

Empowered or Disempowered? Women's Participation in a Development Project in Rural China

Lichao YANG

Abstract

In the last two decades in China, large international donor agencies and domestic women's non-governmental organizations have become significant actors in improving the lives of rural women. Many development agencies have put the empowerment of women on the agenda of all their development projects and introduced new ideas and approaches to promote gender equality. This article aims to understand a new approach to women's empowerment and explore the impact of local socioeconomic circumstances and power relations on project design, implementation and outcomes. It draws on ethnographic research into one community development project, conducted by one of the largest Chinese women's NGOs in Pingxi County, Shaanxi province.¹

Keywords

Development project; gender; empowerment; participation

Introduction

Over the last decade, development agencies have shifted their attention away from women-specific projects to mainstreaming gender in organizational and project policies. Large international non-governmental organizations and donor agencies have supported numerous initiatives to promote local development interventions and, as a consequence, greater emphasis has been placed on working with grassroots women's NGOs and involving women in gender planning. Most donors and NGOs use common terms such as 'bottom-up' and 'participation' to mark their commitment to promoting gender equity through participatory methods. This article aims to understand the dimensions of a new approach, the *funü gugan* strategy, to women's empowerment and explore the impact of local socioeconomic circumstances and power relations on development project design, implementation and outcomes. It draws on ethnographic research into one community development project, conducted by one of the largest Chinese women's NGOs in Pingxi County, Shaanxi province. The interviews involved 157 women and about 50 men in three villages. Many respondents were identified via their links with the Pingxi project in each village. Among them about 15 women were selected as key informants because they had a high profile of involvement in the project or in community affairs. During the first stage of fieldwork, I also conducted interviews with selected project workers, former staff members of the implementing agency, with government officials at all levels, as well as with Gansu-based donor agency staff, who shared their insights with me as insiders.

The article contains five sections: the first reviews gender and participation in the development context, both at the international level and in China. The second section introduces a participatory gender and development project implemented by West Women and the *funü gugan* strategy it employed to promote women's participation and empowerment. The third section provides an ethnographic account of project practice of the *funü gugan* strategy, women's

experience and local power relations in the village. It explores the relationship between the project, local gender and other power relations, and social change, in the village. Drawing on this case study, in the fourth section, I argue that there is no automatic link between development interventions and poor rural women's empowerment. Development outcomes are not only determined by project models, but also shaped by local institutions and power relations. And the relationship between development interventions and social change is complex and obscure. The final section provides a brief conclusion.

Gender and Participation in the Development Context

During the past several decades, approaches of 'Women in Development (WID)' and 'Gender and Development (GAD)' have been commonly identified in development studies literature. Focusing primarily on women as a separate category, the WID approach aimed to improve women's status by addressing their lack of access to resources and improving their capacities and opportunities to earn. WID goals and methods of achieving social justice and equity for women were incorporated as mainstream development concerns during the United Nations Decade for Women from 1976 to 1985. Since the 1970s, WID has been widely integrated into development activities by governments, donor agencies and NGOs. However, feminist activists increasingly criticized the WID approach, which merely emphasized integrating women into development via employment (Moore, 1988). They argued that challenging women's subordination should be at the center of the WID approach, but the nature of women's subordination had been largely unexplored as this did not address the fundamental institutions, values and practices that structure and maintain gender inequalities (Connelly, Li, MacDonald and Parpart, 2000).

In critiquing the WID approach, some development activists and feminists turned to the GAD perspective, which is also referred

to as the 'empowerment approach' or 'gender-aware planning' (ibid.). This approach emerged from the experiences of grass-roots organizations and the writings of Third World feminists. The GAD approach focuses not only on women's productive roles but also on their reproductive roles. Drawing on the socialist-feminist perspective, the GAD approach argues that the social status of women is deeply affected by the nature of patriarchal power in their societies at the national, community and household levels. Moreover, women's material conditions and patriarchal authority are both defined and maintained by existing norms and values that define both women and men's roles and duties in a particular society (Sen and Grown, 1987). Rather than isolating women as a special category, the GAD approach not only investigates women's material conditions, but also explores the nature of their subordinated status and gendered power relations. The focus is on relationships between women and men, not on women alone. Drawing on the interconnections between gender, class and race, the GAD approach recognizes the different impact of development on women and men and treats the former as agents rather than mere recipients of development.

In recent years, the GAD approach continues to evolve, focusing on two central concepts: empowerment and gender mainstreaming (Jacka, 2006). In the late 1980s, activists and theorists from the South began to stress that women need to be empowered in order to challenge patriarchal and political-economic inequalities. Development agencies promote women's empowerment, using different approaches, among which participation has been a dominant concept and practice since the 1980s. Over the last two decades, most donors and NGOs use common terms such as 'bottom-up' and 'participation' to signify their commitment to promoting gender equity through participatory methods in China.

The Pingxi Project and its *Funii Gugan* Strategy

Pingxi County is located in Ankang District in South Shaanxi. The county consists of 98 administrative villages in 14 townships in the hilly area south of the Qinling Mountains, which is widely regarded as the division between North and South China. In June 2002, a flood caused extensive damage in Pingxi County and 11 of its 14 townships were greatly affected. In late 2002, an agreement was signed between Oxfam Hong Kong (OHK) and West Women, one of the most influential domestic women's NGOs in China, to inaugurate a new Disaster Relief and Post-Disaster Rehabilitation Project. West Women was established in 1986 in Xi'an, the capital city of Shaanxi Province, by a few women activists and local academics, many of whom were members of the Shaanxi Provincial Women's Federation. Today, it works independently in seven major fields of work: capacity building for non-governmental organizations, women's legal rights and domestic violence, rural women's political participation, integrated rural community development, disaster rehabilitation, and a demonstration program for promoting rural women in business.

For West Women, the Pingxi project was an experiment in disaster relief, which by 2004 evolved into a comprehensive rural development project. In 2007, the project was extended into a second, two-year stage, and it aimed to 'nurture a self-organized, self-mobilized and self-managed women's organization' in each village and promote rural women's participation in community affairs by the end of 2006 (Oxfam, 2003). This study focuses on the project phase that started in 2007 and the project interventions in Badun, one of the three project villages. In 1996, West Women developed the *funii gugan* strategy and first applied it in its Danfeng Project. Their original aim was to promote local village women's leadership, as they then sought a strategy to make rural development work more sustainable. In the early 2000s, West Women started to apply its *funii gugan* strategy in newer projects, including the Pingxi Project. The most important first step in this was to establish the Women's Mana-

gement Committee (*funü guanweihui*) in each village, whereby all project activities were implemented by involving the community. The members of the committee were called 'mainstay women' (*funü gugan*) and they were chosen by all the women of the village. The process of establishing this meant that a project worker or member of the local county Women's Federation had to explain the idea to local officials in the village. Thereafter, women were organized into groups by local officials in order to choose candidates who were well-educated and capable, had enthusiasm for village service, and had the villagers' trust (Gao, 2002). The selected *funü gugan* became members of the Women's Management Committee.² The selection process was an important component of the *funü gugan* approach.

In April 2004, 17 women were chosen as members of the Women's Management Committee in Badun. Most members were in their late thirties or early forties, had received a primary school or junior secondary school education, and had an above-average household income. Three women who were most capable, educated and willing to manage community affairs were chosen by West Women. They acted as the director (*zhuren*), accountant (*kuaiji*) and cashier (*chuna*) of the committee and received a small stipends, as they were required to undertake responsibilities for giving loans, ensuring repayment and security, and mobilizing and training other committee members. The remaining members selected for the *funü gugan*, however, were not paid for their work, but in order to ensure their effectiveness and continued commitment to the project, the project offered them various training opportunities such as in book-keeping, health education, and other development issues, most of which were held outside the village (interview with Liang, 2008).

The *funü gugan* strategy was West Women's first step toward engendering participation in its development practice. It aimed at changing traditional attitudes and beliefs about women's roles and promoting their leadership and participation in public affairs (interview with Wang, 2008). To some extent, the *funü gugan* strategy ensured project implementation and, at the same time, encouraged wo-

men to participate in project activities in all three villages. However, women's physical participation was not necessarily associated with, and did not always lead to improved status or empowerment. In the following section, I will outline the practice of the *funü guan* strategy in Badun and explore how local social, cultural, and power relations complicate and constrain women's empowerment.

Development Interventions, Gender and Local Power Relations in Badun Village

Badun Village had a population of about 1580 people in 2007 and is a medium sized administrative village (*xingzhengcun*) in Pingxi. Like the rest of this county, Badun is blessed with a mild temperate climate throughout the year. Before the early 2000s, the village economy relied greatly on agriculture and forestry. In 2003, a private company established a molybdenum mine and processing plant in the village, which had a major negative impact on the environment, but at the same time, brought positive changes in the villagers' lives. The plant generated major commercial and employment opportunities for local villagers: about 100 local men were employed in mining in 2006 although the number reduced to less than 20 due to the world economic crisis in 2008 (interview with Xia, 2008). In 2006, the average annual per capita income in Badun was 2580 Yuan,³ but the monthly average salary of a miner was 1500 Yuan.

A few better-off households benefited by setting up shops and small restaurants. In addition, the mining plant made a commitment to ensure the village leaders' interests. According to this, the village director, Mr. Lin and the Party secretary, Mr. Xia, were included among the board of directors of the enterprise and were involved in decision-making processes, while becoming entitled to own some shares in the company. The village leaders, who had dual identities as cadres and private entrepreneurs, made significant profits from the mining plant and gained greater standing and power in the

village. Many of their relatives, for example, were given well-paid jobs in the plant. About 30 percent of the households in Badun Village were engaged in work associated with the mining plant directly or indirectly by the end of 2008. For them, the mining plant became a major source of income and the net average annual household income increased by 50 percent as of 2003. Because of the economic opportunities provided by the mining plant, in Badun people rarely migrated to work outside the village, which distinguished the village from others in China.

There were 754 females in Badun Village in 2007, as compared to 826 males (interview with Lin, 2008). In spite of a high literacy rate of more than 60 percent among local women aged 20-50, primary school completion rates were low. And among literate women aged 20-50, only three had received high school education or technical training (interview with Shang, 2008).⁴ The most capable women in Badun included Shang and her mother-in-law, Mrs. Xia, who was prominent because of her noted ability in agricultural work in her youth in the early 1950s. As a Party member, Mrs. Xia undertook leadership training and had been the village women's head (*cun funü zhuren*) for over 20 years. She had three sons and two daughters: her oldest son, Jianguo, had occupied the post of village party secretary since 1996. Her youngest son, Jianjun, married Shang, one of the three women party members in the village. Over the last several decades, Xia's family gradually became the most influential family in the village. Long before the mining plant was established, her family was involved in many profitable economic activities within and outside the village. Shang was one of the three women to receive high school education in the village. As a member of the most influential family, she set up a shop right at the entrance of the mining plant and this was more successful than other shops in the village. Her husband, the youngest brother of the village party secretary, worked in the plant in a well-paid position.

The Funü Gupan Strategy and the Women's Management Committee

As mentioned above, West Women used the *funü gupan* strategy in Badun and other villages, in order to organize a series of activities to encourage women's participation in public decision-making such as training sessions, environmental protection activities and the establishment of a microcredit scheme. The functions and structure of the Women's Management Committee, formed in 2004, were de-linked from government bodies such as the governing Village Committee and the Party Branch. However, apart from project tasks, the committee took over part of the administrative and developmental roles of the local government and the Women's Federation at the county level. For example, it became responsible for implementing policies and activities that were defined and funded by the Pingxi County Women's Federation and assigned the task of preparing performances for Women's Day (March 8) every year from 2004 to 2008. The committee members, selected by West Women every two years, were also involved in general village development affairs such as negotiating with the molybdenum plant to improve the villagers' access to drinking water and to resurface the village road.

The *funü gupan* approach required the committee to appoint a director and two vice directors to take charge of all project affairs in the village. Shang had been working as the director of the committee of Badun Village since 2004. Like other members, she received little compensation either from the Project or from the local government and she explained that her incentive to take this on had nothing to do with payment. Shang and her family members cared more about honor and the good reputation associated with leadership roles. Therefore, while men complained about their wives' work in the committee, Shang's husband supported her greatly, as he believed this would build her confidence. She spent a large amount of time and energy on the project, which meant she had less time to look after her shop and family, but her husband thought her to be a capable woman who should be involved in such a leadership position. Other family members, including her brother-in-law and

mother-in-law, also supported her, because being a female village leader brought honor to their family.

Earlier, Shang had never been involved in any official village leadership positions. Compared to other adults, most of whom had primary school education, Shang was well educated and she had been a party member for ten years. These were important considerations for villagers to join the committee and the village party branch. But Shang was reluctant to join in village governance. She said that there had been few women involved in official village leadership positions in Badun and people believed village governance was men's business and women had not tried to break out of this mold. Shang too did not seem to connect her project role with the official leadership of village governance, saying that the project and the Women's Federation members had encouraged her to stand for the elections. She explained why she wanted to be the director of the committee but not an official village leader:

I don't want to be an official village leader. It's not like being the Director of the Women's Management Committee. Villagers did not expect particular benefits or service from the project so they appreciated anything we did. . . . But being an official village leader is different. Villagers will expect you to do this and that. They set up standards for village cadres and I don't want to work under pressure. . . . In addition, my brother-in-law has been the Party secretary for more than ten years in this village. I should avoid being involved in village politics as it may arouse suspicion and people will say this family controls the whole village (interview with Shang, 2009).

Shang's experience is an example of how wives from powerful families get involved in project leadership. As she undertook posts on the Women's Management Committee, the project implementation at the community level came under the effective control of the powerful families in the village. The women's group was an informal community authority, which Badun villagers assumed should be man-

aged by official village leadership. This was in accordance with the general understanding of local people that the village committee and the party secretary should be in charge of all affairs in the village. Villagers accepted that the Women's Management Committee should overlap with the formal village authority, although they did not want all of the power over resources to be concentrated in the hands of a few families. Therefore, when Shang was selected as the leader of the women's group, the project authority coincided closely with the existing village power structure. For her, personal motivation to participate in project leadership may have included a desire for personal recognition and sense of achievement. However, access to project funding also became a means whereby political patronage by her family was strengthened.

Aside from Shang, most members of the committee were senior women from the powerful families of the village. Younger and poorer members had less influence in its functioning, consequently, they had less control over project resources and were less involved in decision-making. Even if a woman from a poorer household was selected as a committee member, she would benefit very little. For example, Li, a woman in her early forties, was elected as the cashier of the committee in 2004. When her husband was hurt in an accident, she had to work in the kitchen of the mining plant to sustain her family. The project encouraged her to improve her 'capacity, self confidence and status' (interview with Liang, 2008), but this meant that Li had to spend time on unpaid duties other than duties at home. In addition, according to project rules, the members of the committee could not borrow money from the project microcredit program. Therefore, Li was encouraged to seek a position of leadership but was not allowed to access project resources like others. Expectations that she should fulfill her household duties as well as undertake project affairs led to an extremely heavy workload and difficult working conditions for her.

The positive results of the *funü gupan* approach, and an indication of the increasingly high status of women in Badun, was evi-

dent in project outcomes and impact evaluation in 2008.⁵ The women's committee members grew in confidence and gained abilities of public speaking, articulating their views, writing project reports, and coordinating and dealing with community activities. The community also acknowledged and recognized them. Their status vis-à-vis their community and families improved as well, for example, a few women felt that their husbands started to respect them more after they started to work for the project. Wei, the female leader in Qili, explained; "we organized microcredit, environmental protection activities and many other things. . . now they(villagers) know that a housewife can work like a man. This is good." However, these changes were only limited to a few committee members and were not evident among other village women. The project also did not seem to have led to wider changes in gender relations in the other two project villages.

The Microcredit Scheme

In this section, I focus on the question of whether or not West Women's efforts to promote women's participation in the public arena had a significant impact in, say, enhancing women's decision-making role at the village level or challenging existing gender relations. West Women established a microcredit scheme in the hope that this would help women gain control over money, enhance their household status and lead to women's empowerment in the community in the long term. Through West Women, OHK provided 50,000 Yuan to each village as primary capital. The loans operated in a one-year cycle and the interest rate was set at 3 percent at the beginning, but the village Women's Management Committee felt that borrowers were not willing to repay loans on time at such a low rate and so it was raised to 7 percent, just 1 percent lower than the Rural Credit Cooperative. The loan was to be used directly for income-generating activities. According to the project design, OHK would donate the primary capital to the village Women's Management Committee if the latter demonstrated that the microcredit scheme oper-

ated successfully as part of the Pingxi project (interview with Wang, 2008).⁶

Under the microcredit scheme, at least 80 percent of the women in Badun Village took loans from the village Women's Management Committee, six years before end-2008. Individual loans were 1,000 Yuan, which was usually too small an amount to initiate a business, the logic being that large sums may lead to unwise investment and generate high repayment risks for the women. Villagers usually had some savings, which the project expected them to use in conjunction with loans to set up businesses, therefore, offering smaller loans to women seemed appropriate in this context. By the end of the project, West Women aimed to restructure the existing committee and turn it into an unofficial commercial microcredit model. When I started conducting interviews in Badun in February 2008, the leaders of the committee were negotiating with the People's Bank of China of Pingxi County to obtain enough capital to initiate an unofficial commercial microcredit scheme. By the time I was about to leave in May, they were still waiting for the bank's response and had not yet started to make the first round of loans after project completion.

I asked women in Badun how many small loans they had accessed in the past, how they spent the money, who actually controlled it within their households, and how they managed to make repayments. A young mother, Chen, had taken two loans and with the first, she bought chickens and her husband used part of it to buy fertilizer. A year later, all her chickens had died from fowl disease and she had to ask her husband to make the repayment and so did not seek a loan in the following year. More recently, her husband wanted to start a shop and asked her to borrow money from the project. Initially they sought three loans, but only one was approved. Chen could not tell the committee that it was her husband who wanted the loan to invest in a shop. She received it in February, but they did not set up the shop until the middle of the year, which was the most prosperous season for the molybdenum plant. By the fol-

lowing February, however, it had not generated enough profit to repay the loan and Chen had to use income from the harvest to do so.

Zhang, a woman running a small dumpling and noodle restaurant, confided as follows about the 2,000 Yuan loan she had taken:

I was so excited when I received the money from the village Women's Management Committee. It was enough for running a small restaurant at home. I gave all the money to my husband so that he could buy furniture, equipment, wheat flour and seasonings for me. . . Our business is running well: I make food and do the cleaning while he is responsible for stocking and managing the whole business. . . My husband is well-educated; he is the accountant in our Village Committee. So he manages the money at home.

Huang, one of the only two male members of the village Women's Management Committee, provided another interesting example. He admitted that his family had been the poorest of the poor until his wife registered in the first round of the microcredit scheme in 2003. With the first loan, he bought six goats and three sheep that he sold and used half the profits to repay the loan a year later. In the second year, Huang took two loans of 2,000 Yuan as he wanted to expand his breeding business. He used the money to buy fodder, re-build the pen and take a veterinary course. Huang became one of the richest men in Badun Village soon after, explaining that he relied on start-up capital received from the project to invest in his breeding enterprise. More recently, he was invited to join the committee, providing animal breeding services for villagers. He said that he was very happy to help others and for him it was another form of repayment to the project. Villagers' accounts illustrate at least two things, first, providing microcredit to villagers can be a good way to 'help poor people help themselves';⁷ the implementation of the microcredit scheme has successfully increased the household income of a number of villagers. Second, although the microcredit scheme was designed to target women, like other household incomes funds were largely

controlled by men.

The Pingxi project sought both to reduce poverty and improve women's status within households through the microcredit scheme. To some extent, it did alleviate household-level poverty. For example, Huang, Zhang and a few other villagers greatly improved their economic status by investing loans in micro-businesses. However, I would argue that promoting women's access to credit failed to 'empower' them for three principal reasons. First, the microcredit approach that West Women applied in project ignored the complexity of the local economy and how households functioned. According to the interviews I conducted, most women regarded their families or households (rather than individuals) as basic economic units; married women placed very little value on benefits they derived themselves individually, rather than for their households. In contrast, most male villagers who managed household income spent much more on themselves, compared to their wives, say, on drink and cigarettes. For example, Zhang complained that her husband 'has bad habits.' She said:

He smokes and drinks liquor. Every month he spends at least 150 Yuan on cigarettes and liquor. He often goes out to eat with his friends and he is generous in paying the bill. Each meal costs at least 50 to 60 Yuan. Last month he spent over 200 Yuan on this. He argues that going out for dinner is a good way for men to maintain friendship with each other. . . I also spend money, but I hate wasting money, particularly when I borrowed money from the project. To be honest, I dared not put the money into a business without my husband's help; I don't know how to run a business. I always spend every cent on necessities only, for example, children's books and pens and parent's medicines.

Like Zhang, most women borrowers had no experience or skills in running a business and they relied greatly on their husbands in deciding how to use the loan. Because many men tended to spend money on themselves, microcredit channeled to households often

served their immediate consumption needs. In Chen's case, she only performed the role of loan-taker, while her husband controlled real administration of the money.

Even when women controlled the loan money, poorer women like Shang tended to use it to cover their families' basic needs, such as children's education, food, medical expenses, marriages, loan repayments and so on, rather than investing in income-generating activities. Borrowers were supposed to establish and develop small businesses with the loans, which were designed for 'productive' purposes. In reality, however, no more than 60 percent of the loans—those taken by the better-off women—were used for this purpose (interview with Shang, 2008). Because the loans were used on unproductive activities, many poorer women were not eligible for a second loan. Feng, a poorer woman in her late forties, complained:

What is the 'income generating' activity for a poor family? Medical expenses incurred today will bring income from farm labor the next day. Investment in a child's education will improve his or her livelihood opportunities a few years later. . . . So I think the regulations for 'income generating' activities are not reasonable. Investment in businesses is only for well-off women. . . . Gradually we [poorer women] don't want to get access to the loan any more as the project didn't allow us to put money aside for our emergency needs.

These case studies demonstrate that microcredit schemes require critical attention regarding who actually controls the money and how these are used within households and production cycles. As Lao Liang noted, women in Badun were not able to control income, investment and expenditure within their households (interview with Lao Liang, 2008). Irrespective of the loans they took, they were still expected to conform to traditional gender roles and concentrate on household tasks. Male power and resource control largely remained untouched. Consequently, in the short term, the microcredit scheme only implied that women had to bear extra responsibility for debt

and workload, while men controlled the money.

A second reason why microcredit failed to empower women in Badun, as discussed above, was that changing or ‘improving women’s gender-awareness and participation’ was not a priority among the activities. Recent research has argued that providing money-making opportunities to women cannot lead to women’s empowerment unless it is linked to other activities such as gender-awareness training for both men and women (Endeley, 2001). Such training was included in the Pingxi Project design, the original idea being that West Women would provide it to local officials and a small group of female village leaders, who in turn would train other village women, but this did not happen. As one of the committee members, Shang explained, ‘the gender-awareness training was too “hollow” (tai kong-dong), and village women would not be interested in this. Instead, we organized other activities such as health education and performance’ (interview with Shang, 2009). According to West Women project staff, the gender-awareness training explained concepts of gender equality, gender division of labor, access to and control over resources and practical gender needs and strategic interests. In explaining the gender division of labor, for example, trainers analyzed women’s productive and reproductive roles, household and community services, and community management and political activities. They did not shape the training so as to relate it to Pingxi women’s situations, while the committee members who were trained saw no relevance in it for ordinary rural women’s lives.

Third, from a broader perspective, the project tended to avoid directly challenge existing patriarchal gender relations. It focused only on ensuring women’s access to money but neglected the underlying unequal gender power relations. The microcredit scheme provided opportunities for male villagers to receive money via the women’s hands, but could not monitor who controlled the funds and how they were spent. This may explain why the scheme was greatly supported by male villagers. While the project did demonstrate that women could play an important role in generating income, and were

enthusiastic in fostering micro-businesses, it is important to note that women still continued to perform their existing traditional gender roles. Without gaining higher status in their households, these income-generating activities meant that women had to undertake extra workload. By the end of the project implementation, it was clear that they were unable to control their incomes at the household level, while male control largely remained unchanged.

It was also seen that poor and marginalized women in Badun Village were unable to receive loans. A poor elderly woman said: 'I applied for loans only once as I did not dare to borrow more. My health has deteriorated over two years and I haven't really been able to make money for myself since then' (interview with Chang, 2008). Another widowed and disabled woman said: 'I did not manage to get loans from the project. My applications were rejected because they did not believe that I could make the repayment. In fact my son worked in Xi'an, and he would have brought money back to repay the loan. I just needed the money as a cash advance at that moment' (interview with Li, 2008). Another woman in her late forties explained, 'last time I borrowed 1,000 Yuan. I wanted to buy two piglets, but eventually I did not use the money because the price of pork went down dramatically. I was worried that I could not make the repayment after a year' (interview with Liang, 2008).

The project therefore excluded the poorest women: first, rejected by the members of Women's Management Committee who were responsible for deciding on loans. They gave these in a group-lending fashion, wherein each member of the committee was responsible for processing loan applications from the women who lived close to her home, on the presumption that she would know them best; be in a position to know why they were seeking loans; and assess their ability to make repayments. Further, if borrowers defaulted, the committee member who had approved the application was required to make the repayments. Hence, members of the committee tended to be very strict in processing loan applications. As one member said, the villagers' desire to be on good terms with their neigh-

bors was not as strong as it had been twenty years ago:

Nowadays, compared to maintaining a good reputation in the village, villagers believe that making a monetary profit is more important. Therefore, I would prefer not to trust my neighbors when processing their loan applications (interview with Liu, 2009).

The poorest women also avoided taking loans because they were often unsure about how they would make the repayments. For instance, widowed or disabled women did not seek loans as they felt worried about defaulting, a concern that outweighed the benefit the loans may give them. For this reason, very few poor women in Qili applied for loans, for example, as a widowed woman explained, she did not have the confidence to run a business because ‘all good ideas have gone with my husband.’ Being widowed was viewed as being less capable in managing a micro-business, although a widowed woman had greater control over household income. Thus, their exclusion from microcredit further called into question its role in reducing poverty and empowering women.

Development Interventions, Women’s Empowerment and Local Power Relations

Development scholars define the term ‘empowerment’ as a “process by which individuals and groups gain power, access to resources and control over their own lives. In doing so, they gain the ability to achieve their highest personal and collective aspirations and goals” (Robbins et al., 1998: 91). This includes, in particular, the right and ability to make decisions about major household expenditures, participate in village affairs, and challenge and transform existing power relations. In this section, I will explore the political and economic factors that affected women’s participation and empowerment in the public arena. I will also discuss the technical and methodological lim-

itations of the *funü gupan* strategy in the implementation of the Pingxi project in Badun village.

Women's Participation in Village Government

A project worker claimed that 'being a *funü gupan* was a starting point for village women getting involved in politics' (interview with Wang, 2008). However, such involvement in the two main organs of village government, the Village Committee and Party Branch, has decreased in recent years. In 2002, three women were members of both these, but this changed after 2003 with the establishment of the Women's Management Committee. With the *funü gupan* strategy, almost all capable and relatively well-educated women were selected as its members and they spent much time on project activities. As a result, these women gradually lost the opportunity to participate in village government, while their positions in the Village Committee and Party Branch were taken by male villagers.

In the most recent village elections in 2008, no women officials were elected in Badun, despite government policy that is seeking greater women's participation in governance.⁸ For instance, Wei was the women's representative on the Village Committee before she joined the Women's Management Committee three years ago. After being elected as Shang's successor as the head of the committee in 2006, she spent most of her time on project activities and in providing unofficial microcredit training for other women in the village. Partly because of her active involvement in project activities, two years ago her husband was given the opportunity to work in the mining plant about 20 kilometers away from home. Therefore Wei had to undertake most of the housework and could no longer work in the Village Committee. As she put it:

I knew there were regular meetings of the Village Committee members fortnightly. But I did not have time to go to the meetings. . . I became extremely busy with cooking, washing, looking after the house as well as project activities. A few months later, I had to quit

the Village Committee. . . I was not paid for the project work, but they sent me for training so that I could learn many things. That's better than being a women's representative and getting nothing in the Village Committee.⁹

While there was no formal exclusion of women from the political process, Wei's experience exemplifies how project implementation imposed obstacles, making their involvement difficult, if not impossible. According to the project design, the Pingxi Project set out to increase women's involvement in public affairs and empower them in community development. But it neglected the importance of women's involvement in the formal political bodies for achieving these goals. On the one hand, the project failed to make a gendered analysis of practical barriers to women's involvement in the formal bodies of village government and on the other, it did not provide adequate and systematic capacity building to facilitate women to participate in them.

Badun villagers, both men and women, rarely regarded the leadership of the Women's Management Committee as a real power base, because they knew that the project was a short-term event initiated by a non-governmental organization. As the village head, Mr. Lin said that since the project had started, women were actively involved in all kinds of activities; their work was supported by the Village Committee and the Party Branch, and thus was seen as a 'beneficial supplement' to development. In fact, women's participation in village government actually decreased during the time they became involved in project activities. The existing quota for women in politics was abandoned in 2006, as the township government and the county Women's Federation believed that the project was an alternative form of women's public participation in Badun.¹⁰ The village head, Lin, also admitted that the Village Committee took advantage of the women's organization in many cases. First of all, the project brought a large injection of resources and the support of higher-level local officials to Badun. The Village Committee also gained

new ideas for development from the women's organization. And when reporting to higher government authorities, many project activities were claimed by it as its own political achievements, rather than those of the project. For example, the environmental protection activity was reported as an important achievement of 'building up a new socialist countryside' by the Village Committee. The Women's Management Committee had helped in solving practical problems, for example, its leaders were sent to negotiate at the molybdenum plant for reducing pollution and building drinking water facilities for the village.

Nonetheless, Chen argued that:

The village Women's Management Committee sounds good, but it never had real political or economic power. Villagers never regarded women's project roles as valid. Once the project finished, the women's organization had to disband without funding and support (interview, 2009).

Shang also felt that:

The role of a female village leader was different from the real village head. . . . People respected our work because we provided a service for them, but women's participation in project activities as female village leaders was not valued by villagers. . . . People only recognize government authority. The village Women's Management Committee never had the real power (interview, 2009).

Apart from the inability and lack of desire among members of the Women's Management Committee in becoming more involved in village government, the impression was that West Women and the Women's Federation were responsible for gender inequality issues and led women to presume that women's political participation was the responsibility of external agencies rather than themselves. Although participatory needs-assessment activities were conducted regularly in Badun, women did not collectively make an effort to participate

more in political spheres, mainly because the project design did not promote this. As a result, I frequently encountered members of the Women's Management Committee who, when asked if they would like to be involved in village government, expressed puzzlement. In sum, although West Women was active in promoting women's participation in public decision-making processes, many of their efforts instead created barriers for women's involvement. The project focused on direct development outcomes such as the formation of a woman's organization rather than on influencing the policy and institutional environment.

Women's Participation in Village Affairs

During the course of the Pingxi project, although women's involvement in village government declined, their participation in other public spheres in the village increased substantially. A number of women, aged 22 to 47, sought to become involved in public issues by joining in the village Women's Management Committee or by closely working with its members. In addition, there was a significant increase in the number of women attending village meetings as representatives of their families from less than 10 in 2000 to more than 30 in 2007. In Badun, meetings were organized by the Village Committee members about once a month and had two purposes: first, village cadres were to transmit policies and directives from the township government; second, villagers were organized to discuss a variety of issues, for example, infrastructural construction and village elections.

Several women who had participated in project activities told me that they were willing to attend village meetings, but none said that they had voiced any opinions during these. Hu, a woman in her late twenties confided,

I often participated in project activities, such as health training and the microcredit scheme. [After I joined in project activities], my husband also sent me to attend village meetings [as a representa-

tive of the family] when he thought the meeting was useless and not important to him. . . . There is nothing to worry about [in attending meetings]. I can meet many women there and we don't have to say anything in the meetings. . . I am just happy seeing my friends regularly in the meetings (interview, 2008).

This illustrates that women's participation increased in sheer numbers of women attending village meetings, but it was mostly limited to attendance, rather than active participation. And this had a very limited impact on village decision-making. Apart from the impact of the Pingxi project, women's participation in the public arena was largely shaped by their low economic status and unequal gendered power relations. In Badun, the undervaluing of women's contributions to the paid and unpaid economy fed into women's under-representation in leadership roles in the political sphere. Even within the Pingxi project, which claimed to represent women's interests, these were less likely to be included on the planning agenda rather than those of men. There were many ways in which this inequality was maintained, for example, through the patronage systems and networks that were dominated by men and male interests. In this respect, women in Badun were marginalized, regardless of whether they were poor. As shown above, the village Women's Management Committee in was controlled by women who already held power and so reflected their interests; it was also dominated by the interests of more powerful and wealthy male members of the community, that is, those who had control over the mining plant.

Marginalized and poorer women found that their own organization was against their interests and priorities and this made them lose interest in it. In addition, women of different ages and economic status had different expectations from project activities, which made it harder for them to express their needs in public and as a collective. Furthermore, poorer women's lack of education, restricted their mobility and low self-esteem constrained their knowledge base and ability to analyze their realities, examine alternative options and make

collective decisions about project activities (Mosse, 2005: 85). Even when poorer women were clear about their interests, they were often marginalized by a few powerful women's priorities. This was illustrated by the cashier of the village Women's Management committee, Li, who was not allowed access to the microcredit funds although she was in need. 'The project has never brought any practical benefits for me,' Li complained:

But both Shang and Wang agreed with the project rule [that the members of the village Women's Management Committee could not borrow loans from the project microcredit], I had to take it. . . I wish I was not a member of the village Women's Management Committee, then I would be able to get access to the loan (interview, 2008).

In spite of her membership of the committee, Li was prevented from expressing views on the rules of the project. For the majority of poorer women who were excluded from the committee, their needs and desires were not valued in participatory project activities and many did not feel that they shared the same needs and interests as other women. Problems that poorer, marginalized women faced in the public sphere were compounded by a lack of appreciation on the part of some key project workers, both regarding the concept of participation and the gendered, institutional factors constraining women's participation in the public arena.

Project workers believed that it was not necessary to challenge the patriarchal system and existing unequal gender relations more directly: that these activities helped improve women's self-esteem and capabilities, and thus unequal gender relations would be changed in the long run. For instance, Wang, a former project worker responsible for Pingxi project, said:

Women's role within the family and in the society is part of the Chinese culture. It is unrealistic to challenge existing gender relations within a short term. The project is dedicated to improve wo-

men's self-confidence and capability, which will eventually improve women's status and change unequal gender relations (interview, 2008).

In analyzing Wang's narrative, I argue that improving women's self-esteem and capability may be necessary for empowerment, but on its own is not sufficient to change unequal gender relations, even in the long run. In Badun, as discussed earlier in this paper,

fidence and skills in communicating with village authorities and local government officials. Women and the powerful people sat together so that they could speak up.

However, the capacity building work with women proved to be ineffective in helping poor women gain confidence, let alone enable them to gain positions from which they could exercise greater control over material assets. One of the participants, Jin, reported that bringing women face to face with village authorities and project workers was not a good idea, as ‘they wouldn’t treat us seriously.’ It made the poorer and powerless women feel further disempowered and disappointed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article argues that there is no automatic link between development interventions and poor rural women’s empowerment. Development outcomes are not only determined by project models, but also shaped by local institutions and power relations. Drawing on the research findings in Badun Village, the *funü gupan* approach has failed in this sphere and, on the contrary, it has become a tool to mask the inequalities between men and women, the rich and the poor. West Women was expected to make an external intervention that could help to change existing social relations. But the project did not intervene in the ongoing power struggles, nor did it challenge various inequalities embedded in the local community. Therefore, the project outcomes were limited to improving women’s self-esteem and capability through their participation in project activities.

In rural China, most development projects function to maintain rather than challenge existing norms, institutions, and power relations within the local context. Development practice is largely affected and shaped by complex politics within the project as well as

by intricate power relations and local agendas and expectations. Projects are too limited in both duration and funding to undertake thorough transformation of norms and institutions that are central to women's subordination, including the gender division of labor. As Jacka (2006: 601) has suggested, it is perhaps unrealistic to expect individual development projects to overcome or challenge deeply embedded power hierarchies by themselves. Women's empowerment cannot be achieved without the efforts of the government and rural women need to see a strong political force that provides services and funding to facilitate their involvement in development and promote equal political and economic rights in practice as well as in terms of legislation. Policy makers need to pay more attention to gender equality in China. However, to date, the government has not regarded gender equality as a high priority.

Notes

1. 'Pingxi' is a pseudonym.
2. The Women's Management Committee of Badun village, for example, consisted of 17 female members at the beginning. The membership was voluntary and was reviewed and reassessed every two years. In early 2008, two male members were included in the committee in Badun village. Both of them were village technicians: one was a pig-raising expert and the other a builder.
3. The figure had increased to 3225 Yuan by the end of 2008.
4. A pseudonym.
5. In December 2008, a project evaluation consultancy team conducted an impact evaluation of Pingxi project. The team comprised two external experts from Yunnan Academy of Social Science, a project worker (Lao Liang) from West Women, and two staff members of OHK. They interviewed about 100 women in three project villages within three weeks. Two evaluation reports were prepared by the external experts and the OHK Monitoring and Evaluation officer.

6. A pseudonym.

7. 'Help poor people help themselves' (zhuren zizhu) is the core value of OHK.

8. According to the Information Office of the State Council of the PRC in 1994, the government has stated that it 'recognizes and respects the principle of sexual equality affirmed in the United Nations Charter' and that it 'is convinced that the key to achieving sexual equality is to enable women to take part in development as equals of men' (Government report by the Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 1994).

9. In theory, Zuoyun township government pays an annual salary to the heads of Village Committees and Party Branches of about 2000 Yuan, an amount similar to the average rural income in the county. In practice, the payment is often delayed. Furthermore, there is no budget to pay other members of Village Committees and Party Branches, including the women's representatives.

10. The quotas promulgated at the village level for implementation before the 2005 election required that there must be at least one woman on every village election committee and at least one woman in every village Party Branch.

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