics was ordered. Reports of vote-buying, clanism and interference from higher-level authorities in the electoral processes has muted some of that initial euphoria. Less well known is that the introduction of competitive elections has led to a decline in the numerical representation of women on village committees.

According to the Ministry of Civil Affairs, female representation on village committees dropped from 30 to 16% after 1998 when the Organic Law on Village Committees became permanent.¹ The vast majority of village chairs and village committee members are thus male. How could this be in a country where the leading political force, namely the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), has long promoted

gender equality and where a long-established women's national machinery, namely the All-China Women's Federation, exists to promote women's rights and interests?

This paper examines the gendered nature of village elections in China. The common explanation for women's underrepresentation in political leadership positions put forward by the Party/state and the All-China Women's Federation is the legacy of enduring sexist attitudes that predate the Liberation of China and the concomitant internalisation by women of a sense of inferiority. It is argued here that this understanding of women's subordination in the political sphere overlooks the significance of institutional, structural and political-cultural factors, which has implications for the nature of interventions aimed at bringing women into politics.

The paper begins by providing an overview of the development of village elections in China. This discusses some of the controversies surrounding the idea of competitive elections, the issues that have arisen, and the way the elections have been treated in the literature. In the second part, the paper examines the gendered nature of village committees and situates this within the broader context of female political participation in China. We then go on to examine the specific factors which constrain women's participation in village elections. In doing so we draw upon the findings of fieldwork

1. "More Women Getting Political," *China Daily* (September 9th, 2004), accessed on www.china.org.cn.

carried out in Hunan and Shandong provinces.² In the final section, we consider some of the factors which might enhance in the future women's political participation.

The Rise of Village Elections

Following the onset of market-oriented economic reforms from 1978 onwards the structure of China's economy and society began to change fundamentally. In rural areas decollectivisation, the rapid spread of the "household responsibility system" and the relaxation of controls over rural-urban mobility gradually altered not only the previous collective systems of agricultural production but also the political, administrative and social fabric of village life. With the replacement of the commune system by township governments in the early 1980s and the concomitant collapse of production teams and brigades, there was initially no clear, comprehensive system or administrative structure for organising village affairs. Villagers were increasingly focussed on tending their household plots and making the most of new opportunities to diversify and increase their incomes, whilst political cadres, too, began to shun political mobilisation work in favour of enhancing their family incomes.

Though the 1982 Constitution sanctioned the idea of elections for village committees, there was no legislation, detailed regulations or procedures in place to guide the conduct of elections. Against this background of politico-administrative restructuring and market incentives the management of village affairs became increasingly ad hoc. In some parts of China, villages were said to be out of control, with local mafias, clan rivalry and corruption

dominating local politics, whilst in other parts any political or management work had completely stagnated [Wang 1996]. For many township authorities the new village committees were no different from the former production brigades and they continued to appoint village leaders rather than arrange competitive elections as required by the new Constitution. However, in some places in the early 1980s, such as Guangxi province, villagers had begun to experiment with electing their leaders for the village committee.

Concerned about the administrative confusion in rural areas and indeed lawlessness in some villages, officials in the Ministry of Civil Affairs were keen to find functioning models of village committees that might be propagated across the rest of the country. Reports of villagers choosing their own leaders drew the attention of forward-looking officials in the Ministry and of central government leaders

2. This paper draws upon research carried out in Hunan and Shandong provinces in 2003. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with provincial, county and township officials from relevant Party and government organs, with village heads, Party secretaries, women's committee heads in 4 counties and 12 villages in Hunan province and in 1 township and 3 villages in Shandong province. Research has also been carried out in 5 villages in 3 townships in 1 county in Jilin province and the analysis of this is still underway. The research involved also a pilot study in 2 townships and 3 villages in Qianxi County, Hebei province in 2002. The research was carried out together with Du Jie, from the Women's Studies Research Institute under the All-China Women's Federation in Beijing. I am grateful to the Ford Foundation China for funding this research and for the support provided throughout the research process. I take sole responsibility for the views expressed here and for any errors.

who saw the opportunity to introduce an experiment in China that has since been dubbed as “the silent revolution.”

The decade of the 1980s saw the gradual introduction of the idea of democratic competitive village elections across the country. In November 1987, the National People’s Congress passed the Experimental Organic Law of Village Elections, which came into effect from June 1988. Its experimental status, however, indicated that the idea was not wholly accepted amongst central Party leaders. It was not until 1998 that the law achieved permanent status, thus signalling the Party’s acceptance of this new system of rural governance.

The journey towards the institutionalisation of village elections has, however, been fraught, encountering resistance along the way from some central Party and government leaders and particularly from county and township government officials, who have the closest interaction with villagers. Advocates of village elections could be found amongst central Party and government structures, such as Peng Zhen, former Chair of the National People’s Congress Standing Committee, amongst leaders within the Ministry of Civil Affairs, especially the department responsible for grassroots reconstruction at provincial and county levels and amongst intellectuals.

In arguing their case, they highlighted the benefits of competitive elections. These included the idea that leaders chosen by the villagers rather than appointed from above by the township and county governments would find it easier to govern village affairs. In particular, they would have more success in persuading villagers to comply with directives from above

such as family planning quotas, grain procurement, tax collection, and requests for voluntary labour. Participation in elections would increase farmers’ interests in collective affairs and so counter both the atomising tendencies stimulated by the “household responsibility system” as well as the channelling of grievances into rural protest [Kelliher 1997; Liu 2000; Li 2001; O’Brien 2002; Unger 2002].

Moreover, the process of elections would not only provide a mechanism for villagers to oust unpopular, incompetent and corrupt leaders but also a way to rejuvenate and re-legitimise the Party in rural areas. Though introducing a democratic system was not the prime motive of many government proponents of the elections, Party and government officials³ were well aware that competitive village elections could be used to demonstrate to the outside world, and in particular the West, that China was becoming democratic in its own way.

Those opposed to the idea of competitive village elections were concerned that this would lead to “chaos” for several reasons. Some suggested that villagers would not be able to make the right choices about their leaders and were not sufficiently educated for democracy, a view that implicitly expressed an inherent distrust and disrespect of villagers. Others feared that competitive elections could lead to demands for similar processes at township, county and provincial levels, or even

3. Proponents of village elections tended to emphasise the goals of democratic village elections as being about economic development, regime legitimacy and social stability. For further details, see J. Howell [1998].

higher, which ultimately might threaten the status of the CCP. Many township officials in particular were opposed to the elections as these would reduce their power to appoint village leaders and potentially make their task of implementing Party and government directives in villages much harder. Others were concerned that in some parts of China competitive elections would lead to the revitalisation of clanism and thus intensify conflict along clan lines both within and between villages.

Despite these concerns, the idea of democratic competitive village elections in China is now firmly rooted. By 2006, all provinces in China had held at least one round of village elections, with some provinces such as Fujian already undergoing their sixth round of elections. Numerous investigations suggest that the newly-elected village leaders are younger, more entrepreneurial and more educated than their predecessors. The profiles of the new leaders are in part informed also by the requirements for candidacy put forward by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, which amongst other things stipulate that candidates should be under 45. Not all are Party members⁴ but it is to be noted that the Party is quick to absorb these new leaders into their fold, thereby relegitimising itself at grassroots level.

There remains considerable variation in how elections are conducted, such as whether or not they hold secret ballots, how these are implemented, how votes of absent migrant workers or proxy voting is carried out [Kaye 1995; Elklit 1997; Howell 1998; Alpermann 2001].⁵ There are also reports of malpractices such as vote-buying, clanism, fraud, and township officials interfering in election

processes to ensure their favoured candidate secures a leadership position, and on occasions even subverting the decisions of villagers.

As village elections have become more institutionalised, officials from the Department of Construction of Grassroots Government and Community under the Ministry of Civil Affairs have begun to focus not only on systematising and standardising processes of election, but also on post-election issues such as transparency of village budgets, the functioning of village assemblies, and the relationship between village committees and Party branches. Since the late 1980s, there have also been experiments with introducing competitive elections at township level, Shenzhen and Suining both being cases in point [Shi 2000; Li 2002a; Jakobson 2004]. In some villages, elections have also been introduced to select the Party branch secretary [Li 1999].

China has now experienced over two decades of competitive elections. Though they have brought some stability to rural governance, the continuing waves of rural protests around issues such as land sales, pollution and corruption suggest that the situation in some rural areas is still quite fragile. Moreover, the limited experimentation with elections at

4. For example, in 1996 the Ministry of Civil Affairs reported that around 40% of village committee chairs were not Party members [Howell 1998].

5. "Election Observation Report," Fujian, IRI (International Republican Institute), May 1997. See also K. Chen, "Chinese Villages Get Taste of Democracy," *The Wall Street Journal* (May 17th, 1995) and S. Mufson, "China Dabbles in Democracy to Run Villages' Reform Party", *The Washington Post* (January 26th, 1995).

higher levels indicates that the process of political reform remains tightly controlled by the central Party leaders. For some external researchers and observers the democratic content and purpose of the village elections remains highly dubious. However, it might also be argued that despite the distortions and weaknesses of the electoral processes, the elections have contributed to the development of a rights and democratic consciousness amongst villagers, leading to expectations of accountability and the right to choose one's leaders.

There is now a considerable body of research on China's village elections. Much of this examines the processes of elections in particular villages and counties. Key themes investigated include actual electoral practices [Elklit 1997; Howell 1998; Manion 2000; Bai and Zhao 2001; Cai ed. 2002]; legal cases taken by villagers against higher levels of government [Li 2002b]; township and village relations [Howell 1998; Jin and Shi 2002; Tong 2002]; practices of budget transparency, clanism [Xiao ed. 2002] and analysis of village assemblies [Wang *et al.* 1994].

What is startling, however, is the virtual absence of any research on the gender dimensions of village elections and village governance. Not even the EU research programme has sponsored any major work in this area, despite the inclusion in the original agreement that gender aspects should be investigated.⁶ There is a paucity of systematic research on the gender dynamics of village elections and village governance.⁷ This is particularly alarming given that only 1% of village chairs is a woman, according to the most recent statistics, and that most village committees have no more than 1 female

member, out of 3 to 9 members. In the next section we explore further the underrepresentation of women in village committees and suggest that this phenomenon is part of a broader pattern of political participation in China.

The Gendered Nature of Politics

Statistics on village elections are highly uneven and not wholly reliable. This is in part because the Ministry of Civil Affairs has not had in place a comprehensive system for collecting and analysing data, in part because of the sheer volume of data to be collected in a country as large as China, and in part because the Ministry depends on information that is fed up the chain. Figures on the gender aspects of village elections and governance such as the numbers of women and women on village committees, in the village assemblies, or in Party branches are even more uneven. Not all provincial and county-level authorities have collected data disaggregated for gender and even where they have, the data may not cover all village governance institutions nor an extended period of time.

Our research on female political participation in village committees in three provinces of China reveals a number of patterns that are

6. In 2005, however, it funded one research project led by Xiao Bailing on women's political participation in village governance in Hunan province. In contrast, the Ford Foundation has provided support for a number of research projects on female political participation in village committees whilst the Asia Foundation has run a specific programme on female political participation.

7. Current writings on rural female political participation include Fan Yu [2000] and Yang Shanhua [2003].

also replicated at the higher levels of the political system. These patterns are, first, the numerical underrepresentation of women in political positions at all levels; second, the occupation by women of deputy rather than chief positions; and, third, the assignment to women of portfolios that relate to their reproductive and domestic roles. We explore each of these emerging patterns in turn.

First, women are numerically underrepresented in formal politics at all levels in China. Available statistics suggest that only 1% of village chairs are women, that 16% of village committee members are women, and that the numbers of women on village committees rarely exceeds 1 [Fan 2000].⁸ Moreover, there are villages that have no female representation on village committees. In one town in Hunan province, for example, only 2 out of the 38 village committees had more than 1 woman on the committee. In city X, in Shandong province, the percentage of Party branches and village committees with female members fell to 62% after the introduction of competitive village elections in 1999. Following subsequent initiatives by the local department of Civil Affairs, the Party's Organisational Bureau and the Women's Federation, this had increased by 2003 to 90% of all villages. However, women still remained in a minority on village committees. In 1998, for example, women made up 11% of the total membership of local Party branches and village committees. This rose to 18% in 2003. Only 100 villages out of a total of 3,753, that is 3.7%, had female village heads or Party branch heads. Similarly, in county-level city A under city X in Shandong province, there were only 8

female Party branch heads, that is 1.3%, and 2 female village heads, that is 0.3%, in a total of 607 villages. In township A under city Y, there was only 1 female Party branch head in 27 villages and no female village head. In the three villages we investigated under township B, women accounted for just 8% of all Party members.⁹ There were only 8 female Party members out of a total of 98 in the village, amounting to only 8%.

This numerical underrepresentation of women in political positions is not unique to villages or to rural areas or to village committees. In city X in Shandong province, only 2 out of 9 vice-mayors in 2003 were women. Only 1 woman sat on the city Party Committee, which had a total of 13 members. In the capital city of Hunan province, only 1 out of 6 vice-mayors was a woman in 2003, accounting for 16.6%. In county A, Hunan province, only 2 female town and township governors out of a total of 35 were female, a mere 6%. Of the over 58,600 Party members in the county, 10% were women. In another county in Hunan province, women made up 10% of township governors, that is 3 out of 21, and 3% of Party secretaries, that is 1 out of 21.

At the national level, women are numerically underrepresented in all Party and government organs. For example, there has not been a single woman in the Chinese Politburo

8. This situation pertains also as of 2006 (personal communication).

9. In village A, 8 out of 98 Party members were women (8%); in village B, 5 out of 62 Party members were women (8%); and in village C, 6 out of 86 (7%).

Standing Committee since the late 1980s¹⁰ and there is only 1 woman in the Political Bureau, namely, Wu Yi, out of a total of 24 members.¹¹ Amongst the alternate members of the Central Committee as of 2006, women made up only 14%, 22 out of a total of 156 delegates.¹² Within the CCP women constitute a minority. As of May 2005, there were 12.96 million female members, making up 18.6% of all members.¹³

Since 1949, there have been only 2 female provincial governors, namely, Gu Xiulian, who became governor of Jiangsu province in 1983, and Song Xiuyan, who became governor of Qinghai province in 200.¹⁴ There are no female ministers in the current leadership. Only 1 out of 4 vice-premiers is female, namely, Wu Yi, and only 1 out of 5 state councillors is a woman, namely Chen Zhili. Women account for 20% of the Tenth National People's Congress (NPC) delegates, 1.5% less than in the 9th People's Congress. Moreover, the number of delegates to the NPC has never regained its peak of 22.6% in the 4th NPC in 1975, nor have women since achieved 25% representation on the NPC Standing Committee. Of the 120 members of the CCP Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, only 14, that is 11.6%, are women.¹⁵

Second, women in China face a bamboo ceiling at all levels of the government and Party hierarchies. Men occupy the highest positions of power and authority, whilst women can aspire at the most to deputy offices. So women tend to be vice-mayors rather than mayor, deputy ministers rather than minister, deputy governors rather than governor, deputy section heads rather than section head and so on. For example, there has never been a female

General Secretary or female President of China. Nearly all provincial governors in China, bar one, are, as of 2006, male. Similarly, most township and county governors are male, with women occupying usually only one of several vice-positions. For example, in Changsha in Hunan province women account for 1 of 6 vice-mayors, *i.e.* 17%. In a county below this city, 2 out of 35 town and township governors are women, *i.e.* approximately 6%. In city B in this province, 1 out of 4 vice-governors is a woman and the same proportion recurs in a town under this city's jurisdiction. Women account for only 500 out of all 5,000 mayors and vice-mayors in China's cities and counties, *i.e.* less than 10%, and 9 out of 10 mayors are male.¹⁶

The third gendered pattern of political participation that emerges from the research is that women tend to be assigned portfolios of work that mirror their reproductive and domestic

10. The last woman to serve in the Politburo Standing Committee was Jiang Qing, Mao's second wife, during the height of the Cultural Revolution.

11. See www.china.org.cn.

12. *Idem.*

13. "Chinese Communist Party Says Membership Reaches 69.6 Million," Beijing, Xinhua News Agency, 23rd May 2005.

14. See www.china.org.cn.

15. *Idem.*

16. "500 Women Mayors in China's 661 cities," *People's Daily* (July 5th, 2002), accessed on www.china.org.cn.

roles. For example, at village level, nearly all women with positions on the village committee will be allocated the tasks of family planning and/or women's work. If no woman is elected on to the village committee, then often she will be coopted on as the committee feels it needs a woman to undertake those tasks.

Of the women leaders we interviewed in our fieldwork, all of them were given responsibility for family planning and women's work. Some were additionally assigned tasks such as mediation, which involves sorting out disputes in the villages, an activity which women are seen to be more adept at. So the gendered interpretation of certain tasks such as family planning and by its very name "women's work" leads to women always being given these responsibilities at the expense of other work such as village economic development which is not viewed as essential to their sex.

Moreover, the status of women's work is not high. In this respect, it was noteworthy that in two of the villages under investigation in Shandong province, the Party Secretaries reported initially only half the number of village group heads until corrected by a higher-level cadre of the Women's Federation that the heads of the women's committees in each village group were also group leaders.

This gendered division of public assignments reflects a longer history in which women have been allotted roles in public life that relate specifically to women and children. For example, Long March veterans such as Cai Chang, Kang Keqing and Deng Ying Chao were assigned portfolios after Liberation in the area of women and children, rather than

defence, economy or transport. Having outlined these three key patterns of political participation, we proceed in the next section to explore the barriers that impede women from achieving positions in formal politics.

Barriers to Women's Political Participation

Given the CCP's long commitment to women's emancipation, it seems paradoxical that women continue to be underrepresented in government and Party structures and in village governance institutions. The CCP has propagated a gender ideology that abhors the oppression of women. It acted swiftly after Liberation in 1949 to ban practices such as child marriage, bigamy, foot-binding, which it castigated as feudal and oppressive to women, to facilitate divorce and to enhance the possibilities for women to participate in the waged economy [Davin 1976; Andors 1983; Croll 1983]. Why is it then that at the turn of the millennium women continue to be underrepresented in political and administrative structures?

In trying to understand the multiple causes underpinning women's numerical representation in politics, gender theorists such as Vicky Randall [1987], Joni Lovenduski and Vicky Randall [1993], Dorothy Stetson and Amy G. Mazur [1995] point to a number of factors that constrain women's participation in politics. These include structural factors such as the lower wages of women in capitalist economies, the lack of childcare facilities, and the division of labour in the household and economy; gender socialisation which shapes the role of women and men respectively in public life; institutional variables such as recruitment and promotion systems; political culture such as behaviours and

norms associated with political leadership; and sexual discrimination.

The All-China Women's Federation, Party/government leaders, and many scholars in China commonly attribute the numerical underrepresentation of women in political positions to a combination of these factors. The dominant refrain gives particular salience to the persistence of a "feudal ideology" that portrays women as inferior to men; to the double burden of having to balance family responsibilities with waged work; and to women's own lack of self-confidence and "low quality," which supposedly hinder women from putting themselves forward for positions of authority. This is neatly summarised in the words of a senior leader in Tianjin Women's Federation who explained in an interview in the winter of 2000:

First, women don't come forward; second, their educational quality is low; and third, men don't want to be led by women.

Moreover, the problem is typically understood to pertain more to rural rather than urban areas, and therefore is associated with backwardness, illiteracy, and a general lack of formal education. In this section, we demonstrate that whilst these factors do contribute towards the numerical underrepresentation of women in formal politics, there are also other compounding variables of an institutional, ideological and cultural nature which intervene to keep women out of politics.

At the ideological level, the growing tensions between competing gender ideologies along with the superstructural nature of state interventions around women in politics contribute paradoxically towards the continuing

underrepresentation of women in rural formal politics. The gender ideology of the CCP, and hence the All-China Women's Federation, draws upon an analysis of gender oppression rooted in the Marxist and Maoist traditions. Women's subjugation is crucially linked to their subordination in the production process.

After 1949, the Party mobilised women into the waged economy not only for purposes of hastening economic reconstruction but also for ideological reasons of gender equality. Recognising that beliefs about women's essential inferiority continued to exist despite structural changes in the economy, Mao placed increasing emphasis on promoting gender equality through ideological means. This reached its zenith during the Cultural Revolution when women were called upon to undertake tasks previously done only by men such as steelworkers or physical work in the oil-fields of Da Qing.¹⁷

With the advent of reforms from 1978 onwards, however, the images, slogans and texts used to mobilise women have had to compete with new gender ideologies introduced through the processes of marketisation, globalisation and commoditisation, which in turn reflect fundamental shifts in the economic structure of China. These structural changes in China's economy have altered women's position in the economy, leading to new demands, interests and needs. With the

17. Nevertheless, subsequent research has revealed persisting disparities in remuneration between men and women in the communes and the reproduction of gender divisions of labour found in the domestic sphere [Andors 1983; Croll 1983].

widespread adoption of the “household responsibility system,” women were once again propelled back into the confines of the household. With the breakdown of collective production and health systems, the decline in provision of child-care facilities, and the migration of men and younger women to the cities, the bulk of agricultural production as well as domestic responsibilities such as caring for the elderly, children and sick have fallen increasingly and unequally on women.

In trying to persuade women to engage in formal politics, the All-China Women’s Federation has focussed its attention on individual women. In particular, campaigns such as the “Four Selves,” which seek to boost women’s self-confidence and the perceived “low quality” of women, or training campaigns such as “Double Study, Double Competition,” aimed at improving women’s technical capacity, tackle the issue of gender subordination from a superstructural standpoint. They serve as a counter-ideology to the conservatism that fuels the circulation of phrases that cast women in the household and women as weak. However, by targeting only women, they neither challenge the sexist attitudes of men nor address the structural factors that constrain women’s participation in politics.

Local government and Party cadres we interviewed frequently referred to the low quality of women as a reason both explaining why women did not put themselves forward for elected political positions and, if they did, were not elected. When asked why women did not wish to be elected to the village committees, the Chair of the Women’s Federation in town A under city B in Hunan province replied:

Women’s status is not high. Women have a lower salary than men. Women’s quality is lower than that of men. Their abilities are limited because their education is low and women don’t seize opportunities.

The disjuncture between official gender ideology, the actually lived realities of increasingly diverse groups of women, the focus of interventions on changing attitudes, mainly of women, diverts attention away from an analysis of the other factors shaping women’s positioning in formal politics, such as economic structures, provision of child-care arrangements, institutional barriers and the culture of politics in China. In a nutshell, the way the problem is construed and the subsequent methods for resolving it contribute ironically to the perpetuation of gendered imbalances in the political system.

The institutional barriers to female political participation in village committees and indeed at all levels of the Party/state system are manifold. These range from the very language used in the relevant legislation to promote women in village elections to the continued importance of Party membership in achieving positions of authority.

In order to ensure gender equality in the village committees, Article 9 in both the temporary and permanent Village Organic Laws of 1988 and 1998 stipulated that village committees were required to have an “appropriate portion of women” on the village committees. Indirectly confirming that this was rarely achieved, the Ministry of Civil Affairs in 1999 circulated a document entitled “Suggestions for the Guarantee of a Proper Portion among Members of Village

Committees.” The vagueness of this language hindered the implementation of the law as provincial, county, and township authorities were not required to ensure either that all villages had equal numbers of male and female representatives or that a majority of villages under their jurisdiction had equal representation.

More progressive provincial governments such as Hunan and Shandong introduced local regulations in 2002, which stated that the central legislation was to be interpreted to mean that “at least 1 woman” should be on the village committee.¹⁸ City X in Shandong province carried out some action research to understand why villagers had not voted for women in the first round of competitive village elections in 1999.¹⁹ On the basis of their findings, they put forward a suggestion to the Party Committee that all village committees should have at least 1 female member. This proposal was approved in Document 18 issued by the Party Committee in October 2003.²⁰

However, the effects of this local regulation have been double-edged. On the one hand, they have drawn attention to the gendered nature of village elections and pushed provincial, county, township and village leaders to ensure that the numerical representation of women on village committees improve. On the other hand, the call for a minimum of 1 woman has been conveniently reinterpreted as a maximum of 1. In all three provinces of Hunan, Shandong and Jilin where we conducted research, most village committees had only 1 female member. For example, in Xiangxi Prefecture in Hunan province, only 1 out of 10 villages had more than 1 woman on the village committee (check for Jilin and Shandong).

Even where the woman is head of the village committee, she will still often be the only woman on the committee.

The electoral organising committees at township and county levels frequently stipulate criteria for selecting candidates such as minimum and maximum ages of 18 and 45 years, respectively,²¹ educational levels of at least lower secondary school, evidence of capability such as the economic success of the household and good moral behaviour, as reflected in compliance with the family planning

18. For further details see Document 16, issued by Hunan Province Civil Affairs Bureau and Women’s Federation in 2001, “Guanyu cai 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).

19. The Women’s Federation of city X in Shandong province carried out a questionnaire survey of 1,000 people in 16 (out of 86) towns and townships. Their key findings were, first, that many cadres did not know about Article 9 of the Village Organic Law, which required there be “an appropriate proportion of women” on village committees; second, that they interpreted this as a soft condition, meaning that “there should be” rather than “there must best be at least 1 woman.” (Interview, Women’s Federation, city X, Shandong, April 2003)

20. In an article in *China Daily* (see footnote 1), it is reported that Henan and Gansu provinces and Tibetan Autonomous Region have also amended local laws to guarantee that at least 1 woman sits on the village committees.

21. In some villages, the age limit is even lower. For example, in town B under city B in Hunan province, the town governor stated that the candidates should be under 35 years old.

policy. However, such criteria can work against women because of gendered imbalances in educational opportunities for girls and boys, the effects of decollectivisation and the gendered domestic division of labour. In one village in town B under city B in Hunan province, where there was, at the time of interview, no female member of the village committee, the local accountant explained:

Women were not up to standard as they usually had not attained lower secondary school level.

The cultural practices of son-preference and virilocal marriage translate materially into boys being given favoured access to schooling, especially in poorer families and rural areas. The measurement of capability in terms of economic success can also work against women. In many parts of China, women have assumed prime responsibility for agriculture whilst the men engage more in more profitable off-farm activities. The structural positioning of rural women in less well-remunerated jobs such as farming and caring makes it then harder for them to demonstrate their capacities to other villagers.

This in turn is compounded by engrained cultural prejudices about the mobility and hence life experiences of men and women that are neatly captured in phrases such as “*nanwai, nunei*” (men outside, women inside).²² This phrase portrays men as going out into the public world and therefore being more worldly-wise and knowledgeable, whilst women remain confined in the private space of the household and therefore tend to be more narrow in outlook and unworldly. The particular profiling of candidates encouraged by

these criteria, which draw upon cultural deposits of enduring gendered attitudes, tend, thus, to favour the selection of male candidates.

The criteria recommended for village committee candidates also stipulate age limits. With an upper age limit of 45, women have less chance of standing for election or for seeking promotion in Party/government systems because of the cycle of caring responsibilities that fall mainly on women. In their early twenties and thirties, women in rural areas become the primary carers for their children. As village leaders, they would be required to travel to the township and sometimes county authorities to resolve various village issues. With young children to care for, such extensive travel would put considerable pressures on women to balance the demands of work with those of the household. By their forties, they are often having to care for elderly in-laws, again leaving them less time to gain experience in village affairs, to develop relevant organisational and management skills, and to build up networks of support.

The lack of clarity and unevenness in village election procedures, particularly the nomination and selection processes, also create scope for male bias to intervene in selection processes. There is considerable variation across China in how candidates are nominated. Some villages adopt what is called the “sea elections method,” whereby villagers put

22. The vice-chair of the Women’s Federation in city X in Shandong province also referred to the refrain of “women are weak, men are strong” (*nu zhi ruo, nan zhi qiang*) as shaping the way some men view women and some women view themselves (interview, April 2003).

forward any number of names in a public meeting. In other villages, village groups or the heads of households nominate candidates. In the villages surveyed, most heads of village groups were male and the heads of households called as representatives to the village group were also predominantly male.

In effect, with the “village group or household method” the initial nomination of candidates was effectively done by men. Furthermore, in the next stage of whittling down the number of candidates to one more than the number of vacant positions, the process is again led almost entirely by men, who constitute the majority in the village election committees, village groups and representatives. In village A of township B, Shandong province, the village election committee included 5 village group heads, elected from a total of 8, all of whom were male.

Male domination of key village organisations reflects a broader pattern at all levels of the Party/government system. Though Party membership is not a requisite for standing as a candidate in village committee elections, most leading positions at all levels of the state hierarchy are occupied by Party members. The fusion of the Party/government and at village level of the Party branch and village committee²³ as well as the greater salience of Party over government or village committee leaders make it even more important that women’s representation in the Party increases. Indeed Alpermann [2001: 46] argues that the village committees and the Party branch are best treated as “one leadership group.” After the elections, new village committee chairs are frequently courted by Party authorities to

become members as a way of rejuvenating and relegitimising the Party.

However, women continue to be underrepresented in the CCP.²⁴ As of 2005, only 18.6% of all Party members were women.²⁵ In rural areas, the institution of virilocal marriage makes it much harder for women to become involved in Party activities. Local Party members are reluctant to invest time and energy in young women, who will leave their villages upon marriage. Once installed in the village of their husband, young women lack the networks which their male counterparts have developed during childhood and schooling. Furthermore, land reform has led in some villages to the denial of village residence status to women marrying into the village and hence of their rights to participate in village politics.²⁶ Thus, women’s underrepresentation in the Party coupled with the gendered networks that cement together different village organisations present women with considerable barriers in the election process.

23. For example, in one village under township A in city Y in Shandong province, the village committee and Party branch operate effectively as one organisation, with 3 out of the 9 members serving on both organisations.

24. This stands in contrast to other parties where the proportion of female members is higher. For example, 47% of members of the Chinese Peasants and Workers’ Democratic Party were female as of 2001, compared to around 15% of CCP members.

25. See footnote 13.

26. B. Alpermann [2003: 13] suggests that this occurs particularly in richer villages which can afford to provide collective welfare and in land-poor villages which do not want to distribute land to women marrying into the village.

The way in which women are located in leading Party/government positions in rural areas and rewarded for their work is also shaped by deeply gendered promotion and job assignment practices. As discussed in the previous section, not only are there fewer women in leadership positions in villages than men, but they are nearly always allotted responsibility for family planning and women's work, tasks that would rarely be assigned to men. If women are seen to have political leadership skills, then they are quickly channelled into women's work or family planning rather than into more mainstream positions in the village.

For example, a female village committee chair we interviewed in Jilin province recounted how she had at various times served as head of family planning, leading cadre of the women's federation in the village, deputy Party secretary and village committee chair. As village committee chair she also continued her responsibilities as head of family planning and the women's federation, tasks which male chairs had not previously undertaken.

This mirrors a similar trend at higher levels of the state hierarchy where women leaders in government are often transferred into or promoted via the Women's Federation rather than through other government sectors. For example, the female head of city B's Women's Federation in Hunan province had progressed from being a township governor to township Party secretary and finally to her higher position in the city B. Where they are promoted within local government structures, they enter a male-dominated work environment that makes few allowances for the higher domestic burden that female cadres face. In an interview,

a vice-Party secretary of a township in county B, Hunan province, who had also worked previously in the Women's Federation, expressed her frustration at the lack of arrangements for female cadres with domestic responsibilities:

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 there is a lot of work at township level.

Similarly, the head of township B's Women's Federation under city B in Hunan province expressed her frustration with the sexist attitudes of male cadres, which favoured the promotion of men over women. She complained how she had scored significantly higher in a test than a male cadre but the latter was transferred to the more wealthy township. As she put it:

They didn't want a woman with higher secondary school education. They look down on women.

Furthermore, she recounted how after taking up the position in township B, her boss put her under pressure not to take the full six months' maternity leave. When she refused to cut short her maternity leave, his reply was:

That's why we don't want women.

Though the channelling of village women with leadership potential into family planning and women's work clearly develops a range of transferable skills, it also precludes them from developing a broader portfolio of experience in areas such as economic development,

transport, infrastructural work, areas that would give them greater credibility in the eyes of village voters.

Moreover, family planning policy has been deeply unpopular in rural areas so that women leaders become associated with the coercive rather than developmental dimensions of state authority. If no women have been elected to village committees, the village head will often coopt the head of family planning or of the women's committee onto the committee. For example, in one village in town C under city B in Hunan province, the local officials explained that if no women were elected onto the village committee, then village Party branch, village committee and village group representatives recommend 1 woman, for whom there is then a supplementary election. This woman then becomes the head of the women's committee and is added on to the village committee. When trying to elicit the precise number of village committee members, this situation often led to some confusion among interviewees as the status of such cooptees on the committee was not entirely clear.

Women leaders responsible for women's work are less well rewarded compared to both family planning cadres and to other village committee members, often receiving little or no remuneration for their work. This is often justified on the grounds that the head of the women's committee is not a "main cadre" (*zhu ganbu*) compared to other village committee members such as the Party secretary, accountant, secretary or family planning head.²⁷ Both family planning and women's work cadres encounter institutional discrimination in the

provision of pensions, which relates in turn to their relatively low status in the state hierarchy.

Only key people in the village committee and Party branch, such as the village head, Party secretary and accountant, are entitled to a pension after twenty years of service. Yet, heads of village women's committees frequently perform these duties for similarly extended periods of time. The devaluing of women's contribution is reflected also in the failure to implement policies requiring that grassroots women cadres should be treated in the same way as section-level cadres after eight years of work and three years of assessment. In order to address this, Hunan provincial government reissued in March 2002 a circular dating back to 1989 that stipulated this provision.

Finally, the culture of politics is, as in most countries, highly gendered, serving as an obstacle to women both getting into and remaining in politics. Smoking, heavy drinking and toasting at meals are part and parcel of maintaining relations with colleagues and with higher-level authorities in China. However, women are also not well regarded if they are seen to smoke or drink heavily in public.

Thus, the cultural practices that bond relationships of trust and solidarity between men have ambiguous implications for women. Female leaders both in villages and at higher levels face the dilemma of whether to participate in such practices or not. If they do, they may be seen as women of ill-repute; if they do not, then they may be seen as arrogant and above

27. This was the case in a village we visited in Feng Huang county, Hunan province.

“the masses.” Furthermore, norms around interaction between men and women can also render it difficult for women to take on leadership positions in villages. Illustrating this, one young female village head in Hunan province recounted how she had to be careful not to be seen alone with a man; otherwise villagers would gossip.

Room for Optimism

Whilst we have outlined here some of the barriers to female political participation, there are also a number of factors that could positively promote women’s engagement in politics. First, despite the persistence of gendered cultural norms, the Party still promotes a gender ideology advocating gender equality and it has at hand a well-established women’s machinery to advocate on behalf of women. Despite the challenges it faces from competing ideologies, the official gender ideology is still a resource that advocates of greater women’s political participation can draw upon to bolster their arguments. Activists within the Party/state system who are pushing for the introduction of quotas for women can, and do, make ample use of the Party ideology to persuade and cajole Party leaders to move on this issue. Furthermore, the ranking of China in international leagues comparing female political participation, such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union’s League Table, does matter to the CCP as does the democratic display of village elections.

However, for this ideology to be more effective, it needs to be underpinned by a serious analysis of the structural foundations of women’s subordination in the contemporary reform context. In particular, the notion that

women require the protection of the state needs to be challenged. Such a notion rests on the idea that women are biologically weaker than men. This biological account of gendered differences fuels a more popular discourse that women are weak and therefore less capable than men, an idea that can readily be appropriated in certain circumstances by more conservative forces to keep women in the home and out of politics and indeed the waged economy.

Second, unlike many other countries, China has a long-standing Women’s Federation, which can use and has used its position within the Party and connections with high-level leaders as an entry-point to advance women’s political representation. In the last three years, representatives from the All-China Women’s Federation and the Ministry of Civil Affairs have collaborated actively to promote women standing as candidates for village committee positions. Such collaboration across ministries and with the Party can be effective in bringing about change at lower levels. Indeed, during the politically turbulent days of the Cultural Revolution women’s activism and political participation reached its highest level in the post-Liberation history of China. In particular, the new revolutionary committees created opportunities for women to enter politics, as illustrated by the case of Shanghai where women made up 22% of these committees in 1973.²⁸

The All-China Women’s Federation has organised a number of training sessions to encourage women to stand for positions such as

28. In some areas, women made up half of all cadres at lower levels [Maloney 1975].

village chair. Part of this process has involved instituting elections for village women's committees. In the past, women leaders were appointed to these positions by the village head or township authorities. Many have held these positions for long periods. In order to rejuvenate the leadership of women's work in villages and involve more dynamic and enthusiastic women, the Women's Federation has skilfully adopted the election method. Given that this is the dominant route whereby women enter village politics, for the reasons discussed above, cultivating women leaders who could take on a larger role in the village is one way to boost the participation of women in village politics.

For example, the Women's Federation in city X in Shandong province responded to the decline in the representation of women in village committees by pushing through a document calling for there to be at least 1 woman on every village committee, by engaging the Party, media, Civil Affairs Bureau and other institutions to promote the participation of women in the 2001 elections and by bolstering training for the heads of women's committees to stand as candidates on the village committees. As indicated earlier, they managed to increase the number of village committees with women on them from 62% in 1999 to 88% in 2003.²⁹

The city Party Committee similarly has been trying to encourage more women to join the Party, introducing a requirement in 2002 that 25% of all new members and at least 15% of all Party committee representatives should be female. As a result, the percentage of women belonging to the Party rose from 10% in 1998 to 13% in 2003 and, as of 2003, 16% of all Party

committee representatives were women. However, as discussed in section two, whilst targets can increase the numerical representation of women in politics, they can also prove to be a bamboo ceiling for women, unless concomitant action is taken to address the underlying institutional, political and economic causes of women's subordination.

Apart from these special training sessions, the All-China Women's Federation assisted the Ministry of Civil Affairs in developing the "Guidebook on Women's Participation in Villagers' Self-Governance" in August 2003. This is the first such guide aimed at promoting women in rural politics and providing practical tools and tips on how to get elected into power.

In the summer of 2004, the Ministry of Civil Affairs along with the Women's Research Institute organised a seminar on women's political participation involving academics, female village committee heads, delegates from the National People's Congress and cadres from national and provincial levels of the Women's Federation to discuss how to advance women in political leadership positions. At this workshop a proposal was put forward that quotas for women should be introduced, as had been done in villages in India, and that the 1998 Organic Law should be amended accordingly. Since then, a revised draft of the Organic Law has been drawn up that states that there be at least 1 woman on the village

29. Reflective of this push from above, the number of village committees with a female member rose in township B in Shandong province from 10 out of 27 in 1996 to 26 out of 27 by 2004. However, only 1 of these villages had a female Party secretary.

committee. If this revision is approved at the next National People's Congress in 2007, then we can expect there to be a substantial increase in the number of village committees with female representatives.

All this suggests that there are progressive women within the Party/state who are using their positions to advance women's political participation through policy and legislative change. In the end, of course, it is the implementation of new regulations and policies that will determine how much changes in practice.

Finally, over the last two decades over 180 million rural workers have migrated to urban areas in search of employment and higher wages, many of whom are women. In some sectors such as textiles, electronics, hotel and catering, rural women account for the majority of workers. The experiences of living far away from home in an urban context is often path-changing for many rural women. They become exposed to different ways of life and to the global media, thus broadening their horizons and also raising their aspirations. Most remit substantial sums of money to their families in the villages, which can be used for schooling younger family members, renovating houses, investing in new machinery or setting up sideline businesses.

The new-found incomes of such women can bolster their status back in the villages, undermining some of the economic conditions influencing women's participation. For those that return to their villages, they bring with them a wealth of experience, self-confidence, knowledge and an ability to engage with a wide range of people. As knowledge of the wider world is seen as an important condition for political leadership in the village elections as well

as the ability to generate income, then rural migrant women are as well-placed as their male counterparts to stand as candidates in village elections. Their experience outside challenges the idea that women lack knowledge of worldly affairs or understanding of local authorities that is commonly rehearsed to excuse the failure to nominate more female candidates.

Clearly the positive effects of migration on gendered attitudes towards women taking up leadership positions in villages will take time to weave their course. Nevertheless, a process has been set in train that could potentially unsettle engrained sexist norms and attitudes in a more deep-cutting way than the exhausted method of ideological mobilisation.

Conclusion

Competitive village elections in China have drawn considerable attention from researchers in China and abroad. For some, they create an opening for greater democracy in China. Even if the idea of competitive, multi-candidate elections is not extended up the hierarchy, the practice of overturning leaders, of selecting candidates and the rhetoric of "democratic elections" creates expectations amongst a population that is increasingly exposed to worlds beyond China's borders. Others, however, views these elections as a farce, deliberately instituted by the Party to dupe international observers into believing that China is becoming less authoritarian and more democratic. Whatever position is taken on village elections, it is curious that little mention is made of the gender dynamics of village elections and governance processes, which serve to exclude most women from formal processes of governing.

In this article, we outlined both key barriers to women's political participation in village committees and some of the favourable factors that might promote greater participation of women. For the moment, it seems that the weight of the barriers exceeds the pressure of counter-forces. This is not least because structural factors such as women's dominance in agriculture in many parts of China, the gendered effects of land reform, and their continuing prime responsibility for household work and caring leave them with little extra time or energy to take on additional tasks.

Moreover, the persistence of gendered norms and values that devalue women's work

and limit women's roles in the public sphere of politics is difficult to unsettle. Nevertheless, the wider horizons and higher expectations of rural migrant women may translate at some point into a demand for a greater role in village affairs beyond the traditional areas of family planning and women's work.

Growing discontent in rural areas coupled with an increasing rights consciousness amongst farmers and migrant workers may create the conditions where women can break out into male-dominated politics. What is clear is that this is an area that deserves far greater attention than it has been given by Chinese and foreign scholars and by Party/government officials.

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Résumé

Jude Howell, *Élections villageoises en Chine : perspectives récentes, nouveaux défis*

L'introduction progressive d'élections villageoises en Chine a retenu toute l'attention des politiques, chercheurs et autres analystes, en Chine comme à l'étranger. Or ce processus a conduit à une diminution de la représentation des femmes au sein des comités villageois. Après avoir décrit le déroulement des élections villageoises, l'auteur évoque les controverses qu'a fait naître l'idée de compétition, les problèmes qui en ont résulté et la manière dont ces élections ont été traitées dans la littérature. Puis elle s'intéresse à la répartition hommes/femmes dans les comités villageois tout en resituant cette question dans le contexte plus général de la participation des femmes à la vie politique chinoise. Sont ensuite examinés les principaux facteurs qui expliquent la faible représentation des femmes dans ces comités élus, et ce à partir d'enquêtes menées dans les provinces du Hunan et du Shandong. Pour finir, sont explorées quelques-unes des mesures qui, à l'avenir, pourraient permettre d'accroître cette représentation.

Mots clés

élections villageoises, Fédération des femmes, genre, participation politique des femmes

Abstract

Jude Howell, *Village Elections in China: Recent Prospects, New Challenges*

The gradual introduction of village elections across China has drawn considerable attention from policy-makers, scholars and analysts both within China and abroad. These elections have led to a decline in the representation of women on village committees. The gender aspects of this trend are examined. An overview of this process discusses the controversies surrounding the idea of competitive elections, the issues that have arisen, and the way these elections have been treated in the literature. The gender composition of village committees is placed in the broader context of women's participation in Chinese politics. Findings from fieldwork carried out in Hunan and Shandong provinces are used to shed light on the factors limiting women's participation. Some factors that might improve women's involvement in politics are brought under consideration.

Keywords

village elections, Women's Federation, gender, women's political participation