

Women's Participation in Village Autonomy in China: Evidence from Zhejiang Province

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ABSTRACT Drawing on the data collected from three surveys in China's Zhejiang province during the period from 1999 to 2006, this article attempts to examine women's political participation in village autonomy and village elections in China. The data show that while men and women have obtained a very similar level of self-awareness and motivation in terms of political participation, China's patriarchal system, embedded in various forms of mindset and political practice, continues to constrain rural women's political involvement in a substantial way. The gender gap remains and the proportion of rural women in local power structures is declining. The article explains both the similarities and differences between men and women in rural political participation, and identifies some major causes for the decline of women's share in grassroots leading positions. It shows that there is no causal linkage between economic development and the improvement of women's political participation, and that the lack of political and other systematic supports leads to the low proportion of women in local power structures.

China's rural village autonomy and village elections have progressed dramatically in the past two decades.¹ However, no substantial research has been done on the subject of rural women's participation in local politics, and the gender gap in local elections remains understudied. Early research into grassroots politics usually took a non-gendered perspective and gender problems were often concealed. These gender-blind studies, which became prevalent in academic circles inside China, did not differentiate between men and women in rural political participation. However, things have changed. Since the mid-1990s, gender issues

1 Since the late 1980s, China's rural village governance structure has been transformed from the traditional system in which the village was the bottom level within the three layers of people's commune administrative structure (people's commune, brigade and production team) to the current system of village autonomy. The power structure of village self-governance consists of the assembly, the representative congress, and committee and villager group (based on geographical village). The village assembly is the highest authority; the village representative congress is the organ for villagers to exercise powers of decision-making. The village committee is the executive organ carrying out the decisions made by the assembly and representative congress. According to The Organic Law of Villager Committee Elections, every three years there should be an election for the village committee as the autonomous organization at the grassroots level (Article 2).

and women's political status have received unprecedented attention inside China. Scholars in China have begun to take the gender dimension into account in their research, focusing on issues such as female members of rural committees,² setbacks in women's participation, various approaches to women's participation and ways to improve women's ability in politics.³

Outside China, scholarly works on Chinese rural women's political participation from a gender perspective have focused on the gender differences. The following are some examples. Kent Jennings drew on a four-county probability survey of Chinese countryside residents and assessed the participation levels of women and men.⁴ Stanley Rosen found gender differences in higher positions in different levels of government, including official leading positions for women, and female quotas among the Standing Committee in the Political Bureau of the Central Committee.⁵ James Tong analysed the gender gap in political culture and participation, using survey data from a large comparative survey project.⁶ Jude Howell revealed that the quantitative under-representation of rural women in village committees was the result of complex causes involving social practices, economic structures, institutional norms and procedures, and political culture.⁷

Rural women have played an important role in promoting grassroots democratic development in China. Their status bears two noticeable features. First, at the normative level, rural women have developed a strong sense of having equal political rights and duties. They have developed a similar level of political identity to men. Second, in practice, rural women continue to have a lower level of participation than men. In other words, there is a gap between women's

- 2 Lin Huizhen, "Funü canzheng: yi ge bing bu leguan de shehui huati" ("Women's political participation: a non-optimistic social topic"), *Lilun xuexi (Theories and Studies)*, No. 12 (2004), p. 35; and Zuo Xiaochuan, "Lun cunji zhili zhong de nüxing shenyong: Hunan sheng Yueyang diqu 'nücunguan' xianxiang diaocha fenxi" ("Women's image in village committees: a survey of women village officers in Yueyang"), *Hunan keji xueyuan xuebao (Journal of Hunan University of Sciences and Engineering)*, Vol. 26, No. 10 (2005), pp. 163–64.
- 3 Sun Xiaoying, "Lun nanquan shehui fanli zhong de nüxing canzheng" ("Women's political participation within the boundary of masculine society"), *Guangxi daxue xuebao (Zhhexue shehui kexueban) (Journal of Guangxi University: Edition of Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2000), pp. 97–103; Li Weining and Yin Yi, "Cunmin zizhi guocheng zhong qianfada diqu nongcun funü de zhengzhi canyu" ("Political participation of women in the underdeveloped countryside in the process of village autonomy"), *Yunnan minzu daxue xuebao (Zhhexue shehui kexueban) (Journal of Yunnan Nationalities University: Edition of Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, Vol. 21, No. 6 (2004), pp. 39–42; and Wang Ping and Shi Dongyun, "Congliangxing bijiao de shijiao touchi dangdai Zhongguo funü canzheng" ("Reviewing contemporary China women's political participation from a gender comparative perspective") *Shanxi gaodeng xuexiao shehui kexue xuebao (Social Sciences Journal of Colleges of Shanxi)*, Vol. 17, No. 6 (2005), pp. 31–33.
- 4 M. Kent Jennings, "Gender and political participation in the Chinese countryside," *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 60, No. 4 (1998), pp. 594–73.
- 5 Stanley Rosen, "Women and political participation in China," *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 68, No. 3 (1995), pp. 315–41.
- 6 James Tong, "The gender gap in political culture and participation in China," *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (2003), pp. 131–50.
- 7 Jude Howell, "Women's political participation in China: in whose interests elections?" *Journal of Contemporary China*, No. 15 (2006), p. 603.

political consciousness and motivation to participate in politics on one hand, and their actual political status on the other.

In contrast with previous studies, this article attempts to explain this gap by interpreting survey data on rural women's political participation in Zhejiang, an eastern coastal province with a developed private sector. We try to analyse the main characteristics of female villagers' political participation under the conditions of a market economy. Our goal is to explore whether economic development can lead to women's advancement in the political arena.

The article examines rural women's political participation in two dimensions: their political cognition and their actual roles in power structures. It first compares women and men in terms of their political cognition to see the similarities and differences between them. It then examines the gap between women's political cognition and their actual position in the local political leadership to gauge if they have gained corresponding access to grassroots power structures in an area with a strong private sector. We also explain the sources of the gap in political participation between the two sexes.

The data used in this article were collected from various rural and semi-rural (suburban) areas across the entire province. The selection of areas represents a combination of feasibility and purposive criteria. The surveys consist of three main stages from the end of the 1990s to the end of 2006, in addition to several random investigations carried out during the period and afterwards. The first was from 1999 to 2000 and was conducted in four areas: Wenzhou 温州, Lishui 丽水, Shaoxing 绍兴 and Taizhou 台州. A total of 1,300 questionnaires were distributed and 1,245 valid replies received. The second was conducted in 2004 in Hangzhou 杭州, Huzhou 湖州, Lishui and Wenzhou. A total of 1,000 questionnaires were distributed and 991 valid replies collected. The third was from August 2006 to the end of the year in Zhuantang 转塘 township, Hangzhou. A total of 164 questionnaires were distributed and 145 valid replies received. All these areas were purposively chosen after consideration of levels of economic development. The selection also took the feasibility of conducting a survey into account, based on the fact that the assistance and co-operation of local governments were essential. The population for probability sampling covers rural residents in these areas who are at least 18 years old and have been residing in the countryside or outskirts of these cities. Personal interviews were also conducted at different stages.

The Convergence of Political Cognition between Men and Women

To measure political cognition we selected two criteria: women's political self-consciousness and motivation in voting. The former indicates the level of women's understanding of the significance of elections, and the latter demonstrates what aims they have when they participate in elections, particularly when electing the chairs of village committees. Both criteria, to some extent, reflect women's awareness of their political rights and duties, and the self-determination of their political behaviour in comparison with men.

A similar level of voting consciousness

The level of women's political awareness is important for understanding their voting behaviour. It is the key indicator of rural women's self-cognition and self-determination in participating in local politics. The question "how do you view the importance of your voting?" was designed for this purpose.

As shown in Table 1, both sexes show their awareness of the importance of participation in voting and only a small gap exists in the responses between "very important" and "important." About 5.2 per cent fewer women answered "very important," but 1.3 per cent more answered "important." The gender gap between answers of "very important" and "important" is 75.2 per cent to men versus 71.3 per cent to women, women 3.9 per cent lower than men. But slightly more men (0.2 per cent) than women answered "not important." The response "not interested" indicates a gap: women came higher than men by 4.3 per cent. But again, women came 0.2 per cent lower than men in the answer "don't know." On average, the difference between men and women in voting awareness is not significant.

Similar motivation in electing chairs

Examining the motivation to vote for the chair of the village committee is a more complex issue. Different responses were given from different perspectives. Our emphasis was on women's key incentives for voting. Table 2 demonstrates the responses to the question "what criteria have you used when voting for the chairperson of the village committee?"

As shown in Table 2, the overwhelming majority chose "to enable villagers to get rich." There is no significant difference between men and women: 57.1 per cent versus 57.2 per cent, respectively. The second highest number chose "to speak for the villagers"; the gender gap appears here, with 56.0 per cent of men and 51.3 per cent of women. Both answers reveal that the growth of wealth and economic development is a major concern for men and women in determining their voting behaviour. "To speak for the villagers" basically means that

Table 1: "How Do You View the Importance of Your Voting?"

Cognitions	Sexes		Total
	Male no. (%)	Female no. (%)	
Very important	291 (34.9)	122 (29.7)	413 (33.2)
Important	336 (40.3)	171 (41.6)	507 (40.7)
Not important	77 (9.2)	37 (9.0)	114 (9.0)
Not interested	120 (14.4)	77 (18.7)	197 (5.8)
Do not know	10 (1.2)	4 (1.0)	14 (11.0)
Total	834 (100)	411 (100)	1,245 (100)

Source:

Data from the survey conducted in Wenzhou, Wenling, Shaoxing and Lishui from November 1999 to October 2000.

Table 2: "What Criteria Have You Used When Voting for the Chairperson of the Village Committee?"

Criteria	Sexes	
	Male no. (%)	Female no. (%)
Representing my own interests	60 (7.2)	23 (5.6)
Speaking for villagers	467 (56.0)	211 (51.3)
Working for the CCP	311 (37.3)	151 (36.7)
Enabling the villagers to be rich	476 (57.1)	235 (57.2)
Representing the interests of my clan	32 (4.9)	15 (3.6)
Benefiting my profession	33 (4.0)	7 (1.7)
S/he has a noble character and high prestige	80 (9.6)	39 (9.5)
Others	82 (9.8)	53 (12.9)

Source:

Data from the survey conducted in Wenzhou, Wenling, Shaoxing and Lishui from November 1999 to October 2000.

people wish to communicate to higher authorities that their priority should be villagers' economic interests and other wealth-related development. This was validated by the data from personal interviews.⁸ It seems that the criteria chosen by both women and men tend to be similar, and that economic issues are a major concern for all villagers. It indicates that women's political self-determination in electoral participation is at a similar level to that of men.

Our evidence from personal interviews with both sexes confirms the survey data. Men and women displayed similar motivations when they were asked the question: "For what reasons did you participate in voting for the chairperson and other members of the village committee?" Most rural women had similar political opinions to those of rural men. The following quotations from personal interviews with both men and women reflect this situation:

"It is my political obligation as a citizen to participate in village elections"; "The village committee represents our interests and works for us"; "To participate in village elections is my right entitled by the Organic Law of Village Committees (*cunmin weiyuanhui zuzhi fa* 村民委员会组织法)."⁹

"To participate in village elections is compulsory according to the Organic Law"; "It is our right to elect the village committee and make decisions."¹⁰ (However, it is worth noting that some villagers believe that "the village committee is an arrangement made by the higher authorities.")

Overall, our data from both the questionnaires and personal interviews show that there is no significant difference in cognition of electoral participation between men and women, and rural women have a clear cognition of their own political rights and obligations.

8 Personal interviews show that villagers understand "to speak for the villagers" as an extremely important approach for expressing their opinions to the Party and government. For villagers, this means that village officials should speak for villagers' interests.

9 Interviews in Lisha village, Shuige township in 2000.

10 Interviews in Baiyan village, Shuige township in 2000.

Why the convergence?

Reasons for the similar levels of self-consciousness and motivation between men and women are complex. The gendered origin of women's political awareness can be examined through a macro-level analysis of political and economic development in China. Gender equality is reflected in the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In order to advance women's political participation, the party-state has made efforts to mobilize women to be involved in economic and social development, including establishing the All-China Women's Federation. Moreover, many measures have been adopted by the Ministry of Civil Affairs to promote gender equality and encourage rural women to participate in politics.¹¹ In this study, we focus on some specific factors which are closely related to similar responses on political participation by both sexes. We tend to focus first on major reasons for women's growing awareness and intentions for political involvement, and then explain the gap between their political consciousness and their actual position in the political structure.

Rapid socio-economic development has created new opportunities for women's electoral participation and served as an essential cause of the convergent political consciousness and motivation between men and women. During the process of de-collectivization in the post-Mao era, individual families started to play independent roles in rural economic development. Similar to men, women have experienced a deviation from their traditional position in the shift from being a part of the collective "persons" of the "production team" under the planned economy to becoming independent and self-determined "individuals." Most women interviewed had experienced working in family factories or as street vendors in the early stages of development in Zhejiang.¹² Many were fully engaged in increasing the family income through various approaches such as setting up a family enterprise or workshop, or working for private enterprises. These were the most popular choices for women and men in the early periods of reform in areas with a strong private sector such as Wenzhou. Data from our early surveys show that while rural women in less developed areas usually chose to stay behind to farm or look after the home when their husbands, brothers and fathers left to search for outside jobs, those in developed areas tended to be actively involved in doing something to get rich. In Wenzhou today, there are 223,242 female managers of individual enterprises (*nü geti jingyingzhe* 女个体经营者), accounting for 44 per cent of the total in the area, and 5,326 female private entrepreneurs (*minyng nü qiyejia* 民营女企业家), accounting for 10.17 per cent. The total female members in both individual and private enterprises make up 54.17 per cent of the total.¹³ At a

11 Jude Howell, "Women's organizations and civil society in China," *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2003), pp. 191–215; and Kellee S. Tsai, "Women and the state in post-1949 rural China," *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (1996).

12 "Individual enterprises" refers to firms which hire fewer than eight workers, and "private enterprises" to those which hire more than eight workers.

13 Information from Wenzhou Women's Federation, December 2007.

conservative estimate, at least 50 per cent of them came from rural villages, meaning that they were traditional peasants before the economic reform.¹⁴ Rural women actively took part in family economic matters. A large number of rural women surveyed in Wenzhou, Shaoxing and Taizhou were very talented at running family businesses and demonstrated competence in the marketplace.

This stands in sharp contrast to the situation under the planned economy in which the collective affairs of the production team were determined by the team leader, who usually consulted male representatives as the “head of the family.”¹⁵ Before the reform, women were most likely to take orders from the head of the “production team” (mainly made up of males) who assigned them work. Fathers or husbands represented their families and, with other men, made decisions about public affairs. Ordinary rural women were less involved in the collective affairs of their villages, and they were not entitled to negotiate with men or gain independent political positions. Of course, there were exceptions. The party-state often established female role models to show that Chinese women could “hold up half the sky.” It remains controversial whether women in the Maoist era were more involved in public affairs than today. Some scholars argue that in terms of women’s representation in the National People’s Congress (NPC), the Central Committee of the CCP, the Party Congress and leadership at all levels, China’s market-oriented reform has led to a serious decline in women’s political position.¹⁶ This argument is largely based on the fact that there was a high percentage of female representation in both the top and township-level leaderships during the Cultural Revolution¹⁷: 70 per cent of townships in the country had female directors or deputy directors during that period.¹⁸ The key reason for the decline is that, as Min Dongchao 閔冬潮 argued, the market economy has dismantled some of the key policy arrangements which ensured women’s equality during Mao’s time; consequently, women have become vulnerable in the newly emerged labour market.¹⁹

Nevertheless, this observation did not cover the grassroots rural female villagers whom we are concerned about here. Although there were arrangements to protect women’s equality in rural politics before the reform era, the awareness of participation in those who were assigned to certain positions by the party-state was instilled by the Party. A retired female deputy director told us that she had never regarded her engagement in the decision-making mechanism as part of her individual rights and duties in rural political life, but rather a signal of the Party’s trust in her. Therefore, to her, the Party was clearly the reason for participation.

14 Information from Wenzhou Individual Enterprises Association, December 2007.

15 Susan Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), p. 92.

16 Howell, “Women’s political participation in China: struggling to hold up half the sky,” *Parliamentary Affairs*, No. 55 (2002), p. 46.

17 *Ibid.*

18 Fenghua Wang, “On impacts of the Party’s leadership on women’s political participation,” *Journal of China Women’s University (Social Science Edition)*, No. 3 (2001).

19 Min Dongchao, “Awakening again: travelling feminism in China in the 1980s,” *Women’s Studies International Forum*, No. 29 (2005), pp. 274–88, at 275.

Under the household responsibility system, the rural family became the primary production unit. Women began to be able to voice their opinions on family economic affairs. Their concern over family interests was extended to their participation in village elections, particularly in voting for the head of the village committee. When asked “why are you involved in voting for the village committee?” most of the female interviewees replied “it is important for our benefits.”²⁰ When asked “do you believe that the committee members elected are able to represent your interests?” the most popular answer was “we hope and believe they can.”²¹ It can be reasonably argued that the arousal of rural women’s political awareness is mainly motivated by their family interests or self-interest.

To a great degree, the system of household responsibility has enabled, and indeed some might say forced, women to become more self-reliant.²² The most popular sayings we heard during our fieldwork were “we must depend on ourselves because nobody will help us” and “we are not as lucky as those who live in urban cities.”²³ These imply that women along with men consciously differentiate themselves from people who can benefit from the state. They understand that they have to struggle for their own interests, instead of depending on the government. The system provides women with incentives and chances to discuss their family concerns with their husbands even though, in general, men continue to have the most important say in the family. It is during discussions with their husbands and other household members about family economic affairs that women become aware of their own rights. It is why they have a similar understanding of village elections and are motivated to participate in them.

The so-called “democratic education” and mobilization by the party-state since the country’s reform has also enhanced rural women’s understanding of their political rights and identity. The party-state has issued a number of laws, regulations and policies regarding rural representation since the early 1980s. In 1987, the Organic Law was passed and put into effect, then amended in 1998. To implement the Organic Law, the Party and all levels of government conducted nationwide campaigns, during which villagers were informed of the importance of the reform in rural politics to the realization of their rights. Such campaigns facilitated women’s acceptance of the mainstream discourse of the Party and government, which gradually became embedded in their understanding of local politics. When asked “do you think the election is important for you?” both men and women responded that it is important because it expands their benefits if members of the village committee, especially the head of the committee, are

20 Interviews in Shuige township, Lishui, Chengdong township, Shaoxing, and Xianjiang and Jingxiang townships, Wenzhou, November and December 2002.

21 *Ibid.*

22 Both male and female interviewees in the surveyed areas (August 2002) believed that they would have to depend on themselves for their future livelihoods as they had lost the protection of the previous production team.

23 Interviews in Shuige township, Lishui, Chengdong township, Shaoxing, and Xianjiang and Jingxiang townships, Wenzhou, November and December 2002. Similar answers were also given in interviews in Zhuantang township, Hangzhou. October 2006.

capable of increasing village wealth.²⁴ Our survey in Zhuantang, Hangzhou shows that women tend to have a greater understanding of the importance of village elections (84.9 per cent of women versus 72.8 per cent of men).²⁵

The motivation behind women's learning about political participation is closely associated with their participation in the family economy. Women believe that the biggest responsibility of the village committee is to bring prosperity to the village, just as they expect their husbands to contribute to their families. Official campaigns for village elections accelerated the formation of similar motivation for political participation for men and women. As one female villager said: "We are to select one who can speak for the villagers and lead us in achieving prosperity for the village. Therefore, we are concerned with their [chairperson's and village committee members'] performance, and not who their backers (*kaoshan* 靠山) are during their tenure in office."²⁶ Rural women's expectations of the head of the village committee are in effect a translation of their rights in the private sphere (family) into the public sphere (village politics). Both their experience of economic reform and their knowledge of political participation learned through official campaigns have helped rural women form their own political identity and understanding.

The Differences between the Sexes

As well as women's understanding of and level of participation in village autonomy it is necessary to look at their real positions in village power structures. Although these structures are undergoing change as a result of rapid socio-economic development, our surveys indicate that rural women have not obtained equal opportunities compatible with their political consciousness and motives.

Absolute minority in grassroots leaderships

The most important indicator of women's lower status is that they have continuously been an absolute minority in terms of quantitative representation. In the surveyed villages, the ratio of female to male village committee members is very low. Indeed, the poor representation of women was confirmed by the Organic Law, which requires that there should be "an appropriate number" of women in each village committee.²⁷

Since the Organic Law came into force in 1988, the female ratio has rarely exceeded its minimum and "one woman in each village committee" has become

24 Source from the interviews in villages in Shuige township, Lishui in 2002.

25 See Table 7 (2006).

26 Individual interview with a female teacher in Lisha village, November 1999.

27 Article 8 of The Organic Law states that "the members of a village committee shall include an appropriate number of women." The amended Organic Law was enacted in 1998, ten years after the first trial implementation in 1988. See <http://www.86148.com/englishlaw/shownews.asp?id=129>, accessed on 25 June 2007.

an established rule.²⁸ A recent survey reveals that among 44,965 village committee members across Zhejiang province in 2005, there were only 3,960 female members, a mere 8.8 per cent of the total.²⁹ The data collected randomly since the 1990s also confirm such a situation:

- In the 1993 elections, 267 electoral village committees in Jiaojiang 椒江 city elected about 1,000 members; of these, 115 were women, representing 11.5 per cent of all members.³⁰
- In the 1996 elections, among 51 village committee members in Wuyun 五云 township, Jinyun 晋云 county, 49 were males and 2 were female.³¹
- In the 1996 elections, of 50 village committee members in Taoyuan 桃园 township, Tongxiang 桐乡, 8 (16 per cent) were women.³²
- In the 1996 elections, of 7 village committee members in Xitang 西塘 village, Longyou 龙游 county, only 1 was a woman, one less than the average 2 females in the previous leadership.³³
- In the 1996 elections, among 31 members in the 19 village committees in Chengdong 城东 township, Shaoxing 绍兴, 10 (28.6 per cent) were women. This was the highest ratio of all our surveyed village committees.³⁴
- In the 1999 elections, among 24,125 village representatives, there were 575 women (23.8 per cent).³⁵
- In the 1999 elections in Shangwang 上王 village, Yuyao 余姚 county, there were no female members among 10 chairpersons and 20 village representatives. The reason for this was that female candidates could not receive over 50 per cent of all votes.³⁶ One woman was accepted after a male member gave up his position in response to a suggestion from the election committee.³⁷

Marginal position in power structures

A second indicator is that women have played an insignificant role in rural power structures. Most female deputies are put in charge of children's and women's affairs such as family planning, promoting new policies and mobilizing policy

28 As there is no exact quota stipulated in The Organic Law, an unwritten principle has been exercised in practice, that is, one woman is required on each village committee, or women must make up 10% of each rural grassroots leadership. A few provinces, such as Hunan and Zhejiang, stipulated "at least one woman" in 2005.

29 The data is from the survey of the seventh election in Zhejiang conducted by the Provincial Women's Federation. There were 991 valid respondents from the total of 1,000 samples.

30 "The survey report on the village committee elections," Jiaojiang Bureau of Civil Affairs, May 1994.

31 Source offered by the administrative office of Wuyun township, Jinyun county, November 1999.

32 "The report on the elections of the Taoyuan village committee," Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Zhejiang University, 2000.

33 "The report on the election of the Xitang village committee," Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Zhejiang University, 2000.

34 Source offered by the administrative office in Chengdong township, Shaoxing, 2000.

35 Source collected from the interview with the Bureau of Organization in Yuyao city, 2001.

36 See Article 10 of The Organic Law (Amendment) in 1998.

37 "The report on the elections of the village committee in Shangwang village," Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Zhejiang University, 2000.

support for the local Party and government. In most cases, they hold a deputy position such as the deputy chair of the village committee, the deputy secretary of the Party branch and so on. Female cadres are usually responsible for birth control or peacemaking, mainly to manage conflicts among villagers. Women rarely hold the directorship of the village representative assembly, the village affairs group or the village financial supervision group. Since women have been regarded as particularly suitable for the duties they have been assigned, they are trained in accordance with these traditional standards and develop their abilities in these areas. By contrast, men are not traditionally perceived to be responsible for and are thus not trained for such minor duties in the village. Evidence from random collections demonstrates this situation:

- In the 1996 elections in Lishui, there was only 1 female chair of a village committee, accounting for about 0.9 per cent of all the chairs in the 111 villages surveyed.³⁸
- In the 1999 elections in Sunrui 孙瑞 township, Shaoxing, there were 3 female chairs of village committees among 39 villages.³⁹
- In the 2002 elections in Gulin 古林 township, Ningbo 宁波, there were 3 female chairs of village committees, about 10 per cent. Gulin township was regarded as the model for women's political participation in the region, but most female members and representatives were only assigned to deputy positions.⁴⁰
- In the 2002 elections, only 1 woman took the chair of a village committee in Zhuantang township, Hangzhou, about 0.6 per cent of all the chairs in the township; there were 3 female deputies among all the secretaries of Party branches in the same township, about 2 per cent.

The Declining Tendency of Women's Participation

Women's share in village committees and Party branches is on the decline. There are no signs to indicate a positive linkage between economic development and women's advancement in the political arena. The latest data collected from a survey by the Zhejiang Women's Federation reflect this reality. In the previous term, there were 16,232 female members of village committees in the entire province, about 40 per cent of total village committee members, but this has declined to 34.8 per cent in the current tenure, a reduction of 5.2 per cent. Take Wenzhou for example. There were 3,428 women on village committees in the previous tenure, but only 2,231 managed to retain their positions in the present leadership. The women's share was reduced from 56 per cent to 37 per cent, a 19 per cent decline. Table 3 demonstrates this trend.

38 Data collected from Lishui city, Zhejiang, November 1999.

39 Data collected from Sunrui township, Shaoxing, November 2004.

40 Data collected from Gulin township, October 2003.

Table 3: **The Female Ratio of Village Committees between 2000 and 2002**

	2000	2001	2002
Total no. of administrative villages	42,037	40,579	39,180
No. of villages with village committees	42,037	40,579	39,180
Total members in village committees	149,458	151,693	136,339
Female numbers in village committees	19,982	17,624	14,519
Ratio of women in total village committee members	13.37%	11.62%	10.65%

Source:

Data collected from Zhejiang Women's Federation, 2006.

It is apparent that this decline is continuing. In 2005, Zhejiang province launched a pilot project to improve women's political participation in the *liangwei* (两委, literally "two committees," namely village Party branches and village committees). But the results do not inspire optimism.⁴¹ Some pilot areas have achieved an almost ideal target, such as Jiaying 嘉兴, Jiashan 嘉善 county, where all villages' two committees consist of at least one woman and the ratio of villages with women in the *liangwei* reached 100 per cent. Other areas, such as Ningbo, Huzhou 湖州 and Jinhua 金华, have also increased their proportion of women. But overall, the percentage of women participating in local politics continues to fall. Many villages in the rest of the trial areas of the province have had fewer women representatives in the two committees. For example, Hangzhou only had 14 female members among its 29 trial Party branches; Lishui had seven among its 17 trial Party branches; and Qiuzhou 衢州 had 21 among the 57 "two committees" of all its trial bases.

In some areas such as Jinhua, Wenzhou and Taizhou, where the number of women participating in local politics is much lower than in the rest of the trial areas, the situation is even more worrying. In Jinhua, there were 1,081 administrative villages with female members in Party branches, accounting for 22.3 per cent of the 4,846 villages; 619 out of 3,615 village committees had female members, about 17.1 per cent, where the average ratio was 48.4 per cent; 197 out of 943 Party branches had female members, about 20.9 per cent of all the branches. In Taizhou, 147 out of 534 village Party branches had female members, about 27.5 per cent, 11.7 per cent lower than the average. In Sanmen 三门, there were only four female members of "two committees" in 34 villages, accounting for only 12 per cent of the total.⁴²

The data provided by the All China Women's Federation at the end of 2002 showed that the average percentage of villages with women in village committees was around 76 per cent nationwide, but the percentage in Zhejiang was only 24 per cent, 52 per cent lower. The average percentage of villages with female Party

41 This trial project was launched by Zhejiang Civil Affairs Department. It was initiated in Yuyao and Yiwu in 2004, and spread across the entire province in 2005. The key measure used to improve women's share in the "two committees" is the provision of "at least one woman in 'two committee' leaderships."

42 Data from the Zhejiang Women's Federation, 2006.

Table 4: **Women in *Liangwei* in Jiaxing, Huzhou and Zhoushan (2002)**

	Total no. of village committees	Women in village committees (%)	Women in village Party branches (%)
Jiaxing	1,029	1,080 (21.00)	624 (20.21)
Huzhou	1,064	957 (18.00)	375 (11.75)
Zhoushan	589	607 (20.61)	430 (24.34)

Source:

The Zhejiang Women's Federation, 2006.

Table 5: **Women in *Liangwei* in Hangzhou, Ningbo, Wenzhou and Shaoxing (2002)**

	Total no. of village committees	Women in village committees (%)	Women in village Party branches (%)
Hangzhou	4,538	2,121 (9.35)	1,182 (8.68)
Ningbo	3,789	1,765 (9.32)	1,128 (9.92)
Wenzhou	6,028	2,231 (7.40)	1,591 (8.80)
Shaoxing	5,100	1,687 (6.62)	1,091 (7.13)

Source:

The Zhejiang Women's Federation, 2006.

branch members reached 42 per cent nationwide, but in Zhejiang this figure was only around 25 per cent, 17 per cent lower.

Within the province, this imbalance has been widening in recent years and the survey data reflect this tendency. The best cases of women's participation in "two committees" are Jiaxing, Huzhou and Zhoushan 舟山; followed by Hangzhou, Ningbo, Wenzhou and Shaoxing. The worst cases are in Jinhua, Qiuzhou, Taizhou and Lishui, as shown in Tables 4–6.

The distribution of women's participation in the "two committees" is very interesting. The numbers in Hangzhou (the capital of the province) and Ningbo (the sub-province city), both with highly developed economies, are much lower than those of Jiaxing, Huzhou and Zhoushan with less developed local economies. A low level of women's electoral participation in Wenzhou and Taizhou is incommensurate with their highly open and developed local economies.

Furthermore, the latest survey conducted in Zhuantang township, Hangzhou, an area with a highly developed economy, shows not only the declining trend but a widening gap between women's political consciousness and their actual participation, as demonstrated in Table 7.

Women answering "important" to the question "how do you view the importance of your voting?" accounted for 84.9 per cent, 12.7 per cent higher than men. Only 3.8 per cent of women answered "unimportant" whereas 4.3 per cent of men gave this answer. And 22.8 per cent of men answered "cannot tell clearly," 11.5 per cent more than women. This implies that women's political awareness has advanced along with rapid economic development and efforts to improve

Table 6: *Women in Liangwei in Jinhua, Qiuzhou and Lishui (2002)*

	Total no. of village committees	Women in village committees (%)	Women in village Party branches (%)
Jinhua	5,808	1,169 (4.03)	1,535 (8.81)
Qiuzhou	2,601	697 (5.36)	317 (4.06)
Taizhou	5,163	957 (3.71)	829 (5.35)
Lishui	3,479	370 (2.13)	789 (7.56)

Source:

The Zhejiang Women's Federation, 2006.

Table 7: "How Do You View the Importance of Your Voting?"

Perceptions	Sexes		Total
	Male no. (%)	Female no. (%)	
Important	67 (72.8)	45 (84.9)	112 (77.2)
Unimportant	4 (4.3)	2 (3.8)	6 (4.1)
Cannot tell clearly	21 (22.8)	6 (11.3)	27 (18.6)
Total	92 (100)	53 (100)	145 (100)

Source:

Data collected from the survey in Zhuantang Township of Hangzhou, 2006.

democratic politics in the countryside, and has reached a similar or a higher level to that of men. Meanwhile, the gap between the sexes in actual political involvement is widening in Zhuantang. There were 1,317 Party members in the entire township and only 190 were women, 14.4 per cent. There were 20 females in the "two committees," 13.4 per cent of all the members.⁴³ There was only one female chair in the "two committees" in the township, 0.6 per cent of the 26 chairs, and three female deputies, 2 per cent of all the leading positions. These figures are a great deal lower than those of Jinhua, Huzhou and Zhoushan.

Apparently, there is no direct linkage between economic development and the degree of women's participation. The data show that the highest ratio of women's share in local leadership appears in moderately developed areas such as Jiaying, Huzhou and Zhoushan, and there is no substantial difference between highly developed and less developed areas. However, there is visible difference in terms of women's awareness and consciousness of political participation. Women in economically developed areas have a stronger sense of political participation than their counterparts in less developed areas.

Why the Differences?

The gap between women's political cognition and their actual political power is disappointing. The situation can be explained by many factors, as identified by

43 Data from survey of Zhuantang township, Hangzhou, November 2006.

Howell, such as gender division of labour, rural women's extremely heavy workloads, marriage practice and lower educational opportunity for girl-children.⁴⁴ Here we try to identify several key political and policy-related factors and examine how they have contributed to the lower level of women's participation. We argue that China's political system continues to be dominated by men. The influence of the male-dominated system can be dissected into the following four features, from the under-representation of women in rural political structures to their continuing marginalization.

First, the patriarchal legislation did not take women's political involvement into consideration from a female perspective. For example, Article 9 of the Organic Law states that "an appropriate number" of women is required in each village committee. This provision is undoubtedly important for the rectification of a system which has deprived women of their rights. However, the limitations of such a general requirement for women's representation exist in the deeper context of the legacy of traditional patriarchy which has excluded women from the political domain and led to their under-representation in rural power structures. The lack of a mandatory quota for the number of women in each village committee ignores the fact that women have historically been in a disadvantaged position. Some provinces, like Hunan, took the initiative of adding a supplement such as "at least one woman in each village committee."⁴⁵ But this tends to be understood to be the ceiling of women's representation in the village leadership. It lacks an effective compulsory approach. This is why there have been no fundamental advances in the number of women in village committees resulting from the new regulations. The general provision does not aim to enhance rural women's political position; instead, it is for a proportionate balance in quantity, and demonstrates solicitude for women from a masculine standpoint.

Since the implementation of the Organic Law, local leaders have rarely considered women's participation to be a key issue, even though "an appropriate number" or "at least one woman" in each village committee is required. They usually assign women to "trivial responsibilities" (*suoshi* 琐事).

It is plausible that the provision made in the Organic Law for a minimum number of women on each committee represents historic progress. It is a necessary step as rural women have been excluded from the political realm for a long time. However, few people have noted that the expression "an appropriate number" is no different from the rule under the planned economy which also required one female representative to be present in each production team to take charge of female affairs or trivial matters. From a gender standpoint, there has been no

44 Howell, "Women's political participation in China."

45 As early as 1999, the Hunan Women's Federation suggested that the Provincial People's Congress stipulate in relevant laws and regulations that "there should be at least one woman in each village committee." In April 2005, the Hunan Women's Federation prompted the Provincial Bureau of Civic Affairs to issue a document containing further requirements that ensure each village committee has at least one female member.

crucial change. It will be impossible to make a substantial difference to rural women's political position without fixed quotas. While the shifting position of women is a result of the new women's representation system, the lack of greater progress is also related to the current regulation. As a result of this system, rural women's participation has hovered around 10 per cent, and as mentioned earlier, in some areas the situation is even worse than it was two decades ago.

The second feature is that the patriarchal criteria in the sexual division of labour continue to function in the arena of modern politics in China, particularly in the countryside.⁴⁶ The evidence from our interviews shows that rural women are much more comfortable than those in urban areas with their traditional role as “a good wife and a good mother” (*xianqi liangmu* 贤妻良母). Data from a comparative survey of women in rural and urban communities conducted in 2006 show that an apparent higher percentage of rural women will choose to stay home as housewives or carry out farming in order to support their husbands who work elsewhere. When asked “do you like to stay at home as housewife when your husband works in the city?” 78 per cent of rural women responded “yes” while only 47 per cent of urban women gave the same answer when asked the equivalent question.⁴⁷ This indicates that the traditional expectation originated in circumstances that saw limited opportunities for travel and social interaction for women, which explain their extremely narrow world view and obedience to the traditional doctrine imposed on them.

It is important that women have become aware of their democratic rights as individuals, which will, it is hoped, lead to their emancipation. Nevertheless, it still cannot be said that this new political self-consciousness has increased women's gender awareness. When asked “why has there been no female chairperson in recent years?” most women answered that “women are of lower ability [than men].” Some women said that “this is the men's responsibility.”⁴⁸

The first answer articulates women's awareness that in taking part in local politics they should give their votes to the ablest candidate. But the question is, why do even women assume that the abler candidate will be a man? The second answer seems to come close to the reason why women are unable to develop their political ability as men do. The belief embedded in this answer is a part of the Confucian culture which shaped patriarchal expectations for women as “good housewives” (*haozhufu* 好主妇) and “caretakers of husbands and children” (*xiangfu jiaozi* 相夫教子). During the process of socialization, women's social role as the primary caretaker of children and household chores has deterred them from engaging in political activities while developing the ability to clean, cook and mother. This subordinate position is socialized into women's personalities. During this process, women often become uninterested in public affairs.

46 Howell, “Women's political participation in China.”

47 Data collected from the survey of rural and urban women's participation in local governance, conducted in Xihu district, Hangzhou, 2006. 250 questionnaires were released and 238 valid ones received, followed by interviews with 24 individuals.

48 Interviews in Baisha village, Shuige township, 2001.

Even though they sometimes have their own political concerns, they lack the spare time and energy to be involved in political practice. They also become dependent on their husbands not only psychologically but also in terms of their actual ability to participate in politics. More often than not, women are discouraged from fully devoting themselves to their duty when assigned the responsibility of a leadership position. During our investigation we found many such cases, such as the following.

In the 1999 elections in Shaoxing, the township Party committee supported a woman candidate for chair of Xidi 西递 village. This woman won the election and became the chair and also the secretary of the Party branch. However, after a very short time she resigned from these positions and went to Shanghai with her husband. The main reason for her resignation was that her parents-in-law were unhappy with her role in village affairs and expected her to serve her husband as a domestic caretaker. She had to make a choice under the high pressure of traditional values and the sexual division of labour.

The third feature is that women's ability to participate effectively in local politics is also affected by their collective mentality, which has become accustomed to exclusion and subordination. The female share in local power structures is declining, and that tendency makes it much more difficult for women to overcome their traditional subordinate mindset. Evidence from our female interviewees confirms this. Most women say that they are satisfied not only with their status in the family but also with their current position in local politics. Political participation is unappealing to these women.

Our data show that a lack of self-confidence in their own ability to participate in politics has meant that women do not wish to enter the village leadership, and consequently they prefer to vote for male candidates instead of female. When we asked "have you intended to compete as a candidate for membership of the village committee?" most rural women answered "no," and gave as their reason, "I have no ability to do that."⁴⁹ A large number of women in the villages which have carried out primary elections (*haixuan* 海选) in Gulin township believed they were less able to run village affairs, although females accounted for 11 per cent of the chairs of village committees in the township, a high proportion in the region.⁵⁰ In this, they are complying with the majority of men's opinion, even though they know that there are female candidates who are perfectly able to hold a political office. During our surveys, we observed that female voters frequently demonstrated a double dependence. They were much more susceptible to public opinion than men and they depended on their husbands', fathers' or brothers' choices. When filling out the ballot, they would either ask men for advice, or ask men to fill it out on their behalf. They were more confident with their decisions after doing so.

49 Interviews in Lishui, 2000.

50 Data from Gulin township, Ningbo, 2002.

In fact, men also tend to look to others when making their electoral decisions. They often ask about alternative candidates and make their decision after discussing it with (male) others. However, when these public opinions are brought back home by men, women tend to make their choices based on them. In this process, the male-oriented opinions are automatically translated into women's own views. Thus, women doubly adhere to men's opinions: once to their male relatives and once to the male-dominated public opinion. This means that it is unlikely that even women will choose to vote for a female candidate. Consequently, female candidates lose in most elections, especially when Article 10 of the Organic Law states that "the candidates can be elected only when they have received over 50 per cent of the votes of all eligible village voters."⁵¹ During this process, women as voters are socialized into following the male-dominated mainstream public opinion in their evaluation of female candidates, reinforcing their inherent belief in women's inferiority in politics. This in turn deters women from participating.

The fourth feature is that changing forms of voting and insufficient institutional support are direct causes of women's declining share in local power structures. Since the Organic Law was enacted in 1988, there has not been any improvement in the quantitative regulation of women's political participation. The local Party committee and government do not have an incentive to pay serious attention to increasing women's share in political offices. The new nomination approach, *haixuan*, established in 1998, provides "open nomination and direct election."⁵² This has immediately become a key cause of women's declining share in local power positions. There is no effective institution to ensure a number of women in the list of nominated candidates. In addition the new system has made rural elections fiercely competitive and jeopardized women's ability to win. In particular, it makes it less likely that there will ever be more than "an appropriate number" of women on each village committee. In most cases, only one place is offered to women. It reduces women's opportunities of being nominated by villagers, even by themselves, and thus results in the gap between women's role in the local economy and their share in rural political offices.

The Janus of the primary elections appears in that competition for local political office is increasingly fierce and complex and in that the competition is now open to everyone. The re-emergence of clan forces in the primary elections has weakened the role of women since in this traditional structure men are viewed as being able to represent a clan or family's interests. In traditional society, the clan "was tied by the kin, headed by a male father with several generations, gathered in a certain region, and ruled by particular rules."⁵³ It served to mobilize social forces to cope with both internal and external conflicts, unify people's

51 Article 10 of the Organic Law (Amendment).

52 Before 1998, all candidates for the village committee were nominated by the local Party committee, the leadership of the village committee elections and the groups of villagers, or self-nominated. The *haixuan* originated from Lishu county, Jilin province in 1998 and was adopted by 85% of all villages in that province that year.

53 Ge Chengyong, *The Ancient Society* (Xi'an: Shaanxi renmin chubanshe, 2002), p. 254.

minds and perpetuate a particular culture within the clan. The clan culture was greatly weakened after the establishment of the PRC in 1949. However, clan forces began to re-emerge from the late 1980s as the state controlled less of grassroots affairs with the development of a market economy and the establishment of the village autonomy system. This is exactly the case in the developed areas of Zhejiang such as Wenzhou and Wenling 温岭 where clan forces have remained strong. In these areas, women are hardly ever regarded as family representatives in political competition.

All these factors have contributed to the fact that there is no direct linkage between women's political participation and levels of economic development. As discussed earlier, in terms of women's share in local leadership, moderately developed areas have the highest share while there is no meaningful difference between highly and least developed areas. Key factors are associated with institutions and government policies. In moderately developed areas, local governments show more concern with women's participation than their counterparts in both highly and little developed areas. This is because policies related to women's participation are more effectively enforced in moderately developed areas. In highly developed areas like Wenzhou and Taizhou, local governments are more concerned with the growth of wealth, and men are regarded as more capable than women in creating village wealth. Also, as mentioned earlier, in these areas traditional forces (such as clans) are often mobilized in local competition and thus discourage women's participation. Moreover, women in the least developed areas such as Lishui and Qiuzhou are less concerned with male domination, and local governments have a weak gender consciousness and are less effective at promoting women's participation in local power structures. Compared to developed areas, women have less opportunity to exercise their abilities in both economic and political realms and thus have weaker confidence in their own participation.

Conclusions

Drawing on data collected since the end of the 1990s on rural women's political participation in Zhejiang province, this research found that there is no positive linkage between economic development and women's advancement in the political arena. We have documented our preliminary findings on three related sets of research queries: whether or not, and to what extent, similarities between men and women exist in terms of their cognition of political participation; whether or not, and to what extent, gender differences exist in actual political participation; and whether or not, and to what extent, the gender differences have widened over time. We identified and analysed some fundamental factors which have resulted in similarities and differences between men and women.

Our findings indicate that women and men share a similar level of political consciousness and motivation, especially their awareness of the significance of political participation and the criteria for their representatives in grassroots

democracy. Both men and women have a similar degree of knowledge of the candidates, and consider economic concerns to be their highest priority. We also found three important differences in the manner of rural women's political participation. First, while women share similar views to men in their understanding of the importance of participation in voting, there is an apparent gap in their practical participation in village power structures. Second, women's role in rural political structures remains marginal. Third, women's disproportionate share and marginalization in power structures continues.

The main factor facilitating women's political awareness is the household responsibility system. Another important factor is that rural women have been important subjects who have a subjective experience and a close relationship with men in grassroots political practice on one hand, and objects who are mobilized and instructed by the Party and government on the other. Hence women have been given opportunities to receive common political knowledge and education.

The causes for the gender gap are deeply rooted. This study has focused on some of the most important ones. Institutional defects exist in the form of the gender-neutral legislation which regulates women's quantitative representation as "an appropriate number" in each village committee and Party branch. It is possible for political authorities to enact and uphold "gender-neutral" laws, but such laws can actually go against women's interests. In this case they have failed to improve women's political status. Another key determinant of the gender difference is the legacy of the traditional stereotype of the sexual division of labour and patriarchal expectations, which have constrained women from participating in the public sphere. Women have internalized these patriarchal expectations and accepted their inferior status in political life. Consequently, women are in a vulnerable position in political competition, even though they themselves are often not aware of it. The final and most notable factor is that there has been no new affirmative action on the part of the government in favour of women's political participation in accordance with changing political environments. Consequently, women's share in political offices is in decline. The government has failed to adjust its policy over women's participation to cope with new forms of election and economic changes in recent years. Without new affirmative action for women from the government, women's political participation will continue to be constrained despite their increasing contribution to local economic development.