

## **Institutionalizing Rural Women's Political Participation in China: Reserved Seats Election for Women**

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### **Abstract**

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Electoral gender quotas have been introduced in many countries around the world. China is no exception. Despite a short democratic election tradition and a long history of patriarchal customs, China is keen to promote its women's political participation at the grassroots. The author analyses the Chinese government's motivations for imposing electoral quotas for women's political participation in village governance. Taking *Zhejiang*, one of the most developed coastal provinces in China, as an example, the article studies the reserved seats elections for both women representatives in the village assembly and women members in the villagers' committee. By examining the policies, measures, and implementation of such election practice, the author argues that the current institutional arrangement of rural women's political participation has on the one hand effectively increased the number of women participating in grassroots polity and helped them to get access to power, but caps women's number and confines women to gendered working roles on the other. In the long run, however, there are prospects for the improved redistribution of power positions between men and women and the lessened reproduction of gendered roles of women members.

### **Key words**

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women, political participation, quota, reserved seats election, China

### **Introduction**

Electoral gender quotas have been introduced in many countries around the world, and China is no exception. Despite a short democratic election tradition and long history of patriarchal customs, China is keen to promote its women's political participation at the grassroots. *The Organic Law of Villagers' Committees* (thereafter the Organic Law), which was first introduced

in 1998 and amended in October 2010, stipulated that there should be female member(s) in each of the villager's committees; the female representatives should account for over one-third of the total numbers of the villager assembly representatives. *The Program for the Development of Chinese Women (2011-2020)*<sup>1</sup> issued by China's State Council in August 2011 ruled that at least 30 percent of the members of all villagers' committees and at least 10 percent of the heads of villagers' committees should be women. The Chinese government has upgraded its electoral gender quota goal from the Law's vague and minimum demands for number of female committee members to the Program's much clearer and larger quotas. However, the reality is that women continue to be disproportionately underrepresented in both village party branches and villagers' committees, which are two administrative organs at the village level (Howell, 2006; Liu, 2006; Sargeson & Song, 2010). In China, women comprise only 21.7 percent of villagers' committee members (China Women's News, 2009). The significant disparities in the state gender quotas requirements and the actual representation of women in grassroots governance is exerting huge political pressures on provincial governments, which are required to supervise a great leap forward in grassroots women's political participation in China over the next decade.

Although the electoral gender quotas are practiced at different levels of elections, the election of villagers' committees is the only direct election in China, i.e., it is the only "one person one vote" election for the Chinese government. According to Article 9 of the Organic Law, all the members "of a villagers' committee shall be elected directly by the villagers"; "any villager who has reached the age of 18 shall have the right to elect and stand for election [...] with the exception of persons who have been deprived of political rights in accordance with the law." In contrast, the members of governments at higher levels are elected by the representatives of people's congress and in most cases such candidates are nominated by the higher level Party's organizational departments and the departments make

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<sup>1</sup> The Program was made by the State Department in 2011. It covers six aspects of women's development, including health, education, economy, participation in decision making and management, social security, and environment. It is in the section on women's participation in decision making and management, the quota of women in village government was proposed. The central government will conduct annual, mid-term, and final assessments of the Program implementation.

sure these candidates win the election (Jing, 2007).<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the election of villagers' committees provides a window to observe how the gender quota works in rural China and how it affects rural women's political participation and representation.

This article begins with a review of literature on electoral gender quotas. The second part of the article examines the Chinese government's motivations for introducing and imposing electoral quotas on women's political participation in village governance. In part three, taking Zhejiang, one of the most developed coastal provinces in China as an example, the article studies the institutional arrangement of reserved seats election for both women representatives in the villager assembly and women members in the villagers' committee. In the final part, the article will draw on the research findings to address the gender quota debates on the redistribution of powers and reproduction of gendered roles, the limitations and problems of the reserved seats election, and its prospects in China.

### **Electoral Gender Quotas: Pros and Cons**

Electoral gender quotas are practiced extensively both in the developed and developing nations (Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2003). There are three basic types of electoral gender quotas based on whether the quotas are stipulated by the constitution and whom the quotas target: 1) reserved seats; 2) party quotas; and 3) legislative quotas (Krook, 2007). The reserved seats are usually required by the laws to guarantee certain number of women elected; the other two quota systems set a minimum number of women among all the candidates either required by laws (legal candidate quotas) or voluntarily (political party quotas). The big difference between the reserved seats and other two quota systems is that the former is outcome oriented while the latter two focus on process (Quota Project, 2009).

Gender quota systems aim at ensuring certain number or proportion of

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<sup>2</sup> In China's political system, the Chinese Communist Party rules every public organization. The same rule is practiced from the central government to the village government. There are two heads for every governmental department and every public organization (including army, public universities and schools, public hospitals, governmentally affiliated research institutes): one is for the Party affairs, the other is for the functional duties. The two positions are supposed to be at the same administrative rank, but it always that the Party head comes before the functional head. The Party in this article refers to the Chinese Communist Party only.

women participating in politics and at consolidating women's political representation (Dahlerup, 1988; Chen, 2010). With explicit goals and means, gender quotas are usually easy to implement, and have served as a fast track to improve women's political participation and redistribution of power positions between men and women at the macro level (Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2003; Meier, 2008). The rationale behind this argument is that through gender quotas, women get the positions which have previously been dominated by men and become entitled to the political powers attached to these positions (Sgier, 2004). In addition, scholars in favor of gender quotas have believed that women's descriptive representation through the political presence will improve women's substantive representation, i.e., their participation in the political decision making process (Mansbridge, 2005).

Although the gender quotas produce quick results, a common critique of the practices is that they tend to be tokenistic and unqualified women might get elected (Raman, 2002; Murray, 2010), especially when such political empowerment of women is from the above (Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2003). According to Goetz (2003), if elected women representatives fail to articulate their voices on women's issues or influence the decision-making process, then these women are not politically effective. Thus, electoral gender quotas alone cannot close the gender gap in politics (Meier, 2008). Another critique of the gender quotas is that they may contribute to "a reproduction of stereotyped gender roles and a stigmatization of women" (Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2003, p. 5). Especially, of all the three quotas systems, reserved seats reflected outcome-orientation and lack of confidence in terms of female political representation (Chen, 2010).

China's electoral gender quotas are also facing the same criticism. Wang (2013) believes that women's gender equality in politics in China is characterized by tokenism and the quota practices are "a symbol of good will, gesturing a sense of moral justice and political correctness" (p. 3). Women's reluctance to participate into the politics is the results of complex conjuncture of variables including economic reform, feudal attitudes, gender notions and so on (Howell, 2006).

The gender quota debate—whether it has redistributed the political powers between men and women and/or it has enhanced the reproduction of women's gendered roles—is a universal one. But whether the China's one-party context will bring a new perspective to the debate is quite

interesting. The answer to these two questions will enrich the scholarly understanding of gender quota debates.

### **The Chinese Government's Motivations for Adopting Electoral Gender Quotas**

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance classified China's electoral gender quotas as reserved seats. The Chinese government has a special name for the election of women members in the village government. It is called “专职专选 (zhuanzhi zhuanxuan),” i.e., reserved seats election for the designated positions (of women). Unlike in most developed countries where the gender quota was introduced as a result of women's movements and gradual inclusion of women in public sphere, the electoral gender quota was adopted by the Chinese government from above. Behind the electoral gender quotas are the mixed motivations of the Chinese government.

First, the worldwide introduction of quotas is a result of the international discourse on women's political participation (Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2003). Women's political participation is a sign of democracy and modernity (Dahlerup, 2006). China is now the second largest economy in the world. Apart from its economic power, China also wants to be acknowledged as a modern and democratic country that advocates social justice and gender equality. Female activists for suffrage movements in China have argued that if China wants to gain international respect, it should include women as full and equal political citizens (Edwards, 2008). China hosted the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, at which China and the other participating countries agreed to employ affirmative actions and quota systems to ensure equal opportunity for women's political participation and representation. This conference has to a great extent led to the increasing adoption of electoral gender quota in the world (Chen, 2010). In *the Program for the Development of Chinese Women (2011-2020)*, China declared its intention to work on increasing women's participation in grass-roots democratic governance. As a country sensitive to its international reputation, China has taken certain measures to improve its international reputation, and the electoral gender quota can be counted as one of them. Also, the policies from the neighboring countries can be contagious and it was very likely that the countries in regional clusters would adopt similar types

of quota policies (Krook, 2006). China's neighboring countries including India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh introduced a 33 percent gender quota to village councils (Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2003). In such a context, China does not want to be left behind in the introduction of electoral gender quotas.

Second, an electoral gender quota that has explicit goals is an efficient and effective way to guarantee the election outcome. China has a long history of feudalism, and women are underrepresented in all arenas, especially in political participation. Realizing the fact that women are underrepresented politically, the Chinese government adopted the gender quota as a compensatory measure to improve women's representation in rural governance. Although the introduction of this kind of quota has historically been difficult in most countries, as a one-party state, China could easily incorporate the electoral gender quota into its election laws and policies without facing opponents' criticism. Some scholars' research also supports the hypothesis that quotas are more likely to be adopted and work best in the countries such as China with a tight culture where people value obeying authority and strictly following cultural norms (Toh & Leonardelli, 2012). Quotas have been a handy tool for the Chinese government. China has quotas for various groups, such as ethnic minorities, people in various occupations, party and non-party members and so on. When implementing these quotas to facilitate the political participation of these various groups, the Chinese government sometimes attaches women's quotas to other quotas. For example, a non-CPC ethnic woman professor fits simultaneously the quotas for ethnic minority, intellectual, non-party membership, and gender.

The Chinese government acts as a leading actor in the design and implementation of the quota system. Other actors that facilitate the quota system in China include All China Women's Federation (ACWF) and international NGOs. ACWF is a mass organization led by the Chinese Communist Party. From my interviews with the Women's Federation officials, it can be seen that their advocacy of women's political participation through electoral gender quota is more pragmatic and therefore results in a utilitarian approach. More women's involvement in the grassroots governance will better help ACWF to carry out their projects in family planning, domestic violence, and domestic work. International NGOs, as a collective third actor, contribute to women's participation in grassroots government through

their subsidizing and supporting rural women's capacity-building projects. For example, the Ford Foundation, Oxfam, and FAIHPP worked with Yunnan establishments, while the UNDP, the Netherlands Embassy, and the Irish Embassy collaborated with Shaanxi governments at different levels and research institutions to initiate many action projects for rural women's political participation (Gao, 2010; Zhao, 2011). They developed special training materials for rural women's political participation, provided training on gender, community governance and leadership to rural women with political potential, and launched campaigns to publicize the significance of women's political participation. For elected women, they provided participatory training in gender analysis, village governance, women's leadership, and participatory rural appraisal (Gao, 2008; Jacka, 2008).

This article will draw on the author's fieldwork in Zhejiang province to address the following research questions: How is the reserved seats election of women members in the village government arranged institutionally? What are the impacts of such arrangements on rural women's political participation in China: does it help facilitate the redistribution of power positions or enhance the reproduction of gendered roles of women? The findings aim to shed light on the scholarly understanding of the implementation of reserved seats election in a one-party state and the prospects of such gender quota practice in China.

### **Electoral Gender Quotas: Policies and Implementation**

To accomplish these electoral gender quotas, provinces have adopted diverse policies on the basis of their economic and socio-cultural backgrounds and access to various resources (Liu, 2005; Howell, 2006; Pan, 2008). Among them, Zhejiang's reserved seats election for women members in the villagers' committee is a pioneering and effective practice in China, and recommended by All-China Women's Federation to all the other provinces (China Women's News, 2011). Therefore, Zhejiang is a perfect research site to study the reserved seats election in China. It is in the eighth election of village committees since 2008, when Zhejiang first introduced the reserved seats election for women members. *The Resolution on the Implementation of the 2008 Election of Village Party Branches and Villagers' Committees*, which was jointly issued by Zhejiang Provincial Department of Organization and Zhejiang Provincial Department of Civil Affairs, stipu-

lated that “there should be reserved positions for women members in the election of villagers’ committees” and “ensure there is a certain number of women’s representatives of village assembly in each village through legal procedures.” In 2008, 23,064 out of 29,492 villages in Zhejiang adopted the reserved seats election for women members in villagers’ committees. After the election, 83.23 percent of villagers’ committees have at least one woman member and over 95 percent of villages had at least one woman member in both village committees, a 50 percent increase from the election in 2005. Altogether there were 972 female party committee heads and 835 female villagers’ committee heads (China Women’s News, 2010). In Zhejiang’s village elections in 2011, it was reported that all villages elected at least one female member to either the villagers’ committee or village Party branch, and women accounted for 35.1 percent of the total village assembly representatives (China Women’s News, 2011). However, how these spectacular numbers were achieved is questionable. The following section will examine the mechanism and arrangement through which the quota targets are realized.

According to *the Provisional Work Program for the 2011 Election of Village Organizations in Zhejiang* issued by Zhejiang Provincial Disciplinary Committee and Zhejiang Provincial Departments of Organization, Civil Affairs and Agriculture in November, 2010, the quota goals for the rural governments in Zhejiang are as follows: female representatives should make up over one-third of the total numbers of the village assembly representatives; there should be more than one woman member in the villagers’ committee and/or the village Party branch in each village. According to this Program, both quotas should be fulfilled through reserved seats election for women members.

To elaborate how the local governments use the reserved seats in the village election, I will draw evidence from my fieldwork in County K, Zhejiang province between 2011 and 2015, which included interviews with officials of the county Women’s Federation, Civil Affair Bureau and township governments, questionnaire surveys and interviews with 48 women members of the village governments.

### *Election of Women’s Representatives in Villager Assembly*

According to Article 25 of *the Organic Law of Villagers’ Committees* amended in 2010, villager assembly representatives should be recommended and elected



by villagers. The number of representatives is determined by the population of the village, usually one representative for every five to fifteen households. In practice, each small production team<sup>3</sup> will have same number of representatives and the representatives elected should represent the interests of that small team. Whoever gets the highest vote will be elected. The elections of men representatives and women representatives are conducted separately. Members of villagers' committees and village Party branches will automatically become the village assembly representatives. In the 2011 election of village assembly representatives in County K, 3,336 female representatives out of 9,744 village assembly representatives were elected in total 255 villages, accounting for 34.24 percent. The following three procedures and measures are adopted by County K to realize the gender quota target in the villager assembly.

*Reservation.* The local township government will reserve female representatives' seats in the election of villager assembly representatives. If one village needs 30 representatives for its assembly, the number of the reserved seats for women representatives will usually be 11, slightly higher than the quota target of one-third women. There are two practices to allocate the quotas to the village. One is to tell the entire village to elect the certain number of women as required; the other is to allocate the reserved women seats among the production teams. If this village has 10 production teams, then each team will be instructed to elect 2 men representatives and at least 1 woman representative. To realize the quotas, there will be 1 production team having 1 man representative and 2 women representatives. Usually the villages will adopt the second practice which is easier to implement.

*Recommendation.* Villagers recommend women candidates for the reserved seats. In my interviews with the village women and the local officials, I learned that women with good relationships with their families and their neighbors were more likely to be recommended as candidates. A female villager said:

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<sup>3</sup> Since late 1980s, the household contract responsibility system was adopted in the Chinese villages. Each village is composed of several production teams and each team has 10 to 15 households. The heads of teams are elected by the households within the team. The heads undertake the responsibility of communication between the village committees and the villagers, submitting applications for housing sites and managing land and irrigation.

I will not recommend those women who are in frequent quarrels with their husbands and parents in law. If they cannot maintain good relationships with their family members, how should they represent us? We believe that family harmony is the most important thing.

*Second-round election.* The local government will organize a second round of nominations and elections for women representatives if the first round of election fails to produce the adequate number of women representatives. When interviewed, the local officials believed that the reasons for this quota failure might be that the villagers didn't have a good understanding of *the Organic Law* and the related policies or that the male villagers had discriminatory views against women. Before the second round of election, they tended to have more intensive publicizing of laws and policies to change the "backward" ideology of villagers. In the 2011 election, the County K government only gave township governments five days to organize the second round of election for women representatives.

I asked a deputy director of the local civil affairs bureau whether it was difficult to realize this quota and what they would do if all of these three measures failed to fulfill the designated quotas. He admitted that women representatives accounting for over one-third of village assembly was a tough goal to realize. Although village representatives were supposed to be elected by all the villagers or at least by villager households, villages had their own established rules to elect the village assembly representatives. Usually the head of each small production team would automatically be the village assembly representative and the vast majority of these small team heads were men. Besides the above-mentioned three measures, the township government would sometimes mobilize the elected male representatives to give up their positions to their wives or other female family members. He received several complaints from some male representatives, who said that women representatives brought their children to the meeting venues, making it too noisy to have a good meeting.

#### *Election of Women Members in Villagers' Committee*

In the 2011 election of the village government in County K, the number of the villages with at least one woman member either in the villagers'

committee or in the party branch was 249, accounting for 97.6 percent of 255 villages, very close to the quota. To realize this target, the local governments in Zhejiang again adopted the reserved seat election, but in a way different from the election of the villagers' assembly representatives.

Because of the very small number of women party members, the reserved seats for women members was only applied to the election of villagers' committees. On the ballot, there was a special seat for women member(s), separate from villagers' committee head and general seats for committee members. Theoretically, besides the reserved seats for women, women candidates would also be able to run for the villagers' committee head and the general seats. But in practice, most local officials and villagers understood that the general seats were only for male candidates.

The local governments were targeting and mobilizing women candidates with related working experience, reliable political quality, and higher education, namely, village women's congress chairs or former committee members, college graduates, and party members. In the 2011 election of villagers' committees in County K, 592 women registered as candidates for the reserved seats of villagers' committees, and 269 were elected. Women candidates who ran to be heads of villagers' committees are not counted in these numbers. In 2011, the numbers and percentages of women heads and members in the village governments in County K were as follows (see Table 1).

**Table 1.**

*Numbers and Percentages of Women Heads and Members in the Village Committees and the Village Party Branches in County K, 2011*

Heads and Members	N (%)
Villagers' committee heads	250
Female villagers' committee heads	3 (1.2%)
Villagers' committee members	562
Female members	269 (47.9%)
Village party secretaries	255
Female village party secretaries	8 (3.1%)
Village party branch members	755
Female members	70 (9.3%)

*Notes:* 5 out of 255 village elections failed to elect the heads of the village committees. The positions were undertaken by the other committee members temporarily.

According to the Program, if there are no women committee members in the elected villagers' committee, the village must organize another round of reserved seat election for women committee members. It was quite obvious that the design of reserved seats and ballot paper was a success, as very few villages needed to do the second round of election.

In early December 2011, I attended the Training Program for the Women Members of the Village Governments in County K, and surveyed and interviewed 48 women. For characteristics of these 48 respondents please refer to Table 2.

Of the 48 members of the village governments interviewed, 41 had related working experience either as village women's congress chairs, former members in the villagers' committees and the village party branches, or as liaison persons for birth control or land management personnel. Of the 41 with related working experience, 39 were village women's congress chairs, accounting for 95.1 percent.

Table 2.

*Characteristics of Women Members of the Villager's Committees and the Village Party Branches in County K, 2011 (N=48, Unit %)*

Aged 30-49 years	85.4
Married	100
With high school education or higher	29.2
Party member	72.9
Previous working experience	85.4
Allocated duty on birth control	100

The percentage of elected women who were Chinese Communist Party members in the village government was much higher than that of the general population of rural Chinese women, which was only 3.2 percent according to the Second Survey on the Social Status of Women in China organized by All-China Women's Federation and National Bureau of Statistics of China (Ding, 2006). From the 48 women interviewed, 35 were party members, accounting for 72.9 percent of the total respondents, and most of them joined the Party after they were elected members of the village governments. The remaining 13 respondents were not members of any political party.

The women committee members' levels of education were also higher than the provincial average. 70.8 percent of the respondents had junior middle school education; 22.9 percent had high school or technical high school education; 6.3 percent had college education or even higher. Meanwhile, the average schooling of rural women in Zhejiang at the time was just 6.82 years, just a little bit longer than the primary school education (Zhejiang Provincial Bureau of Statistics, 2012).

### **The Roles of Women Members**

All of the 48 women members in the village governments were given the responsibility of birth control, and for 11 of them, their only responsibility was birth control. Those who held additional duties were in charge of environmental sanitation and medical insurance, which are seen as appropriate work for women. Only two of these 48 women were responsible for major tasks, which were village affairs supervision and village finance respectively. Besides being given portfolios related to their gender, some women members were also tasked with chores such as making tea, cleaning the village government offices, and even cooking for the village government.

According to the regulation of Zhejiang provincial government, the salaries of the villagers' committee heads and the village party secretaries in County K were paid through transfer payment. The salaries of other members in the villagers' committee had to be handled by the committee, usually 60-70 percent of the village heads' salaries. The sources for members' salaries usually came from the collective income of the village, such as the rent from the collective land or forest, or limited subsidy from the provincial government for the impoverished villages whose per-capita annual income was less than 10,000 yuan. The salaries were usually paid once a year, by the end of Chinese lunar year. Because most villages didn't have much collective income and had difficulties in paying the members' salaries, the gendered roles of women members gave some villages excuses to pay them less than their male counterparts. 23 women members were paid less than their male counterparts by 800 to 4,000 yuan, accounting for 47.9 percent of the total respondents. The most common salary gap was about 1,000 yuan. Of the 48 respondents, 17 said that they were paid as much as the male members, while seven reported that they were not clear about whether their salaries were lower than men's and one respondent stated that she

received no payment for her job.

An interviewee who was the only woman member of a villagers' committee said:

Last year the annual salary of other members was 7,000 yuan, but I only got 5,000 yuan. I meant to complain about this to the county Women's Federation. But both the villagers' committee head and the village party secretary did not allow me to do so. They promised I would get equal pay as other male members this year. When the villagers' committee and the party branch held a meeting to discuss our salaries, I was absent from taking care of my sick mother in hospital. At the meeting, some members said that I as a woman did not do much work, and therefore didn't deserve to get equal pay as the men members.

To her complaint, the head of the villager's committee where she worked responded:

Men and women members have different working hours. Men spend more time on work. They participate in all kinds of work in the village. The woman member is only in charge of birth control. We don't ask her to do any difficult jobs or the job might cause disputes. But anyway, we will consider giving her equal pay this year.

Although underpaid and deemed by their men counterparts as not doing much work, women members in the villagers' committee arguably had the most difficult jobs. Birth control and environmental sanitation need cooperation from the villagers. In the focus group of 48 members, most of them complained about the difficulties of birth control. The following quotes were complaints from three interviewees:

Birth control is a job that requires a lot of labor but gets no credit. I spend so much time trying to persuade women to have intrauterine devices for contraception. If they don't listen, my work is just a waste of time and nobody acknowledges my work and effort.

The changing of birth control policies has brought about many troubles for our work. It was compulsory for a woman who has an only son or two children to have sterilization. We persuaded some obedient women into doing this. But the naughty ones would avoid it. Now we have a different policy, it's not compulsory to do sterilization. They can choose whatever means to control conception. Those who have done sterilization cursed us.

Now women have freedom to choose the way to control conception. It increases the difficulty of the birth control work. You ask them to have intrauterine device, and they will tell you they're going to use condoms. If they get pregnant and have an extra baby, we will be punished.

### **Training after Election**

By early April 2011, County K had completed all the elections at the village levels. In May, the County Organizational Department conducted a four-day training program for the newly elected villagers' committee heads and village party secretaries. The lecturers were officials from various departments of the county government. It was an inclusive program covering 16 topics that the local government believed essential to the work of the village heads and village party secretaries. The topics ranged from the general introduction of the state policies and programs such as the rural grassroots organization construction, the new countryside construction, maintaining rural harmony and stability, and the 12th five year plan, to information about specifics such as laws on land, meteorological disasters, birth control, food and drug safety, and duty crime prevention. Although this program attempted to target every aspect related to the work of village heads and village party secretaries, one important point was missing in the training program, namely gender issues. The only subject slightly relevant to gender issues was the birth control work, but the birth control lecture was in no sense in promotion of women's wellbeing.

In late November and early December 2011, the County K Women's Federation organized a three-day training program for the elected women members in both villagers' committees and village party branches. But even in the explicit training of women members, it was difficult to find gender

issues addressed in the training program. Instead, the training program was more specifically focused on the women's perspectives. The lectures were given by Women's Federation cadres and the local Party School's lecturers. The contents of lectures included the current international situation, the spirit of the 6th plenum of the 17th central committee of CPC, women's health knowledge, and women's work knowledge, which was mainly about birth control techniques and reproductive health. They also arranged a group discussion about how to play one's roles in facilitating the construction of the new countryside and promoting the harmony of the rural society. However, the group discussion did not proceed as the organizer had hoped, as it turned out to be a good opportunity for rural women cadres to complain about their tough work and low pay.

When asked why there were no gender issues addressed in the program, the Chair of the County K Women's Federation explained that there were two reasons for this absence: first, it was not required by the central government or the provincial government; second, even if they did want to discuss gender issues, they lacked lecturers with certain gender knowledge and also the funds for this curriculum.

### Discussion and Conclusion

By examining the policies, measures and implementation of the reserved seats election for women members in China's rural government, the author will draw on the research findings to address the gender quota debates on the redistribution of power positions between men and women, reproduction of gendered roles of women, and the prospects of the current electoral gender quota in China.

*Has the Reserved Seats as an Electoral Gender Quota Facilitated the Redistribution of Power Positions between Men and Women?*

The reserved seats election has proved to be a very effective way to increase the numbers of women representatives in the villager representative assemblies and the villagers' committees within a short period of time. The carefully designed election system and strict implementation of the local governments have successfully satisfied the gender quota goals. In the villagers' committees, nearly half members are women. However, it will be too soon to jump into



the conclusion that through the reserved seats election, the political powers have been redistributed between village man and women. The increased number of women members does not necessarily lead to the enhanced representation of women and change fundamentally the power distribution between men and women. In County K, only 3 (1.2%) out of 250 villagers committees and 8 (3.1%) out of 255 village party branches are headed by women. The small percent of women heads in the village governments will not be sufficient to change fundamentally the power distribution between men and women. From my observation, the efforts to enhance women's representation are just at this preliminary stage where few women have access to limited power but are still learning how to exercise power.

Also, the negotiation about transferring the representative roles from a husband to his wife under the instruction of the local government indicates that these elected women representatives might not be independent of the influence of the Party and their husbands, and are more likely to represent their family's interests than the interests of village women. It implies that some elected women might be incompetent or unqualified for the position. The reason why they got elected might be their husbands or male members of families cannot take the positions, so the women are actually acting for their family members.

In this sense, we have to admit that tokenism does exist in the rural women's political participation in China. Elected women do not have adequate autonomy, time and resources to "act for" women to design and implement activities regarding women's wellbeing even they have such an intention.

What's more, the existing reserved seats election arrangement is often misunderstood and serves as a cap to women's access to political participation despite the fact that its preliminary intention was to mandate a minimum number of female participants in the politics. Women candidates are actually deprived of their opportunities to be elected to the non-reserved seats. In a sense, the reserved seats create a glass ceiling for women.

From 2011, when the research was started, to the present, neither the local governments nor the central government have adopted new policies and measures to facilitate rural women's participation in the village government. When comparing the results of villagers' committee's elections in County K in 2011 and 2014 (see table 3), we can find no substantial increase in the number of women either as the heads or members of villag-

ers' committees or the representatives of villager assemblies. As long as the gender quota has been met, the local government has no intention and no motivation to change the status quo of rural women's political participation.

Table 3.

*Numbers and Percentages of Women Heads and Members in the Village Committees and the Village Party Branches, and Women Representatives in Village Assemblies in County K, 2011 and 2014*

Heads and Members	N (%)	
	2011	2014
Villagers' committee heads	250	252
Female villagers' committee heads	3 (1.2%)	3 (1.2%)
Villagers' committee members	562	501
Female members	269 (47.9%)	263 (52.5%)
Village party secretaries	255	243
Female village party secretaries	8 (3.1%)	8 (3.3%)
Village party branch members	755	802
Female members	70 (9.3%)	NA
Village assembly representatives	9,744	11,462
Female village assembly representatives	3,336 (34.2%)	3,978 (34.7%)

*Notes:* In County K, the total number of villages in both 2011 and 2013 is 255. 5 villages in 2011 and 3 villages in 2014 failed to elect the heads of the village committees; the positions were undertaken by the other committee members temporarily.

### *Has the Reserved Seats as an Electoral Gender Quota Enhanced the Reproduction of Gendered Roles of Women?*

In China's case, most women members' roles are confined to reproductive and domestic work such as birth control and environmental sanitation, or in some cases, care of children and the elderly, and public health. In the author's fieldwork, all the 48 women respondents have been given gendered roles. This observation resonates with Dahlerup and Freidenvall (2003)'s argument that quotas would result in a reproduction of stereotyped gender roles.

Even though the Chinese government does not intend to enhance women members' gendered roles, the designing and implementing of the reserved seats election has as a matter of fact led to the reproduction of

women's gendered roles in two ways:

First, the designing of the ballot with a special seat for a woman member leads to a misunderstanding among most villagers. They believe only this special seat is available for women, so they will not consider women candidates for other positions. When this ballot design is combined with the villagers' established opinion about women's roles, it makes the women members' gendered roles unavoidable. In the author's interviews, when asked about the villagers' opinions or comments on women cadres, they will automatically refer to the women members as the ones in charge of birth control and women's affairs.

Second, there is a special policy made by the Zhejiang provincial government requiring that all Chairs of village women's congresses should be elected into the villagers' committees. The initial intention of this policy was to guarantee the number of women members, because these women usually have some administrative experience that makes them good candidates. However in China's case all chairs of village women's congresses are responsible for women-related issues. When they are elected into the committee, the nature of their job does not change.

As a consequence of undertaking gendered roles, women members in the village governments receive comparatively lower salaries and less credit for their work because their jobs are deemed by the male members to be easy and unimportant.

### *The Prospects of Reserved Seats as an Electoral Gender Quota*

Despite their limited access to power and to roles other than gendered roles, women elected in the village governments have gradually gained more confidence and comfort in their work. Their presence has also enabled villagers and local officials to acknowledge the women members' important and indispensable roles. Regardless of the debates about the legitimacy of birth control policy in China, the importance of birth control work to the village governments does give women members in the village governments more room to play their roles. And the fact that a majority of the women members have joined in the Chinese Communist Party during their terms indicates that the gendered roles they play now provide them with future opportunities to play more general roles. In this way, the redistribution of power between men and women is quite foreseeable.

There is also a chance for women to have less gendered roles. China practiced very rigid one-child policy between 1980 and 2015. From 2016 on, each family in China has been permitted to have no more than two children, which is not a total relaxation of birth control but still a great advance in Chinese people's birth right. The birth control issue will no longer be a priority work for the women members.

In conclusion, the current institutional arrangement of rural women's political participation has effectively increased the number of women participating in grassroots polity and helped them to get access to power on one hand but caps women's number and confines women to gendered working roles on the other. The reserved seats election for women in the village government has enhanced the reproduction of gendered roles in the process of the policy implementation. In the long run, however, there are prospects for the redistribution of power positions between men and women to be improved and the reproduction of gendered roles of women members to be lessened.

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