

# Feminist-Inspired NGO Activism in Contemporary China: Expanding the Inductive Approach in Qualitative Inquiry

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Ping-Chun Hsiung<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article analyzes feminist praxis and nongovernmental organization (NGO) activism in the Heyang Project, which endeavored to increase women's political participation in rural governance through village elections in Shaanxi Province, China (2004–2013). It presents an NGO-centered framework to challenge the Western and state-centered lenses that have been used to frame and assess the development of NGOs, civil society, and the women's movement in China. I disrupt the exclusive power upheld by the researcher by inserting the interpretative voices of the researched. I demonstrate that the Project transcends the predicament of a binary conceptualization. The NGO successfully interweaves and juxtaposes seemingly contradictory forces.

## Keywords

feminist NGO, China, qualitative inquiry, women's participation in rural governance, rural election

In the fifth village elections in 2003 in Shaanxi province, only 184 women were elected as village heads, a mere 0.6 per cent of the total. By the sixth election in 2006 the number had almost doubled, and by the seventh election in 2009 it had increased to 544. Together with the women on village Party committees, there were now 1,193 women village officials throughout the province, 4.5 per cent of the total . . . How was it that within the short space of five years, the number of women village officials could increase this way? (X. Gao, 2010, p.870)

Increasing Women's Participation in Village Government in China: Is it Worth It? (Jacka, 2008)

One of the perennial challenges in the transnational women's movement is adequately analyzing and theorizing local feminist praxis. International researchers and funders often apply an outsider lens in investigating and presenting local activities and phenomena. Their power and position in "writing-up" often excludes their subject, the researched, from speaking for themselves. This is the case in China, where starkly different accounts can be conveyed about the same event. For example, the quotes above convey two opposing perspectives on the same nongovernmental organization (NGO) project, the Heyang Project, implemented to advance women's political participation through village elections in Heyang county, Shaanxi province, China. The first is an excerpt from Xiaoxian Gao, founder of the Shaanxi Research Association of Marriage and Family (hereafter, the Research Association), the NGO that carried

out the initiative through initial funding from the Ford Foundation. X. Gao's (2010) piece discusses strategies that she and her team used to bring about changes leading to more women elected into village office—an outcome she considered "[having] an impact on the local gender division of labor and entrenched gender attitudes that far surpassed the number along" (p. 870). The second is the title of an article by Tamara Jacka, a feminist scholar at the Australian National University who studies gender, rural–urban migration, and social change in contemporary China. Jacka's paper, without denying the electoral results highlighted by Xiaoxian Gao, questions whether the effort is worth it in the first place. She argues that village governance is an inconsequential platform and cites comments by newly elected female officials as evidence of the additional hardship they endured since stepping forward. At the heart of this contradiction is the politics of knowledge production and reproduction resulting from *re-presentation* and *writing-up*.

This article engages with the decolonizing endeavor that invites qualitative researchers to think through the ethics and politics of interpretation (Denzin, 2005). It also directs critical reflexive attention to the politics of writing-up, in which the researcher often exercises exclusive, unchecked

<sup>1</sup>University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada

## Corresponding Author:

Ping-Chun Hsiung, Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Toronto, 1265 Military Trail, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M1C 1A4.  
Email: pc.hsiung@utoronto.ca

power to *own* and *tell back* the story of the researched through re-presentation (Hooks, 1990). In this article, I analyze feminist praxis and NGO activism centered on the Heyang Project. I use terms such as *re-presentation* and *writing-up* to emphasize the constructed nature of knowledge production, and call for a critical reflection on researchers' roles in the process.

To unravel the re-presented story of Chinese feminist praxis by researchers, I first present a methodological review of two sets of literature pertinent to framing: (a) debates over the development of NGOs in China and their relationship with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) state and civil society, and (b) analyses of the women's movement in China. I argue that in existing literature, researchers rely on a state-centered framework and/or Western-filtered lens to interpret, appraise, and write-up the story of NGO activism and the women's movement in China. Doing so has resulted in analyses of Chinese feminist praxis and NGO activism that assume the state is responsible for social change, that changes have been reliant on Western ideas and funding, and that NGOs have failed to establish a civil society to curb the authoritarian CCP regime. Using the Heyang Project as a case study, I put forward an NGO-centered framework that allows for a nuanced understanding of NGO activism and feminist praxis in contemporary China because the framework is substantiated by insights and interpretations of the leaders/participants of the Project. By calling upon them as the interpretative authority, rather than relegating them to be the interpreted object, this article illustrates how to tackle the researcher's exclusive monopoly in re-presentation and writing-up.

In this article, I draw heavily on an unpublished manuscript about the Heyang Project and interviews with its key participants, which I coauthored with Xiaoxian Gao and Juan Du.<sup>1</sup> I follow the inductive logic of qualitative inquiry to summarize key attributes of the Project. I demonstrate that as an NGO, the Research Association was neither coopted by nor antagonistic to the CCP state. Instead, it simultaneously challenged and collaborated with the CCP state and the All China Women's Federation, the mass organization established by the state to disseminate official policy and represent women's interests. My analysis shows that the Research Association was able to draw on its members' knowledge of the history of local feminist praxis and organizing to achieve the Project's goals. Specifically, the Project's intervening strategies were realized by utilizing the top-down and bottom-up bureaucratic functioning of the CCP state and the Women's Federation. Building on the analytical summary of an NGO-centered framework, I outline methodological insights essential to theorize feminist praxis in China, which have been obscured by state-centered frameworks and a Western-filtered lens.

## NGOs, Civil Society, and the Women's Movement in Contemporary China: A Methodological Review

Over the past three decades, researchers have made concerted efforts to assess the emergence and development of civil society in China. This work centers around two general topics: (a) the state, NGOs, and civil society; and (b) the status of women and the women's movement. The literature is interrelated and shares comparable methodology and epistemological viewpoints.

The term *NGO* was introduced to China when Beijing was preparing to host the United Nations' 4th World Congress on Women in 1995. Ever since, studies on NGOs in China have examined their development in the context of state and civil society. Many researchers have focused on clarifying the diverse terms used to denote emerging groups/entities, and others have documented the steady growth and diverse characters of the trades, professional, charitable, and volunteering organizations (Q. Ma, 2002; Saich, 2009; Whiting, 1991). A fundamental question central to these studies is whether these entities have led to the emergence of a civil society that functions as an autonomous sector to curtail the authoritarian state by mediating its relationship with individuals and families, which are the primary units of society (Deng, 2010; Mencher, 1999; Saich, 2009; Schwartz, 2004; Yang, 2005). Although most researchers have identified the state, NGOs, and civil society as three interrelated entities in their analyses, they explicitly or implicitly use a state-centered framework that either frames NGOs as extensions of the state or pits the state against the NGOs and civil society. This kind of framework emphasizes the pervasive control of the state over NGOs and is based on the assumption that being autonomous and independent from the state is a prerequisite for NGOs to realize their activism, and for civil society to challenge the authoritarian state.<sup>2</sup> This leads to an appraisal of NGOs in China as deficient and inadequate, and of civil society as being "overshadowed" by the state rather than as a "potential vehicle rising up to overthrow its rule" (Frolic, 1997, p. 51).

Methodologically speaking, these researchers consistently use the institution as the unit of analysis by aggregating individual data to the institutional level. In doing so, individual actions and interactions are re-presented and written-up by researchers driven to adjudicate the status and attributes of the state, NGOs, and/or civil society. This is particularly apparent when performative, public speeches are presented as "interview data." Such data are also quoted as proof of the researcher's argument without any reference to the context in which the data were collected.<sup>3</sup> Overall, the writing-up practices underscore a deductive logic where researchers exercise exclusive power in re-presenting their informants. No mechanism is in place to compel

researchers to critically reflect upon their unchecked power in writing-up. A similar issue occurs in official reports by international funders who rely entirely upon local collaborators (most of them women) to execute their organizations' gender and development programs in China. In many cases, local participants' labor and practical know-how is never acknowledged and does not enter the discourse of feminist praxis. Instead, Chinese women are presented as passive recipients of developmental project and in the form of statistics, in write-ups to present their deeds and legacy.<sup>4</sup>

Similar to scholars focusing on NGOs and civil society, these authors have long adopted a state-centered framework in assessing women's status and/or the women's movement in China. In the 1970s, Western socialist scholars looked up to China for inspiration. They presented the CCP state as a monumental, benevolent liberator of women (Croll, 1979; Davin, 1976; Young, 1973). After China opened up to Western researchers in the late 1970s, terms like "unfinished liberation" and "socialist patriarchy" were used to categorize the CCP state as having betrayed Chinese women and its promises (Andors, 1983; Johnson, 1983; Stacey, 1983). This research has applied a top-down logic, implying that only the CCP state has the power to either liberate or oppress Chinese women. It also projects a gaze from the Western core to the peripheral that turns Chinese women into objectified Others.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the women's movement in China appears to come up short as it is measured against its Western counterparts.<sup>6</sup> Contributing to this perception is the fact that the women's movement in China has undeniably been influenced by international (Western) feminist praxis and the NGO sector has been supported through international funding. Viewing local praxis through a Western lens, however, obscures how local feminist organizing has taken Western imports and adapted them based on local traditions and practices.

### *The Politics of Re-Presentation and Writing-Up*

It is indisputable that the CCP state has long been a dominant force in all aspects of Chinese society and that the regime has shaped the development of NGOs, civil society, and the women's movement. But it is not the only factor of influence and it is problematic and counterproductive when a state-centered framework is employed deductively during data collection (whether for research or program evaluation). Doing so can obscure the often subtle or hidden ways that nonstate actors are able to push the boundaries imposed by the state, sometimes even while working with state institutions. Unless the state-centered framework is suspended at the outset, the energy underneath the seemingly suffocating curtain of the CCP state will remain undetected. In parallel, a Western-filtered lens informs what and how data about the researched will be processed and assembled into scholarly or other official knowledge. As this article will

show, it is particularly crucial for researchers to forego a Western-filtered lens in writing-up to recognize the agency and contributions of the researched. I will show below that although the Research Association employed the concept of gender and practice of gender training in their organizing, it transformed them from their Western origin and individualistic premise into collective, locally grounded concepts. Furthermore, a crucial aspect of the Project's community mobilizing is connected to the lineage of women's liberation led but then aborted by the CCP state to advance women's political participation by challenging patriarchal ideology.

To analyze the dynamic relationship between the state, NGOs, and the women's movement, I situate the Heyang Project in the larger historical project of China's modernization. I recognize that since the Opium War (1840–1842), the intellectuals, peasantry, and various sociopolitical groups have continuously employed diverse strategies to realize their visions of modernity (Chang, 1987; Chow, 1960; Feuerwerker, 1968; Jen, 1973). Engaging with the state and challenging its structure have rarely been an either/or choice. Thus, as I will illustrate below, applying a state-centered framework to analyze the Heyang Project obscures rather than illuminates NGO activism and feminist praxis in contemporary China where the Research Association simultaneously challenged and collaborated with the state apparatus. Likewise, I argue that a Western-filtered lens not only perpetuates the colonial gaze; it is also too simplistic to adequately illuminate feminist praxis.

### **The Heyang Project**

The objective of Heyang Project (2004–2013) was to increase women's political participation in rural governance through village elections. The project involved four phases: getting women elected into local office (2004–2006), enhancing the leadership skills and capacities of the newly elected female officers and incorporating gender lenses into local governance (2006–2007), expanding mobilizing efforts from Heyang county to Shaanxi province (2008), and extending women's political participation from the village level to other levels and branches of the party state (2009–2013). It was a participatory action initiative designed and executed by the Shaanxi Research Association of Marriage and Family founded by Xiaoxian Gao as a civil group (*minjiantuanti* 民间团体) in 1986.<sup>7</sup> According to Gao, she and many intellectuals of that era were eager to get involved as China began its market reform. As a woman came of age under the motto of "women holding up half of the sky," Gao was struck by unprecedented challenges faced by women when the principles and infrastructure of planned economy gradually gave way to privatized market. Gao had been head of the research office at the provincial Women's Federation in Shaanxi before founding the

**Table 1.** Electoral Results of Village Elections in Heyang County.

Year	Directors			Members of village committees		
	Total	No. of women	% of women	Total	No. of women	% of women (%)
Fifth election (2002)	351	0	0	1,296	191	14.7
Sixth election (2005)	348	20	5.7	1,285	324	25.2

Research Association. There she became keenly aware about the limitations of the Federation in confronting obstacles women encounter, such as political participation, which began drastically declining in the early 1980s. She founded the Research Association as a venue for feminist-inspired NGO activism.

Since its inception, the Research Association has gathered a group of dynamic staff and seasoned practitioners. Realizing feminist principles through intervention and participatory empowerment is the Association's canon. Transparency and democratic practices are its operational ethics. Its efforts have largely been devoted to transforming patriarchal norms and practices through gender training, an approach inspired by international feminist praxis. It has carried out many gender and development initiatives in Shaanxi province. By adopting a participatory framework and through "carrying out [developmental] projects" (*zuoxiangmu*, 做项目), the Research Association has provided opportunities for a sizable group of capable women to step into the public arena in rural communities.<sup>8</sup> The Heyang Project was its first attempt to advance women's political participation through village elections. Although many women participated in the Association's development projects, Gao and her colleagues realized that simply having women participate in these projects was too limiting. In order for women's and feminist issues to enter the discourse of local governance, women needed to be involved in decision-making via political participation. Starting in the late 1990s, the Research Association gradually shifted from its activist identity from "carrying out project" to "conducting NGOism" (*zuoNGO*, 做NGO).<sup>9</sup> This implies that the Association has come to conscientiously position itself as an NGO, whereas its conduction of developmental projects is simply a means to realize an NGO-centered activism. In this sense, the Heyang Project was a new chapter in the women's movement in China where a feminist NGO, rather the CCP state, took the lead.

One of eighty counties, Heyang is located at the Western-boarder of Shaanxi province. The Research Association chose Heyang County to implement its intervention because it had established professional rapport with the county-level Women's Federation through collaboration on several gender and development initiatives. The central goal of the Heyang Project was to subvert patriarchal norms and practices through policy implementation, gender training (*shehui xingbie peixun* 社会性别培训), and community

organizing.<sup>10</sup> Intervening efforts and mobilizing strategies were established to (a) hold the party/state branches accountable for policy implementation, (b) activate the mobilizing capacity of the Women's Federation, (c) identify and persuade capable female candidates to enter the race and to succeed once being elected, and (d) convince local communities to cast their votes for female candidates. As noted, the effort was inspired by the international feminist movement but was deeply rooted in the history of the women's movement in contemporary China.

Numerically speaking, the Heyang Project transformed the political landscape of women's representation as directors and members of the village committee—the CCP's lowest administrative branch in charge of civil, political, and economic affairs at the village level. Table 1 illustrates the result of the Heyang Project in its first phase. In 2002, the year before the launch of the program, no women were elected as directors of village committees in Heyang county; in the 2005 election, this number rose to 20 as a result of the Heyang Project. The number of women elected as members of village committees also increased considerably.

When viewed through an NGO-centered framework, I argue that these figures signal a new chapter in advancing gender equality in China. For decades, women's liberation was one of the claims consistently made by the CCP state to establish its legitimacy. In particular, the CCP state repeatedly cited the "Constitution of People's Republic of China" (1998) and the "Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women" (1998) as having realized women's equal rights in political participation through casting their votes and running for offices. However, women's political participation continued to decline despite policy such as the "Organic Law of Villagers Committees," which stipulates that an "adequate number" of women should be elected as directors or representative members of village committees. Whenever the issue was raised, the CCP state dismissed or downplayed the significance of the deplorable records, suggesting that they are an indication of inadequate policy implementation, women's low quality, and/or the residual, backward patriarchal ideology of the villagers. To challenge the CCP state's inaction and false claims, the Research Association designed and executed the intervention that turned equality between men and women from an abstract policy declaration into tangible electoral outcomes.



The Heyang Project also enabled the Women's Federation to activate its dormant mobilizing capacities. As a mass organization set up by the CCP state, the Federation has an extensive bureaucratic structure stretched from national headquarter in Beijing to every remote village in the countryside.<sup>11</sup> Within the Federation, this hierarchal structure gives the upper level units administrative power over the lower ones. However, the Federation is at the fringe of the CCP state's bureaucratic system and must adhere to the state's commands (the provincial Women's Federation follows instruction from the party secretary and provincial offices of the CCP state). Operationally, this means that the Federation has often disseminated state policy at the expense of its imperative to represent women's interests. As I will illustrate below, the Research Association made a concerted effort to manipulate the Federation's position vis-à-vis the apparatus of the CCP state so as to enable the Federation to fully use its mobilizing potential. It also exploited the bureaucratic functioning within the Women's Federation.

It is also important to note that since the 1990s, the Research Association has been at the forefront of feminist activism bridging local and international interests. As already noted, although the Heyang Project was initially funded by the Ford Foundation, over time it was also able to draw upon local administrative and financial resources. In addition, gender as a feminist concept and gender training as a mobilizing device originate from the West, but the Research Association did not simply apply them as colonial transplants. Instead, it used them as a means for individuals to realize their individual potential while joining the collective project as empowered agents. The Association transformed the idea of gender and gender training into a means of organizing to challenge patriarchal ideology and practices in local community. Ultimately, it incited community longing for gender equality. Thus, the Heyang Project was grounded in local feminist praxis while negotiating and transcending the local/global divide.

### An NGO-Centered Feminist Praxis

Below, I analyze the Heyang Project as an example of an NGO-directed feminist praxis. I focus on the Research Association's activism in relation to the CCP state, the Women's Federation, bureaucrats and women, and the local community. In my presentation, I first highlight the core attribute of each collaborative endeavor. This is followed by a section on the politics of such collaboration where I draw on stories and interpretations from the Project's key participants to document behind-the-scenes interventions that cleared obstacles and turned the tide at critical junctures. Finally, I provide an analytical summary to articulate the organizing logic and thematic threads of the project as an NGO-directed feminist praxis.

The ordering and content of these three sections underscore a methodological approach that I develop. I recognize that the existing principle of inductive logic in qualitative inquiry emphasizes the importance of deriving analytical insights from combing through rich, thick empirical data, but I argue that it insufficiently problematizes the researcher's exclusive authority in this process. To put this authority in check, it is imperative to carve out a space for the researched objects. In this article, I create such a space by including a section on the politics of NGO activism between a descriptive section that focuses on the Research Association's intervening endeavor and an analytical summary that teases out the key attributes of its intervention. This section makes it possible for the Project's key participants to provide their lived experiences and interpretative insights. In so doing, they contribute to the re-presentation and write-up of the Heyang Project as interpretative authorities, rather than being relegated to interpreted objects.

### From Policy Declaration to Policy Implementation

Village elections have always been within the CCP state's administrative domain. Thus, transforming state policy from rhetorical promises of women's political rights into tangible electoral outcomes could only be realized through deliberate policy interventions conducted via the administrative system and within the system itself. The Research Association needed to simultaneously challenge the state for having failed to realize gender equality and also collaborate with the two administrative offices in charge of village elections: the Civil and Administrative Office (*Minzheng* 民政厅, CAAO) and the provincial and county level Personnel Department (*Zuzhibu* 组织部); the former is the state/party unit directly in charge of village elections and the latter handles all of the CCP's personnel matters. The Research Association's objective was to insert a policy implementation mechanism that would replace habitual indifference with an effective means to hold the rank-and-file bureaucrats accountable. In collaboration with the provincial Women's Federation, the Association skillfully orchestrated the development and pronouncement of Directives 25 and 58 prior to the sixth (2005) and seventh (2007) village elections, respectively. The directives were co-signed by the provincial-level CAAO, the Personnel Department, and the Women's Federation, the significance of which I discuss below.

*Directives 25 and 58.* As implementation mechanisms, both directives intervened in the *process* leading to the village election, stipulating women's participation in the process, and setting a quota for the electoral outcome. Both directed that the Women's Federation should participate at all levels of electoral committees organized by the state/party

branches; that each village should have at least one female member sitting on the village election committee that oversees the election; and that each village should nominate one female candidate to run for the directorship of its village committee. To ensure the electoral outcome, Directive 25 stipulated the following: There should be no fewer than three women directors on the village committees in each county, district, or municipality; in relatively developed and densely populated counties, districts, or municipalities, there should be no fewer than five women directors, and 25% of representatives on each village committee should be women. The effectiveness of the quota was proven in the sixth election, and so Directive 58 increased the quota, stipulating that 5% of elected village *directors* should be female.

From the perspective of NGO activism and feminist praxis, having these directives issued was significant in three ways. First, as a local, grassroots NGO, the Research Association had neither legitimate status nor tangible leverage to advance women's political participation through village elections. It was rather extraordinary for the Research Association to facilitate collaboration among key administrative units of the CCP state to move from the state's conventional rhetorical policy declaration into the uncharted territory of policy implementation. Furthermore, because the directives were issued by the provincial CAAO and the Personnel Department, the district, township, county, and village branches of these two units were administratively obligated to carry them out. This meant that a massive amount of the state/party's political, administrative, and financial resources were activated and directed to realize the objectives of a feminist initiative launched by a feminist NGO.

Second, as a mass organization, the Women's Federation was often ignored by other bureaucratic units of the CCP state when it came to eradicating gender inequalities. Having the provincial Women's Federation as one of the co-signees not only elevated its previously peripheral position, but it injected a mechanism for the Federation to realize its potential. For example, having a seat on the election committee enabled the Federation to intercede when election-related decisions were being made. The requirement to have at least one female candidate nominated also allowed the Federation to nominate and support capable candidates. Most importantly, the directives resolved an embedded contradiction the Federation had long struggled against: implementing state policy and also representing women's interests. The resolution of this contradiction enabled the Federation to fully realize its organizing capacity, as I will discuss in more detail later.

Third, the directives brought an initiative led by a feminist NGO and funded by an international donor into the electoral arena of the CCP state. They assured that the

Heyang Project was not an undertaking concocted by an NGO, whose status is often seen as questionable if not outright suspicious by the CCP state. Directive 25 acknowledged that Heyang County was a pilot site to advance women's political participation through village elections in the sixth election. Having the recognition of Heyang County as pilot site written into the directive implied that the provincial CAAO and Personnel Department not only publicly endorsed the Project, but they also expected bureaucratic units of the entire Shaanxi province to emulate it.

In the seventh election, as the Project devoted its mobilizing efforts in three new counties, the CAAO followed suit. Directive 58 explicitly stated that

in order for the pilot counties to meet the targeted electoral result, the district and municipality of those counties must provide comprehensive support. To advance women's political participation to a new height, all other counties in Shaanxi must emulate approach and strategies employed by the pilot counties. (X. Gao, in press-b, p. 58)

To subsidize the Heyang Project's mobilizing endeavors, the provincial CAAO provided \$50,000 (US\$10,000) to each of the pilot counties.

Together, Directives 25 and 58 explicitly turned vague promises of women's right to political participation into actionable devices of policy implementation. By having the directives issued by the provincial-level CAAO and the Personnel Department, the Research Association relied on the existing bureaucratic structure as a mechanism to hold rank-and-file bureaucrats at lower administrative levels accountable to specific measurements of electoral outcomes.

*The politics of policy intervention.* The negotiated processes that led to the development and implementation of Directives 25 and 58 shed light on NGO-centered activism. In August 2004, before the first of the directives was issued, the Heyang Project had acquired funding through the Ford Foundation. This put the Research Association in a position to approach the director of the provincial Women's Federation to beginning the political process of issuing a directive as an intervening mechanism. At the time, the Association also contemplated having a quota clause included in the directive. Although the quota system had been in wide use internationally to rectify systematic gender inequality impeding women's political participation, when the idea was first suggested by the Association to the minister of the CAAO, he opposed it emphatically. He insisted that although existing policy stated the need to have an "adequate number" of women elected, it did not include a definite number. To him, adding a quota would not only deviate from original policy, but might "[safeguard] women's right at the expense of infringing upon

men's right" (X. Gao, in press-a, p. 58). In March 2005, representatives from the Women's Federation and the Research Association presented various rationales at a meeting to fully deliberate the matter, but his opinion was unchanged. He conceded reluctantly only when Mr. Zheng, the Director of the Institute of Policy Research at the Provincial Party Committee, asserted, "The Organic Law stipulates to have *adequate number* of women elected. If there were no woman elected at all, it would also be a violation of the Law" (X. Gao, in press-a, p. 58)

As noted above, the sixth village election proved the effectiveness of Directive 25 as an intervening mechanism. Rather than waiting to be approached this time, the Minister of the CAAO initiated a conversation with the director of the provincial Women's Federation in December 2007, indicating that his office was ready to work with the Personnel Department and the Women's Federation to issue a new directive for the upcoming seventh village elections. At the meeting to draft the directive, Xiaoxian Gao and representatives from the provincial Women's Federation proposed increasing the targeted quota from at least one female director being elected in each county (district and municipality) as in the sixth election, to at least five in the seventh election. The Minister stunned everyone by recommending that the target be raised so that 5% of elected directors would be female. His suggested target was much higher than the national level (1.6%), and meant that at least 12 female directors would have to be elected in each county (district and municipality). When others questioned the likelihood of reaching the proposed target, the Minister of CAAO laid out his rationale. As recalled by X. Gao (in press-b),

According to the Minister, the target is meant to encourage all involved units to excel their effort. No matter how low a target we set, there will be ineffective, underperformed counties failing to reach the target. Setting a higher target is to incite those adept counties. It is likely that they will work hard to meet or even surpass the target. With their higher than expected performance, we are likely to raise our overall performance when we even out performance of these two groups. To the very least, we will surpass our record of the 6<sup>th</sup> election. (pp. 88–89)

With regard to the Minister's explanation, Xiaoxian Gao recalled that five of 72 counties in Shaanxi province had managed to elect more than 10 women as directors of village committees in the sixth election. Although still rather unsure about the likelihood of success, she welcomed the Minister's insights, trusting that "he knew how the system worked" (X. Gao, in press-b, p. 89). She particularly appreciated his willingness to muster the administrative leverage to advance women's political participation in the upcoming election.

*Analytical summary of policy intervention.* These intervening efforts and politics call for a nuanced understanding of the state, bureaucratic system, and NGO activism in China. First, the bureaucrats of the CCP state constitute a heterogeneous group who do not always think and act with "one mind." For example, Directive 25 had a quota included only because of an argument put forward by a career researcher of the CCP state. Moreover, CCP bureaucrats are known to sometimes change their position and even lend support to NGO activism. It was more unusual for the Minister of the CAAO who opposed the quota during initial deliberations on Directive 25 to not only change his position a few years later, but to recommend a seemingly unattainable figure in Directive 58 to elevate the cause to a new height. His strategic rationale was informed by his knowledge of "how the system works." To frame the CCP state solely as an authoritarian entity would be to neglect the inner workings of the bureaucratic machinery and the heterogeneity and agency of its individual members. These attributes have been overlooked in the existing literature on the CCP state and NGOs.

Second, the Research Association employed both confrontational and collaborative tactics. Although the Heyang Project was intended to denounce and rectify the CCP's failure to advance women's political participation through village elections, the Research Association also found ways to strategically collaborate with the state to realize its agenda. Most importantly, it effectively exploited the top-down nature of the bureaucratic functioning of the CCP state to implement abstract policy promises through policy implementation. This also challenges the state-centered framework used in the existing literature, which portrays a gulf between an authoritarian state and NGOs.

Third, achieving the Heyang Project's objectives relied on a convergence between international and domestic resources. Independently and collaboratively, the CAAO, the Personnel Department, and the Women's Federation directed their administrative, human, and financial resources to support the project. The Western-filtered lens pays sole attention to external resources provided by the international funder. It also implies a dichotomous split that fails to recognize the convergence and fluidity between local and global forces in feminist praxis.

### *Unleashing the Mobilizing Capacity of the Women's Federation*

As already noted, the Women's Federation is a mass organization with an extensive bureaucratic structure. Its staff and offices, often referred as the "arms of the Federation," extend from national, provincial, regional, county, to village levels. Its strength is its capacity to muster mass mobilization, capitalizing on its access to and knowledge about local communities. Nevertheless, the Federation's status as

a mass organization relegates it to the fringe of the CCP's bureaucratic power structure. Thus, the Federation does not have any formal administrative authority to actually effect women's political participation through village elections. As noted, this authority is held by the provincial CAAO and the Personnel Department. In practice, the authority specifically resides in the offices of the CAAO and Personnel Department at the county and district levels and is realized through nominations, resource allocation, and formal/informal endorsements. Directives 25 and 58 were a bureaucratic intervention that the Federation leveraged to reposition itself within the bureaucratic structure and unleash its own mobilizing capacity.

As a co-signee of the directives, the provincial Women's Federation was elevated to the level of the CAAO and the Personnel Department. Specifically, the directives required a Federation staff member to sit on the election committee. This meant that the party/state branches no longer monopolized the bureaucratic machinery in village elections. Most importantly, the director of the Federation had rare in-person access to the key players of the CCP's bureaucracy—who were almost entirely men. The Heyang Project shows how the Women's Federation in Shaanxi province got women elected by maneuvering its marginalized bureaucratic position and playing up its strengths.

*The Federation's mobilizing endeavor.* The directives publicly pronounced the party's/state's endorsement of women's political participation through village elections. This meant that the Women's Federation was free to rally behind female candidates: They were perceived as legitimately implementing state policy, rather than self-servingly representing women's interests. The following three vignettes capture the Federation's mobilizing endeavor: Vignette 1 illustrates how the Women's Federation at the county level takes advantages of the Directive 25 during the sixth election; Vignette 2 captures the Research Association's deliberate and delicate exertion to secure support from the CCP's bureaucracy; and Vignette 3 documents how the Research Association, in collaboration, with the Women's Federation, mobilized and consolidated the Federation's internal support as the Project expanded from Heyang county to the entire Shaanxi province during the seventh election.

*Vignette 1: Local organizing.* After Directive 25 was announced, the Federation tackled the existing administrative structure in two ways. In villages where it considered the incumbents to be weak or vulnerable, the Federation made deliberate efforts to identify strong female candidates to come forward, and mobilized its resources to ensure they won. In villages where the party secretary held a concurrent post as the director of the village committee, the Federation

skillfully approached the CAAO to persuade the party secretary to withdraw from running for the directorship to free up a slot for a female candidate.

On the ground, the Women's Federation of Heyang county mounted an all-out election campaign. Staff members went door to door to identify and persuade promising women candidates to come forward. To help them overcome their self-doubt, the Federation recommended they attend a gender training workshop organized by the Research Association. In addition, to quiet the "noises" (i.e., uproar/opposition) surrounding them, staff members brought along retired female cadres or respected male elders to talk to husbands and/or in-laws to "neutralize" their objections and/or galvanize their support. Many of these "sprouts" (*miaozi*, 苗子), as they were known, eventually agreed to put their name forward. During the election, offices of the Federation became the headquarters where election-related information was shared/updated and campaigning strategies were concocted.

*Vignette 2: Profile raising and public forum.* After Directive 58 was developed, Xiaoxian Gao and the director of the provincial Women's Federation grew increasingly anxious about delays in making it public caused by administrative gridlock on the part of the state/party branches. During the agonizing wait, Xiaoxian Gao learned that Madam Xiuliang Gu, the president of the national All China Women's Federation in Beijing, was planning an official tour to Shaanxi province. Gao immediately contacted the director of the provincial Women's Federation, and together, they decided to use Madam Gu's visit to advance the Heyang Project. In less than a month, they put together the "Forum on Women's Participation of Local Governance in Shaanxi Province," with Madam Gu invited as an honorable guest. As a public forum, the event successfully galvanized bureaucratic support in three ways.

First, because Madam Gu was also Vice-chair of the National People's Congress, the highest administrative organ of the People's Republic of China, it gave her symbolic authority above and beyond provincial state/party offices, including those of the premier and ministers of state/party branches of Shaanxi province. Therefore, the Forum, organized by the Research Association and the provincial Women's Federation, was attended by the Party Secretary and leaders of party/state administration at the provincial level (i.e., the head of provincial People's Congress, ministers of the CAAO, and the Personnel Department). According to Xiaoxian Gao, having so many high-ranking state officials attend an event on women's political participation was extremely rare. The event raised the legitimacy and public recognition of the Heyang Project when it was broadcast on TV and reported on in newspapers.



Second, the Forum provided a platform for the director of the provincial Women's Federation, the Party Secretary of Heyang county, and Xiaoxian Gao to rally support for women's political participation through village elections and to showcase the Heyang Project. After their presentations, Madam Gu applauded their remarkable achievement. She appealed directly to the Ministers of the party/state offices to "tilt" their administrative power/attention in support of women's political participation. In response, the minister of the Personnel Department pledged to make three changes in the upcoming election: (a) move from a superficial understanding of the importance of women's political participation into action; (b) change vague policy into specified quotas to safeguard women's representation; and (c) establish an administrative structure and offer individual mentorship to advance women's political participation. He declared that women's political participation must be implemented proactively through interventional directives, above and beyond routine administrative operations. This was a major victory for the Heyang Project; Xiaoxian Gao (in press-b) commented, "the Forum became an inaugural event for Directive 58 and the upcoming election" (p. 90).

Third, the Research Association bussed in the 20 elected female directors of village committees in Heyang country to attend the forum. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for them to shake hands with Madam Gu at a photo ceremony. This opportunity not only boosted their morale but also their status in the local community.

*Vignette 3: Gender training workshop.* To expand its scope from Heyang county to Shaanxi province in the seventh election, the director of the provincial Women's Federation called out the Federation's entire body in the province to activate its mobilizing capacity. She declared that advancing women's political participation through village elections was the Federation's 2008 strategic plan. This meant that human and budgetary resources at all levels would be devoted to the objective, and the performance of every office would be assessed according to the electoral results. She then instructed the heads of Federation's regional, county, and district/township offices (a total of 108) to attend a gender training workshop organized by the Research Association.

Workshop participants were first trained in general mobilizing strategies. Next, they were grouped into teams clustered along geo-administrative divisions (e.g., the heads of district/township offices were assigned to work with the head of their affiliated county). Employing a bottom-up participatory approach, each team was asked to develop a strategic plan for the upcoming election. Plans identified tasks such as recruitment of promising female candidates, allocation of human and financial resources, vertical and horizontal collaborations within the Federation and across the Federation and the state administrative systems, and

accountability mechanisms. The teams spent a half-day mapping out their respective strategic plans, and as their plans took shape, an orchestrated action plan for the entire province began to emerge.

As each team shared its strategic plan and received feedback from their colleagues and the workshop facilitator, collective excitement and enthusiasm grew: Participants were ready to go back to carry out their plans. The workshop wrapped on a high note with three action-based resolutions: (a) the director of the provincial Federation promised to distribute funding her office had recently received from the party/state branch to cover training and mobilizing expenses incurred by the regional offices; (b) the heads of regional, county, and district Federation offices pledged to pay a personal visit to the party secretary one administrative level below them to secure his backing; and (c) collectively, the attendees would anchor their mobilizing endeavors along the following devised slogan:

Securing party secretary's backing;

Identifying solid candidates;

Galvanizing public support;

Powering through the election with precision. (X. Gao, in press-b, p. 92)

The slogan underlined a concrete objective on three strategic fronts that the Federation must realize: having the party secretary's backing was non-negotiable, identifying solid female candidates was a must, and consolidating public support was imperative. It closed with a punctuated vow as the attendees embarked on the seventh election.

*The politics of the Federation's mobilizing.* These vignettes illustrate that a major aspect of the Research Association's activism and its collaboration with the Women's Federation was to enable the latter to fully realize its mobilizing capacity. The Directives enabled the Federation to exploit its dormant mobilizing capacity at the ground level. The "Forum on Women's Participation of Local Governance in Shaanxi Province" was a carefully planned and skillfully executed organizing undertaking. The event capitalizes on Madam Gu's status in the CCP's bureaucratic system. The provincial leaders of the party/state were obliged to attend an event that they would otherwise likely sidestep. Gu's speech turned the Forum into a massive rally that compelled the Minister of the Personnel Department to publicly pledge his administrative commitment. He codified changes essential to translate a policy declaration into policy implementation.

In addition to the public affirmation obtained on stage, the Heyang Project team used the occasion to foster administrative support through a personalized relationship with

the Party Secretary of the Heyang County. Knowing that he and his office upheld direct administrative authority and influence in village election, Xiaoxian Gao pressed the county Women's Federation to invite him to attend the forum. He was even given a chance to make a presentation in front of the national and provincial dignitaries, knowing that he would gratefully appreciate such an opportunity. Gao also instructed her team to arrange to have him seated next to her at the Forum, so she could engage him in small talk. Throughout the forum, Xiaoxian Gao briefed him about the accomplishments of the elected women directors in Heyang county and discussed challenges related to the upcoming election. She told him that his support was crucial, and at the end of the evening, he "gracefully made himself available by saying, 'contact me anytime when you run into difficulties'" (X. Gao, in press-b, p. 92).

The Research Association and Federation's mobilizing tactics were developed and informed based on insider knowledge about the workings of the CCP's bureaucratic culture and practices. Both Xiaoxian Gao and the director of the provincial Women's Federation were veterans of the Women's Federation.<sup>12</sup> As they strategized to expand their efforts from Heyang County to all of Shaanxi province, they both considered it essential to get the entire Federation system on board, and they viewed the gender training workshop as an effective means of mobilization. However, they disagreed on who should attend the workshop. Xiaoxian Gao believed it was vital to have the heads of the Federation's regional-, county-, district-, and county-level offices attend. The director and her assistants were concerned that because of the responsibilities and competing commitments of the regional leaders, this approach would lead to low turnout and thus diminish the purpose. Upon Xiaoxian Gao's insistence, the director and her assistants leveraged all their administrative authority to get the heads to attend the workshop. According to Xiaoxian Gao, such effort was remarkable because in the Federation's mobilizing history, it was rare for the heads of the Women's Federation at the regional, county, and district levels of the entire Shaanxi province to come together for a 3-day training workshop. The pledge and momentum secured at the workshop eventually paid off, and in retrospect, X. Gao (in press-b) noted,

Given China's administrative cultural and practices, unless one secures endorsement and support from the head, it would be very difficult to see an administrative order from provincial office executed all the way down to the lower offices. It turned out my instinct was right. (p. 92)

*Analytical summary.* The strategies used by the Research Association and the Women's Federation included a mixture of bureaucratic, top-down functioning and grassroots, bottom-up mobilizing. The former is similar to the leverage activated within the state/party sector, as discussed in the

previous session. The latter is very much rooted in the roles of the Federation as a mass organization and the history of the women's movement within the CCP state. The actions and mobilizing tactics of the Federation show how it took full advantage of the new bureaucratic landscape as constituted by the directives. It broke away from its peripheral position, unleashed its seasoned cadres, and capitalized on its mobilizing capacities.

Such energetic dynamism relied on proactive members of the Federation. As Xiaoxian Gao (in press-a) reflected on the Heyang Project, she repeatedly praised the director of the provincial Women's Federation as "a leader with strategic vision and sensitivity" (p. 65). She felt that the electoral results reflected the mobilizing endeavors of local branches of the Federation: "wherever the Federation puts in its thought and invests in solid effort, the electoral results were outstanding. Those areas where the results were poor, it was because of the insufficient effort of the Women's Federation" (X. Gao, in press-a, p. 69).

This collaborative work between the Research Association and the Women's Federation exemplifies both continuity and discontinuity in the history of women's organizing in China. As a mass organization, the Women's Federation continues to uphold extensive administrative contacts, personal/professional networks, and mobilizing strategies and experiences at the community level. These are invaluable resources inherited from the CCP-directed, decade-long project of women's liberation. The Heyang Project benefited from the know-how and infrastructure of the Federation as part of the heritage of the women's movement in China. The Research Association tapped into the Federation's strengths, which appears to reflect continuity, but the dynamic work of the Research Association actually manifested a new chapter in feminist activism. As a feminist NGO, the Research Association positioned itself to bring together constituents of the CCP state and the Women's Federation to realize a promise that the CCP state had long failed to deliver.

### *Gender Training as a Means of Feminist Organizing*

This section details how the Research Association was able to engage CCP bureaucrats to engage in gender training. The gender training served as a means of NGO organizing to ensure that policy implementation would be realized at the individual level. In prior sections, I described gender trainings used prior to the seventh election to activate the mobilizing capacity of the Women's Federation. Here, I focus on how the Association used gender training workshops prior to the sixth election to solicit commitment from bureaucrats, and to encourage women to step forward as candidates and succeed once they were elected.

*Turning bureaucrats into change agents.* After Directive 25 was issued and before the sixth election, the Research Association organized a trip for the party secretary, the head of the CAAO, and the director of the Women's Federation in Heyang county to visit a county in northern China that had already increased women's political participation through village election. The visit helped the county leaders better appreciate the objectives and significance of the Heyang Project. They learned that bureaucrats and administrative units in this county had moved beyond simple declaration of commitment by actually carrying out proactive strategies to realize such rhetorical promise. This visit fundamentally changed their thinking and planning regarding the Heyang Project. According to Xiaoxian Gao (2014, Heyang Project/Interviewer: J. Du & J. Du),<sup>16</sup>

In the past, their position was "being assigned [to implement the policy]" (*yaowoguan*, 要我管). Now, they assumed a position of seeing policy implementation as "my business and I want to see it done" (*woyaoguan*, 我要管). (p. 42)

The trip functioned as a sort of "sensitizing baptism" that helped the leaders of Heyang county reposition themselves through a change of mind. They moved from a passive position of being assigned to implement the policy to a proactive position as change agents who wanted to see it done. This pledge from individual bureaucrats was the result of interbureaucratic exchange that dismantled the indifference and inaction within the bureaucratic system, which had long forestalled policy implementation: Such a change in mindset is subtle but significant in feminist mobilizing.

After their visit, leaders of the bureaucratic branch in Heyang County agreed to have their frontline staff receive gender training from the Research Association. A total of 120 bureaucrats in charge of policy implementation in Heyang County attended a gender training workshop during which the facilitator argued that stagnation of women's political participation meant that the entire society loses along with women. Participants were asked to identify specific obstacles they foresaw in advancing women's political participation through the upcoming village elections. They then worked in small groups to develop specific strategies to address the identified obstacles. This led to the articulation of orchestrated efforts to entice administrative support, activate professional/personal networks, and develop inter-unit collaboration.

*Empowering women to be the trailblazers.* The Research Association organized two types of gender training workshops throughout the Heyang Project to empower women to run for elected positions. Recruitment-oriented workshops were organized during the first and third phases before the sixth and seventh elections. They focused on getting women to step forward as candidates and help them get elected into the office. Capacity building workshops were organized

during the second phase to provide information and training for newly elected women directors.

At a typical recruitment workshop, facilitators first argued that the state had failed to fulfill its commitment to gender equality. They pointed out that in recent years, women's interest had been particularly compromised because local governance had mainly focused on economic development, investment in infrastructure, and societal security. Issues directly related to women's welfare (e.g., women's health, children's education, family violence, and property rights for married women) were deemed secondary. This kind of neglect was unlikely to be addressed when only 1% of party secretaries and directors of village committees nationwide were women, as in the last election. The facilitators then tackled the pervasive patriarchal ideology in China, illustrated by proverbs that ridicule women's political participation as resembling "the hen cackles in the morning, the rooster lays eggs" and that deter women from stepping forward because "no matter how big the window is, it should never be bigger than the door."

After the impediments to women's political participation were mapped out, participants were asked to brainstorm action-based strategies to dismantle them. For example, through role-playing, participants came up with a script for a wife to talk to her husband and in-laws about her decision to run for local office. One group suggested that to overcome the loss of identity and social capital that married women experience due to patrilineal practices, a female candidate could strategically introduce herself to fellow villagers as the wife or daughter-in-law of a well-established local man/clan rather than as a newly arrived/married, non-affiliated outsider/bride. Others created a mock campaign speech that replaced women's habitual unassuming disposition with confidence. This de- and reconstructive work encouraged women to step forward, as illustrated by the following excerpt by one candidate:

I'm a quick temper and competitive person. When I realize that women could get involved in local governance, I could no longer be an indifferent bystander. For years, I have seen our village plagued with problems, problems like muddy road, insufficient running water, littered garbage, and complicated infights. I have been rather agitated. After giving it much thought, I decided to put my name forward. (C. Li, in press, p. 1)

As a campaign speech, this excerpt illustrates how this candidate put herself forward by applying her personal traits (quick temper, competitive) to public discourse (i.e., what is at stake in village affairs). It illustrates the public-private divide women encounter as they participate in local governance. At the discursive level, the candidate explained how she adjudicated tension between the public perceived feminine traits and expected public persona as well as why she decided to step into the public arena.



After the first cohort of female village directors (*nvcun-guan*, 女村官) were sworn in, the Research Association organized gender-based capacity building workshops to help them acquire administrative skills and establish contacts with their administrative superiors at the County level. The Association made deliberate efforts to have officers in charge of local development from the Heyang County to attend the workshop to explain the administrative responsibilities of their respective offices (e.g., transportation, hydro, electricity). The gathering was also meant to give the female village directors a chance to meet their administrative superiors in person. This was important because they would soon be making repeated trips from their village to the county offices in Heyang to secure funding for infrastructure projects (electricity, running water, paved roads, community centers, etc.) for their villages. The trip was known as “running around for project (*paoxiangmu* 跑项目).” One of the primary yardsticks used by local communities to measure the village director’s accomplishments was whether or not she was able to secure enough funding to instantly improve their daily living through infrastructure projects. As I will discuss below, when the first cohort of women village directors in Heyang recalled their experiences of “running around for project,” their narratives bring to light the politics of women’s political participation in rural governance as uncharted territory.

*The politics of gender training workshops and women’s political participation in rural governance.* Soliciting and cementing commitment from administrative authority is essential to implement policy. The Research Association knew that the Party Secretary and the head of the CAAO of Heyang County had administrative authority over the village elections, and applied this knowledge to its mobilizing efforts. Reflecting upon their intervening strategy, Xiaoxian Gao noted that the saying “officials of the higher rank are able to crush the ones below” (*guandayiji yasiren* 官大一级压死人) is an essential rule of the bureaucratic system in China. She stated,

Once the NGO knows how the administrative system works, you know who to go to get things done. You must be flexible, knowing where and how to turn and all that. It was critical to issue the Directive, having our project’s objective incorporated into the government’s policy declaration. Even after the Directive was issued, it could still be ignored. In order to get it done, the person in charge must turn it into assignments and demand the rank-and-file to implement it. The deputy secretary is powerless. The Women’s Federation is ineffective. Even with administrative directive, it could still be ineffective. Deliberate effort must come from the person in charge. He must be willing to take it up and see it done. (X. Gao, 2014, pp. 137–138, Heyang Project/Interviewer: J. Du & J. Du)

Only after the Party Secretary and head of the CAAO committed themselves to “take it up and see it done” did

they agree to have the rank-and-file bureaucrats receive gender training on feminist perspectives from the Research Association. This was a daring move and remarkable breakthrough because the CCP state and its bureaucrats are known to assume a cautious position about “foreign” influence/import, for example, the NGO, feminist perspectives, and gender training.

According to Xiaoxian Gao, for women who had never thought about stepping into the political arena to realize their individual potential, “the [recruitment] workshop was an incubator that nurtured a cohort of female candidates for the upcoming local election” (p. 6, Chapter 3). Integrating an action-based participatory approach into gender training further facilitated the motto “see it done.” This required differently positioned individuals to contribute to a collective undertaking. At the workshop, facilitators encouraged participants to think through various strategies that emerged from brainstorming. For example, while on the surface, a husband or mother-in-law might question who would do the housework, their real anxiety might be related to the husband’s masculinity and/or gossip or disapproval among neighbors who consider women’s political participation as a sign of “the hen cackles in the morning.” Once the participants identified, and then executed, strategies to defuse the “real” concerns, NGO activism was no longer an abstract, discursive concept. It was realized through collective undertaking.

In contrast, as the first cohort of women village directors in Heyang stepped into the political area, they relied upon their personal strength and determination to carry out their daily duties. For example, Yin (2005) described the extra burden she carried to prove herself:

The society as a whole is biased. We experience pressures from every corner. It is as if you women are only able to look after kids. There are all sorts of gossip and slander about women. They wonder what a woman could do. “She is only good at taking care of babies,” this is the most hurtful comment I’ve received since I get involved. Although there have been all kind of pressures and doubt, they’ve made me becoming even more determined. If you really force me out, I have no choice. However, when you accuse me of frivolous rumor to intimidate me, I buckle down. I must prove myself. I want to get something done. This means I have to put in more than ten times of effort of my male colleagues. I am determined to get things done. This is how I feel since I’ve taken up the position. (p. 7)

Others recalled their experiences of securing funding for village projects. For the female village director, funding was not finessed over the numerous rounds of wine, toasts, karaoke singing, and late-night outings routinely used by male village directors and their male superiors. In contrast is the not atypical story of H. Li, who waited for more than 5 hr to establish an initial contact with the director of the Planning Department at Heyang county:



I went to visit the director of the Planning Department. It was before the Chinese New Year. I brought a bottle of wine as a gift. I called him after I got to Heyang, saying that I would like to see him. He asked me to go to his office. I thought it would be a bit strange for me to bring a bottle of wine to his office. I thought it would be better if I went to his house. I knew where he lived so I waited outside of his apartment building, thinking that sooner or later, he would come back. I still remember. It was on December 17, a rather cold day. I ended up waiting there for more than five hours . . . Eventually, I saw his mother coming back from shopping. I told her I would like to talk to her son but didn't feel comfortable going in to his office with the wine. His mom was very kind. She asked me to go in so that she could offer me a cup of hot tea. She felt sorry for me because it's really cold that day. I went in but didn't dare to stay long. I was afraid the director might come back and not like the wine I brought him. So, I quickly left after just a few words. . . . I sent him a message on my way home, apologizing for not having a chance to meet him in person. A few days after I got back to the village, I got a message from him saying that he has got thirty thousand dollars as seed money for our village to build the paved road. My trip was worthwhile. The wait was worthwhile. (H. Li, 2013, pp. 22–23, Interviewer: F. Du)

Another director, Y. Ma remembered the insult and outrage she felt when she went to Heyang as a Rip van Winkle. After getting to the capital of Heyang county via a long bus ride through heavy snowfall, Ma recalled the long walk on slippery roads in ankle-deep snow from the bus station to the county office building. By the time she got there, her boots were completely covered in ice and snow. She welcomed the warmth of the building. Once she stepped inside, Ma recalled, "they got a heating fan there!" While waiting in the reception area, the snow and ice on her boots turned into a puddle of water. The receptionist glared at her and said, "Couldn't you pick a better day to come!" Years later, Ma recalled,

I was so insulted and enraged by her look and remark. I wasn't a beggar! If I weren't a director, I wouldn't go there! . . . Could they ever understand what it means to be a village director in the countryside? Ma, Y. (2014), On Heyang Project, Interview conducted by X. Gao, Transcript, p. 17.

While their narratives were punctuated by challenging episodes and indignant emotion, assuming authority in local governance irrevocably changed these women and perceptions about them. Ma asserted, "in my family, my daughter knows I'm in charge. Not her dad!" She told her fellow directors that after a heated exchange with her husband, she told him that "even if we got divorce, I would still be the village director, *his* village director!" (Y. Ma, 2014, p. 17, Interviewer: X. Gao).

*Analytical summary.* Since the 1990s, Chinese scholars and practitioners have upheld two opposing positions on the

notion of gender and gender training among Chinese scholars and practitioners. For example, Xiaojiang Li opposes embracing gender and gender training to eradicate inequality between men and women in China because they are Western imports saturated with colonial connotations (X. Li, 1996). Zheng Wang advocates exchange and hybridization across national boundaries (Wang, 2004). Others categorize gender training as a refreshing Western import that empowers, and calls on, individual women to combat persistent gender inequality (Du, 2001). It is essential to note that when the Research Association employed gender training as an organizing device, it was directed at a collective ethos. Its call to confront gender inequality was framed as an interdependent endeavor whereby individual actions were infused within the collective. Thus, the leaders of Heyang county were motivated to tackle pervasive bureaucratic norms and practices that were indifferent to advancing women's political participation. The rank-and-file bureaucrats were encouraged to act because "when women lose, the entire society loses." Together, CCP officials and rank-and-file bureaucrats pledged to revamp institutionalized norms and practices that had made the CCP's gender policy a discursive declaration rather than a lived reality. Women who had never considered a political platform as a means of self-fulfillment were inspired as members of a disenfranchised group fighting against patriarchal ideology and a societal fabric that had long delegitimized them as rightful participants of the public sphere. Therefore, the fusion of, and fluidity between, the individual and collective allowed gender training to serve as an effective, localized organizing device. In other words, gender training was reconceptualized from general characterization as a foreign import underscored by individualism to an organizing device that galvanizes individual pledges to establish a collective, comradesly *we*.

In addition, gender training was realized through an action-based, participatory pedagogy, which ensured that ideas were implemented through clearly defined plans of action. It framed individuals as differently positioned change agents. Thus, specific action plans were developed, crisscrossing alliances emerged, and intervening strategies were collaboratively executed. In other words, although the Heyang Project was an initiative inspired by the international women's movement, its practices were guided by locally informed strategies. As I will illustrate below, this local-global alignment rests on the genealogy of women's movement in China.

Furthermore, when the first cohort of women village directors recalled their experiences in rural governance, the hardship they endured features prominently. This is one of the primary reasons that Jacka declared the Heyang Project to be an unworthy undertaking. Such a conclusion is problematic because it overlooks women's action in the face of adversity and their own interpretation of their action.

The instances of Yin's determination to "buckle down," Li's categorization of her trip and long wait as being "worthwhile," and Ma's expressed pride in being her husband's village director even if they divorced all speak against Jacka's conclusion. Dismissing the worthiness of the Heyang Project fails to understand that in the Chinese context, narrating hardship is a common practice that allows the narrator to project his or her agency. It also enables the narrator to remain being an everyday individual rather than becoming an oversized giant.<sup>13</sup>

### Community Mobilizing

As discussed above, the Heyang Project entailed considerable planning and effective execution to implement its intervening policy mechanism, activate the administrative system, and collaborate with the Women's Federation. These mobilizing endeavors were relatively easy in comparison with community mobilizing because they involved targeting well-defined groups and established networks (e.g., particular administrative offices, names of responsive bureaucrats, and contact numbers). It was much more difficult to transform patriarchal ideology in local communities so that villagers would cast their vote for female candidates.

*Organizing strategies.* Once the Heyang Project was funded through the Ford Foundation in 2004, Xiaoxian Gao appointed Danzhu Gao as the project's director. Danzhu Gao was a Heyang native and had moved back to her hometown after recently retiring as an officer of the provincial Women's Federation. Together, the Gaos mounted a community-based mass campaign to upend the pervasive patriarchal ideology that was very much a defining feature of village life. Knowing that Heyang County had a rich cultural heritage and active community lives, they decided to recruit a local folklore troupe as a medium to advocate for women's political participation through village elections.

In preparation, Danzhu Gao reached out to locally known but retired "crosstalk" and folksong scriptwriters.<sup>14</sup> Using the narratives of female candidates as raw materials, they composed lyrics and scripts echoing feminist perspectives. A theater troupe of male and female local villagers was organized. They spent months putting together a performance that coalesced the new lyrics in old, familiar tunes, and jingles.

Facilitated by the Women's Federation of Heyang County, the troupe delivered their crosstalk and folklore musical at makeshift theaters in 17 villages in the month prior to the sixth election. The show usually started around 8:30 or 9:00 p.m. after villagers had come back from the field, finished their dinner, and were in a relaxed mood. In the 2-hr performance, the troupe replaced traditional verbal lore with newly constructed feminist scripts to reveal cultural constraints, appease husbands and in-laws, and rally

community support. The shared folklore melody and formulaic crosstalk rhythm enabled the troupe to engage the mass audience, although the message they delivered was assailing stereotypes and the patriarchal ideology the audience had rarely questioned.



**Figure 1.** The theater troupe carried out a community-based campaign.

*The politics of community mobilizing.* Reflecting upon their mobilizing work, Danzhu Gao contrasted it with their past efforts with a community campaign launched by the CCP to advocate women's political participation in the 1950s. She described a long history of outreach plays:

I remember when I was a kid, there was the election campaign. Basically, every village had to put together its own outreach play. This is Heyang's tradition . . . I remember it was 1954. I was a student at the time. We, the students, were being mobilized to join the campaign. Advocacy is extremely important. At the time, the first and foremost was folklore play. Then came the huge posters. We also used billboards to spread the message on importance of women's political participation. Gao, D (2014), On Heyang Project, Interview conducted by J. Du, Transcript, p. 4

In this genealogical context of political movement, the current troupe and retired crosstalk and folksong writers were the tradition-bearers. As the audience listened and watched, the troupe reminisced about an unfinished project that had started a half century ago. They called on the community to pick up the torch. With hundreds of new banners and murals descending upon their communities, getting women elected once again became the current talk of the town.

When Danzhu Gao was asked about how she managed to pull it off, she downplayed her role:

I didn't do anything really extraordinary. I simply did what I was supposed to do; coordinating groups, making sure things

got done, etc. etc. There were times when they needed me to talk to cadres and officers. Because I had just recently retired [from the Federation], I still knew those people, those people at the county or village level. I knew where to find them and how to talk to them. . . . When we needed to get their support, teacher Gao [Xiaoxian Gao] sometimes would ask me to make the phone call. I would make the call. Coaxing, bluffing (*lianhong dai piping* 连哄带批评的), and doing all those sort of things [when I called]. (D. Gao, 2014, p. 28, Interviewer: J. Du)

Danzhu Gao did not specify who she had called, nor did she detail her “coaxing” and “bluffing” tactics. Nevertheless, her statements illustrate how she was a linchpin in community mobilizing. She was able to provide an actionable structure and mobilizing endeavor targeted at the loosely defined “masses” because she “knew those people, those people at the county or village level.” As a recently retiree and a Heyang native, she knew “where to find them” and “how to talk to them.” These “coaxing” and “bluffing” tactics are not “how-to” strategies found in conventional textbooks about feminist praxis. Instead, they were a clever strategy used by a seasoned member of the Women’s Federation who was fully aware of the practices of locally grounded feminist praxis.

*Analytical summary on community mobilizing.* The community mobilization in Heyang was centered on the renewal of its folklore tradition. Transforming the folklore tradition into a means of feminist organizing demanded clear vision, deliberate effort, and dedicate execution. Danzhu Gao was the catalyst, strategically activating her personal and professional networks to remake the troupe into a mobilizing force. This mobilizing endeavor illustrates a dialectic engagement resembling the classic Chinese metaphor of “new wine in old bottles.”

The troupe and theatric performance behind the community mobilization were fueled by the heritage of local community. The retired scriptwriters and performers were members of local communities. The troupe traveled to individual villages to put on their performance in makeshift theaters according to daily routine of village lives. Although they adopted the rhythms and melody of traditional folklore musicals, the message of feminist longing was fresh and new. As a true believer of advocacy, Danzhu Gao was convinced that “unless the mass comes to embrace it, women’s political participation would never get rolling” (p. 3). She continued, “once the mass resonates with the message, they will commit themselves, knowing that it has to rely on women to get things done” (D. Gao, 2014, p. 5, Interviewer: J. Du).

Danzhu Gao’s story of rural campaigning in the 1950s serves as a form of collective memory of the women’s movement that connects the past and present. As someone who had witnessed and been involved in both the past and present, Danzhu Gao was acutely aware of the continuity

and disjuncture. When asked to comment on women’s organizing in the present in an interview, she stated,

After I joined the Research Association, I learned many new terms. For example, I came to learn the term “grassroots.” I feel the term is different from those we were familiar with. It is really rather awkward!! (D. Gao, 2014, p. 16, Interviewer: J. Du)

Upon probing, Danzhu Gao listed some of the “awkward” terms used by the Research Association and comparable terms used in the 1950s. She framed the contrast in term of “we said” versus “they say”:

We used the term “foundational units” (*jiceng*, 基层). They call it “grassroots” (*caogen*, 草根);

We said “promotion” (*xuanchuan*, 宣传). They call it “community mobilizing (*shehui dongyuan* 社会动员);”

They say “good governance” (*shanzhi*, 善治). We said “rigorous management” and “heightened supervision (*yange jiandu guanli* 严格监督管理);”

They call “baseline research (*jixian diaoyan* 基线调研.” We said “investigative research (*diaocha yanjiu* 调查研究).” (D. Gao, 2014, pp. 16–17, Interviewer: J. Du)

Thus, Danzhu Gao identified a genealogical lexicon that stretches over more than a half century of the women’s movement in contemporary China. Although she considered the new terms used by the Research Association to be “awkward,” she was still able to relate to them when she compared them with terms used in the earlier era. For Danzhu Gao, they projected the same objectives of women’s organizing. This kind of continuity and disjuncture highlights a unique aspect of the women’s movement in China.

## Methodological Insights

The story and politics behind the Research Association’s activism underscore the inadequacy of a state-centered framework and a Western-filtered lens in understanding the relationship between the state, NGOs, civil society, and the nature of the women’s movement in China. The state-centered framework presupposes that the state is all powerful and NGOs are powerless. An NGO-centered framework levels the playing field by recognizing NGOs as dynamic players in a state-dominated context. The confrontational and collaborative engagement between the Research Association and bureaucrats of the CCP state illustrate the dynamism and energy of the Research Association. It also demonstrates the need for closer examination of the bureaucratic system: its heterogeneous members, shifting positions, and potential for change.



Given the fact that the Research Association deliberately and methodically appropriated the top-down administrative functioning of the CCP state and the Women's Federation to realize its agenda, it is fruitful to explore ongoing tensions and engagement between the NGOs and the CCP state. Rather than asking why the NGOs have failed to disrupt the authoritarian regime, a question dictated by a Western-filtered lens, researchers should examine competing agendas and strategic alliances between the two key players. Meaningful issues for exploration of NGO activism in the Chinese context include, for example, how the NGOs rally and cooperate with the state; how NGOs appropriate state resources to realize their objectives; and under what circumstances and context the state participate initiatives initiated by NGOs to realize their own administrative mandate. These questions compel researchers to suspend, even if only temporarily, their evaluative gaze originating in the Western democratic context. By focusing on, and embracing, the empirical reality and mundane happenings on the ground, researchers are more likely to derive analytical insights situated in, rather than divorced from, the Chinese context.

Since the Opium War (1840–1842), Westernization and nationalism have been two opposing positions underscoring debates over modernization in China. The former is faulted for its “colonial” orientation, and the latter for its antagonistic isolation. Calling feminist perspectives and gender training “colonial imports,” and labeling feminist critique of the CCP state “non-patriotic” mirror this polarized debate. By employing gender training as a means of mobilizing, the Research Association translated a foreign import into a locally actionable device. It rallied differently positioned individuals as change agents to realize a collective agenda. It converted administrative and financial resources of the CCP state to carry out a grassroots project initially funded by an international agency. Thus, the Heyang Project transcended the predicament of a binary conceptualization. In the context of the international women's movement, its legacy calls for a methodological perspective that recognizes the interplay of local and global forces and fluidity of individualism and collective ethos.

Furthermore, an essential feature of the Heyang Project can only be fully understood by taking a historically grounded view of women's organizing in China. The Women's Federation assumed the mandate of advocating for women's interests as a state-sanctioned institution. Regardless of embedded contradictions and constraints, the Federation continues to occupy a bureaucratic position, with an extensive administrative structure, practical know-how, and collective memory. It also constitutes a massive group of “professionalized activists” under the banner of women's liberation sanctioned by the CCP state. Although feminist NGOs have emerged as prominent players in the women's movement since the 1990s, leaders of the first

cohort of feminist NGOs were seasoned veterans of the Women's Federation.<sup>15</sup> Growing up in the era of “women holding up half of the sky” in the 1950s, these NGOs provide an alternative venue for them to realize a collective vision of women's liberation. Although the Heyang Project was an NGO-directed initiative, Xiaoxian Gao and Danzhu Gao had intimate knowledge of the Federation's tactics, discourses, and principles of mass mobilization from an earlier era. They had also developed an extensive professional network within the Federation. Therefore, understanding feminist praxis calls for a historical, rather than cross-sectional, approach. It also necessitates paying attention to the transformative potential of continuity, the dynamic energy of disjuncture, and the interconnected nature of continuity and disjuncture.

The above methodological insights call for an epistemological framework that recognizes a feminist praxis that comprises actions and strategies spanning across countercurrents. In the case of the Heyang Project, the Research Association revolved around five types of countercurrent: confrontational versus collaborative, top-down versus bottom-up, individual versus collective, local versus global, and continuity versus rupture. These countercurrents defy the either/or dichotomy presupposed in a state-centered framework and a Western-filtered lens. They demand that researchers stop appropriating, assembling, and representing the story of the researched through preconceived framework. They underscore the essential merit of critical qualitative inquiry. In other words, to adequately examine and theorize local feminist praxis in the context of the international women's movement, researchers must engage in reflexivity and inductive logic substantively and methodologically.

## Conclusion

In this article, I examined a feminist-inspired NGO activism in contemporary China. I put forward an analytical framework departing from existing literature on the CCP state, NGOs, civil society, and the women's movement. The framework brings to light the in-between space carved out by the Research Association, a feminist NGO that has dynamically and continuously crossed several boundaries. To adequately analyze and theorize its activism, it is imperative to explore methodological approach and epistemological angle beyond existing literature.

Furthermore, although qualitative practitioners have problematized power disparities between the researcher and the researched, the field has nevertheless continued to perpetuate the privileged position of the researcher in knowledge production. The starkly different accounts presented at the beginning of this article illustrate the problematic assumptions and power held by the researcher in re-presenting and writing-up experiences of the researched. I put



forward a methodological proposition that expands the inductive logic currently practiced in qualitative inquiry. I do so by including a section on the politics of NGO activism between the descriptive account that focuses on the Research Association's intervening endeavors and an analytical summary that teases out the key attributes of its intervention. I draw on the lived experiences and interpretative insights of the Project's key participants to shed light on the empirical happenings and to build upon my analytical summary. I argue that carving out a space to incorporate the interpretative authority of the researched is an effective means of disrupting the exclusive power of the researcher. As qualitative practitioners in China Studies engage in dialogue with non-area specialists, it is essential to interrogate the methodological practices currently employed by practitioners in qualitative inquiry.

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### ORCID iD

Ping-Chun Hsiung  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4838-8572>

### Notes

1. The unpublished manuscript is a testimony of the Heyang Project. It is written by Xiaoxian Gao, Juan Du, and myself. As the leader of the Project, Xiaoxian Gao documents the chronological events of the Heyang Project, critical strategies of the Research Association, and the rationale behind those strategies. She also provides eyewitness accounts of the behind-the-scene politics of nongovernmental organization (NGO) activism. Juan Du calls upon her intimate knowledge about the Project as a consultant contracted by the Ford Foundation (the initial funder) to evaluate the Project at its various stages. Du also conducted interviews with key participants upon completion of the Project. In the manuscript, she analyzes professional and institutional networks that facilitated the mobilizing endeavor. Although I was not directly involved in the Project, I was invited to join the writing based upon my collaborative work with Xiaoxian Gao and the Research Association as well as my interest in the women's movement in China. In the manuscript, I focus on how the Research Association painstakingly de- and reconstructed discursive narratives to mount NGO-directed activism. My participation has given me full access to interview transcripts, internal documents, and other materials central to the Project. The manuscript was completed in early 2018, but its publication has been held up by multiple levels of review.

At this point, it is unclear when, and whether, the manuscript will be published. Xiaoxian Gao has given me permission to use the manuscript and all materials related to the Project for this article. I have shared my views with her during my writing, although I am solely responsible for the positions presented in this article.

2. For example, Hsu and Hasmath (2014) use the concept of corporatism to argue that the state apparatus co-opts the NGO by tapping into its nonofficial status and community networks to carry out tasks that the state is unable or unwilling to deliver. Others describe local government offices that have contracted out projects to local NGOs for public awareness education on HIV, distributing condoms to sex workers, and pollution cleaning up campaigns (Kaufman, 2011; Schwartz, 2004).
3. For example, Howell used the following interview statement to underscore an argument about the imperative of China's political reform, "the future of women's organizations is linked to the political democratic process. It depends on political reform. Only then can women's organizations develop. If political reform is limited, then women's organizations cannot develop more" (Howell, 2000, pp. 374-375).
4. For a discussion on how the Canadian International Development Agency fails to acknowledge local actors in its report, see Hsiung (2016).
5. The terms *core* and *peripheral* have been used to underscore institutionalized inequality qualitative inquiry between those in Anglo-American North and Non-Anglo-American South. For discussion on related issue, see Hsiung (2012).
6. This is particularly evident in the literature on the women's movement in China in the 1990s, when Beijing held the United Nations' fourth World Conference on Women. For example, the women's movement led by the All China Women's Federation and feminist NGOs are categorized as only having created "ripples" but no "waves" (Howell, 1997). For a detailed discussion on the topic, see Hsiung and Wong (1998).
7. For a discussion on the establishment and development of the Research Association, see X. Gao (2001).
8. In addition to the Heyang Project, the Research Association has conducted major projects such as "Women's Hotline," "Project on Women's Rights and Anti-Domestic Violence," "Project on Migrant Women and Their Children," "Project on Eliminating Gender Inequality," "Project on Gender Education for Teenage Girls," "Project on Women's Political Participation." For more details, see the website of the Research Association at <http://www.westwomen.org/plus/list.php?tid=12>.
9. In an essay about the Research Association, Xiaoxian Gao (2009) stated, "Because of feminist inspiration and commitment, I gradually change my approach from 'carrying out project' to 'conducting NGOism.' I have ever since exploited an uncharted journey marked by struggles and determination. Although there have been occasions when I want to walk away, my inner calling keeps me going" (p. 203).
10. Since the 1990s, "gender training" (*shehui xingbei peixun* 社会性别培训) has been widely adopted by academics, NGOs, and the Women's Federation in China to address persistent gender inequalities. It usually takes the form of

- participatory action workshops where facilitators work with participants to make apparent taken-for-granted patriarchal norms and practices, formulate changing strategies, and implement agreed-upon alternatives. The term and form of gender training signify a distinctive feature of women's organizing in China. For a discussion on the gender training workshops, see Du (2001), Milwertz and Bu (2007), and Zheng (1996).
11. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) set up three mass organizations as pillars of its proletarian revolution: the Women's Federation, Youth League, and Labor Union.
  12. A note about Gao's work within the Women's Federation, moving to found the Association, and her continual roles as both a collaborator and critique of the Federation (to be added).
  13. I draw this analytical insight from an internal discussion conducted by key participants of the Heyang Project in responding to Jacka's conclusion that the Heyang Project is an unworthy undertaking. One particular member indicated that she had interviewed the same informants as the ones interviewed by Jacka. Based on their intimate knowledge about the personal hardship of the first cohort of women's directors in Heyang and the way the directors narrate their stories, they argued that Jacka's conclusion is premised upon a misinformed lens that is blind to culturally adequate interpretation of the narratives. The deliberation is printed in an internal publication of the Research Association (X. Gao et al., 2009).
  14. Crosstalk (*xiangsheng* 相声) is a favorite form of stand-up comedy for the Chinese in which skits are used to present mundane of people's daily lives with humor, sarcasm, and twisted irony. For an account on crosstalk and other forms of performative laughter as a means of processing/sharing societal sentiment and/or clandestine defiance in modern China, see Rea (2015).
  15. Xiaoxian Gao and Danzhu Gao were colleagues of the provincial Women's Federation in Shaanxi province. Xiaoxian Gao was the chair of its Research Department and Danzhu Gao the chair of its Personnel Department.
  16. In 2013 and 2014, the Institute conducted interviews of participants of the Heyang Project. The interviewees included members of the Institute and the Women's Federation who were directly involved in the Project as well as female village directors who had been elected through the Project. I was given access to the transcripts by X. Gao (2014) for this paper.
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### Author Biography

**Ping-Chun Hsiung** studies the politics, mechanism, and engendered process of knowledge production and ignorance perpetuation in local and global contexts. She has facilitated and contributed to critical dialogue across the core/periphery, Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal, and science/social science divides to advance the interpretative paradigm of social science inquiry. She is the founder of the Forum of Critical Chinese Qualitative Research. Her current research examines how investigative research was conducted, findings constructed, and policies derived during China's Great Leap Forward (1958–1962), which result in the great famine and 15 to 45 million deaths.