

# Women's Participation in Rural China's Self-Governance: Institutional, Socioeconomic, and Cultural Factors in a Jiangsu County

ZHENGXU WANG\* and WEINA DAI\*\*

*We examined women's participation in village self-governance in an Eastern Chinese county. While they have more or less been universally participating in voting in village elections, their representation in the village self-governance bodies remains low, and their political aspiration and sense of empowerment remain limited. A wide range of factors contribute to this situation. In general, women enjoy a much lower level of education and are economically dependent upon male members of their families. Social gender, or the stereotypes of women as less competent and are expected to stay away from public affairs, plays a very significant role too. Institutional problems, such as frauds and irregularities in election, lack of government's attention in promoting women's political roles, and the inability of state-sponsored women organizations to influence local governance, all contribute to underrepresentation and inadequate participation of women. Policy responses must look beyond women's electoral participation and address these many deep-rooted issues.*

Since the 1980s, China has implemented a system of self-government in hundreds of thousands of villages across the country. This reform has provided the institutional foundation for male and female villagers' participation in rural governance. The Chinese government has proclaimed the success of this system, citing improvements in governance and economic and social developments in rural China. The government also argues that this system has brought significant improvements in women's political status, through their acquisition of the necessary rights to participate in local governance. Such a view is shared by many scholars as well.

In this article, we look at women's participation in, and perception of, politics in villages in Rudong, a county in the eastern province of Jiangsu. We find that despite the existence of formal institutions and an active role of the state, women's participation in rural governance remains seriously limited. While women have more or less been universally participating in voting in village elections, representation of women in local governance bodies remains low, and women villagers' political aspiration and sense of empowerment remain underdeveloped. We were able to identify a wide

\*School of Contemporary Chinese Studies, University of Nottingham

\*\*School of International Studies, Renmin University of China

range of factors contributing to this situation. In general, women enjoy a much lower level of education and are economically dependent upon male members of their families. The lack of socioeconomic resources seriously prevents women from emerging as active participants and leaders in local governance. Social gender, or the social beliefs or stereotypes of women as less competent than male and are expected to stay away from public affairs, plays a very significant role too. In fact, such social beliefs or stereotypes also affect women cadres negatively, limiting their ability to play an important role in local governance. Institutional problems, such as frauds and irregularities in election, lack of government's attention in promoting women's political roles, and the inability of state-sponsored women organizations to have bigger influence in local governance, all help lead to underrepresentation and inadequate participation of women. We argue that policy responses must look beyond women's electoral participation and address these many deep-rooted issues.

We first review the evolution of the village self-governance system as well as its implications for rural women's political participation. Next, we present our study conducted in Rudong County. We present both quantitative and qualitative findings regarding female villagers' participation and representation in, as well as their perception of, local elections and governance. We then provide an integrated analysis of the factors prohibiting women's political participation. We conclude with a discussion of the findings and refer to some corrective measures that may address the situation in rural China.

### **Village Governance in China: Institutional Development and Women**

The economic reform of China that began in the late 1970s saw to the dissolution of the Maoist commune system in rural China. Economic activities were no longer organized by people's communes but by individual households instead, returning to farmers the autonomy in producing and managing farm goods. In terms of local governance, in February 1980, peasants in Guozuo Village, Yishan County (now Yizhou City), Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region voluntarily established a village committee to maintain public security, settle disputes, and provide public works in the local community (Mi 1998). Soon after, the Chinese government began to establish township governments to replace the people's communes and village committees to replace the production brigades. Article 111 of the 1982 Constitution of the People's Republic of China thus declares village committees as self-governing bodies of the villages. The Constitution also makes it clear that the chairman (or chairwoman), deputy chairman (or deputy chairwoman), and members of the village committees are to be elected by village residents themselves. Five years later, in 1987, The Organic Law of the Village Committees was promulgated and took effect the next year (Li 1994). After 10 years of implementation, a 1998 revision of the law introduced several important institutional

specifications for village elections, such as secret ballots, direct nomination of candidates, and having more candidates than the number of seats to be filled (Luo 2006). These newly stipulated measures further institutionalized the village self-governance system, while providing it with a stronger legal and institutional framework. In October 2010, another revision of the law was passed by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, indicating a new stage in the evolution of the self-governance system of villagers.

Four formal institutions make up the "village self-governance" system. Democratic Election consists of the direct election of village committees by all villagers. Democratic Decision-Making requires decisions on vital village issues to be made by the Villager's Assembly, with the Council of Villager Representatives making deliberations on executive issues. A third institution, Democratic Management, requires the Villagers' Committee to conduct village affairs within the village's established regulations and rules of self-governance. The fourth institution, Democratic Supervision, prescribes transparency and disclosure of village affairs and finance to the public, villager's evaluation of cadres' performances, and the reporting of vital issues to higher levels of government (Wang 2004).<sup>1</sup> By the early 2000s, the Organic Law of the Village Committees had been implemented in more than 600,000 villages across China. Meanwhile, the Villagers' Assembly or Council of Villager Representatives had been established in over 80% of all villages, with all these villages establishing their own regulations and rules for self-governance. Moreover, institutions of transparency and disclosure of village affairs had been put in place in more than 90% of all villages (Zhongguowang 2003).

With the implementation of village self-governance, women's opportunities to participate in village governance were significantly expanded, in stark contrast to the people's commune era. Chinese media and academic research have constantly highlighted large amounts of rural women participating in village elections. A number of female candidates have stood for elections, with some of them winning and serving as members or even chairs of villager committees. At the end of 2000, statistics showed that in more than 73,000 villages across the country, there existed 3,438 female members from a total of over 315,000 villager committee members, thus constituting 16% of committee membership. This figure averages at 0.67 female members in every villager committee across China (Ministry, Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2001). At the end of 2008, females accounted for 21.7% of villager committee members nationwide (Renminribao 2009). Large regional diversity certainly exists, and in more developed areas things seem to take a better shape. For example, Hunan as a leading province in promoting women's representation in rural governance, saw women accounting for 31.4% of all villager committee members in 2008 (Renminribao 2009). In Shanxi province, however, in 2008, women accounted for a mere 7.7% of all villager committee members (Wang 2010). In rural areas of Beijing, the nation's capital, the

proportion of female members in villager committees stood at 21% in 2010, just about the same level of the national average. However, women in rural Beijing accounted for 4% of chairs of villager's committees and 6% of village party secretaries, significantly higher than the national average (Wang 2010).

### Problems with Women's Participation in Rural Governance

In any case, it looks like the system of self-governance in rural areas has created favorable conditions for female villagers' participation in politics, and progress has been made on the ground. But how institutional setups have translated into daily practices, and how much the abstract figures have captured the realities on the ground, is far from clear. Academic studies on women's participation in rural politics are few and far between. Studies using large-N survey data often find a clear gap in political participation between women and men (Jennings 1998) as well as in the perception of politics (such as political knowledge and internal efficacy) between rural women and men (Tong 2003). More contextualized research presented a low level of participation of women in village politics and underrepresentation of women in corresponding governance structures (Howell 2006). A mix of various factors, including traditional patriarchal stereotyping of women, gendered division of labor and responsibilities, economic structures, institutional norms and procedures, inadequate state interventions, lower levels of women's education, political culture, and male-centered social practices have all been put forward to explain this phenomenon (Guo, Zheng, and Yang 2009). With most of these factors deeply historical and culturally entrenched in Chinese society, scholars seem to be in agreement that the prospects for women's political equality in rural China remain bleak.

Howell (2006), for example, points out that in general, women's participation in politics faces challenges including gender socialization, structural factors, gender ideology, and political and institutional barriers.<sup>2</sup> In the Chinese countryside, sexist attitudes coincide with the perception of women as less competent (*disuzhi*, or "low quality") and the belief that women should confine their activities within domestic instead of public arenas. These attitudes have tremendous effects in producing and reproducing gender inequalities. Because of such social beliefs, for example, rural girls face serious disadvantages against rural boys in obtaining education and opportunities for waged employment. Social beliefs often dictate parents to see education as less important for girls, hence making them more reluctant to invest in girls' schooling. While most rural families are now ready to send boys to school, their decision to send girls to school is much more likely to be affected by their household income or the two parents' education level (Davis et al. 2007). What is more problematic is that such social beliefs are held by villagers of both genders, making the challenge to change them more formidable. Davis et al. (2007) find that

having a mother with past Youth League membership significantly increases a girl's likelihood of attending school. If this is true, then because women with past Youth League membership constitute a small minority of rural women, the large majority of rural women tend to place less importance on a daughter's education. Research in Gansu, Northwest China, found that when the husband of a rural family migrated to work in the city, the daughter seemed to perform better in school. That probably means that when the father is away, the mother assumes more control over the household's decision making; hence, the daughter receives more support to her education—another indication of low support for girls' schooling under normal condition (Park 2010).<sup>3</sup> Such social beliefs intertwine with structural factors, such as the lower education level of women, resulting in complex mechanisms that always lead to low political participation from women.

Furthermore, institutional ambiguities and insufficiency in electoral arrangements, the party–community relationship, and the organization of government, all contribute to exacerbating women's lower political status. Women who make it to the villager committees, for example, are often assigned marginal portfolios such as family planning. Such assignments reinforce and institutionalize the gendered social roles of women, reproducing women's lower and more limited status within the local social and political structure. With women cadres often assuming the family planning portfolio, they are often disdained by other female villagers as being there only to ensure that no woman shall become pregnant without first obtaining the pregnancy permission from the government (Howell 2006).

Similar to Howell (2006), Guo, Zheng, and Yang (2009) find that while women in general are badly represented in local governance, those women that are included in the village governance structure are also given marginal roles. But nonetheless, while registering the intergender disparities in actual participation, they found an equal level of political identity, consciousness, and motivation between the two genders in rural China. Based on survey data collected in Zhejiang between 1999 and 2006, they argue that rural women have developed the same level of consciousness and motivation for political participation as male villagers. Our data seem to dispute this judgment: We find that once taking the concept of motivation beyond the participation and perception of voting in village elections, the female–male disparity becomes highly significant. Improving gender equality in local democracy and governance needs to move beyond election and take a more holistic approach that includes the representation of female members in governing institutions and the construction of democratic citizenship and civic competence among both genders.

The relationship between economic development and the political status of women in rural governance is complicated. At the aggregate level, the linkage appears to be weak or nonexistent: Between regions of different levels of economic development, the rich places do *not* necessarily see stronger female presences in local governance (Guo, Zheng, and Yang

2009). This serves as a very important caution against a simplistic belief in developmentalism, that is, with economic development, women's political status will almost automatically improve. However, at the individual level, individual women's economic status and participation in economic activities seem to matter significantly. Like many others, Guo, Zheng, and Yang (2009) point out that economic reform during the 1980s and 1990s in rural China greatly improved women's political consciousness, partly contributing to the convergence of political attitudes between the two genders in the countryside. We will show that individual women's lower level of economic status invariably leads to lower probabilities in political participation. In addition, women's cognitive capital acts as a decisive factor in determining their participation in politics. Higher household wealth as well as mother's individual cultural capital both lead to much better education opportunities for rural girls (Davis et al. 2007), helping to reduce the gender inequality of the next generation. In fact, Guo, Zheng, and Yang (2009) also allude to the linkage between individual economic status and the obtainment of rights consciousness and a new selfhood among women, which is important for women's more active role in politics. Our data will provide strong evidences confirming such a causal linkage.

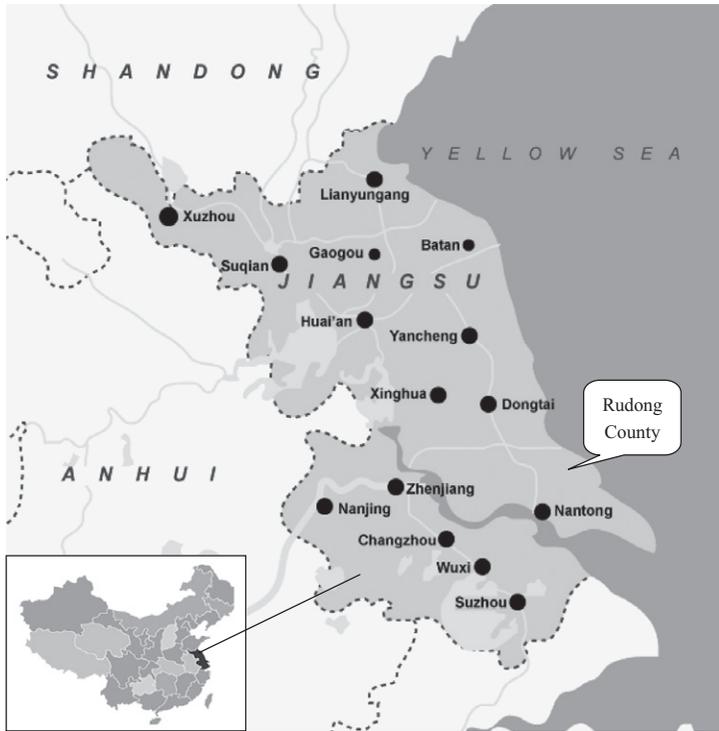
### Research Design

While few in number, existing studies have nonetheless identified common factors preventing a stronger presence of women in rural governance in China. In this study, we take the issue to a typical community of rural China, that is, a county in Eastern China's Jiangsu Province. Unlike past studies that make more sweeping arguments about rural women's political participation, we examine the issue in the political and social arenas of one county in which women's political activities are theaterized. Our data will allow individual women to speak for themselves, giving the reader a first-hand understanding of how various factors are at play when it comes to women's participation in local governance.

Between June and August 2009, we conducted our fieldwork in Rudong County of Eastern China's Jiangsu Province. Jiangsu faces the Eastern China Sea in the east, Shanghai in the south, and Shandong Province in the north, with Anhui Province bordering it in the west (see Figure 1). A typical rural county in Eastern China, Rudong sits in the central-eastern area of the province. The county occupies an area of close to 1,900 square kilometers, with a registered population of just slightly over one million. It governs 15 towns (*zhen*),<sup>4</sup> which in turn covers 34 community residents committees, 13 residents committees, and 218 villager committees.

A few statistics can help put Rudong in the context of subprovincial socioeconomic developments in Jiangsu and China. While Jiangsu, especially Southern Jiangsu, represents one of the most developed areas in China, Rudong seems to be at the mid-range of the province. The 52

FIGURE 1  
Jiangsu County



county-level administrative units in Jiangsu include 25 counties and 27 county-level cities, or *xianji shi*. In 2008 per capita economic output (gross domestic product [GDP]) of Rudong stood at about RMB 25,000. This puts it at about the mid-point of Jiangsu's 52 county-level units—no. 24 to be exact. The most developed county-level units in Jiangsu are found in Southern Jiangsu's industrial area such as Kunshan, boasting a per capita GDP of RMB 220,000 in 2008, almost 10 times of that of Rudong. At the same time, the least developed Guanyun, Fengxian, and Suining Counties claim a per capita GDP of merely RMB 8,000–9,000, lower than the average level of the much poorer Anhui Province to the West of Jiangsu (Jiangsus-hengtongjiju 2009). Hence, Rudong appears to be among the most developed in all of Jiangsu's 25 counties, with its GDP/cap ranking no. 4 among them. Meanwhile, it appears less developed than the majority of Jiangsu's 27 county-level cities, with only five of which having a per capita GDP lower than Rudong's.

In terms of rural society, in 2008 Rudong's per capita net income for farmers stood at RMB 7,210, also ranking no. 24 among the 52 county-level units of Jiangsu. The highest farmer per capita net income in Jiangsu is found in Jianguyin City (county-level city), at close to RMB 12,000, while

the lowest is found in Guanyun and Guannan Counties, at about RMB 4,900–5,000 (Jiangsushengtongjiju 2009). Rudong's average farmer net income was just about the same with that of the whole Jiangsu, which stood at RMB 7,357 in 2008. By comparison, this income is about 2–3,000 RMB higher than the average in the neighboring Anhui Prince (RMB 4,504 for 2009) and the whole nation (RMB 5,153 for 2009). Based on these statistics, we can reasonably believe that Rudong represents a mid-range county-level unit in Jiangsu, just between the more developed Southern Jiangsu and less developed Northern Jiangsu. For the whole nation, Rudong represents a typical county in the nation's more developed areas such as Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Guangdong.

In our study, we were able to access the county government's documents and other sources of information to compile our data set. These included documents relating to female participation in politics in rural communities as well as socioeconomic statistics of towns and villages. We also administered a questionnaire survey, resulting in responses from 200 villagers living in five villages across the county. We adopted a multistage sampling strategy when selecting our respondents. First, among the 15 towns in the county, we chose five towns that represent various development levels existing within the county. Next, we randomly chose one village in each of the five towns. At the third stage, in each village, 20 male and 20 female respondents were randomly selected from all the adult villagers. In the selected villages, we also conducted semi-structured interviews with female villagers and female cadres, asking questions regarding women's participation in politics in their village as well as their views toward this issue. A total of 20 interviews were collected. In Figure 2, the selected sites are noted in boldface: Juegang, Hekou, Shuangdian, Chahe, and Bencha.

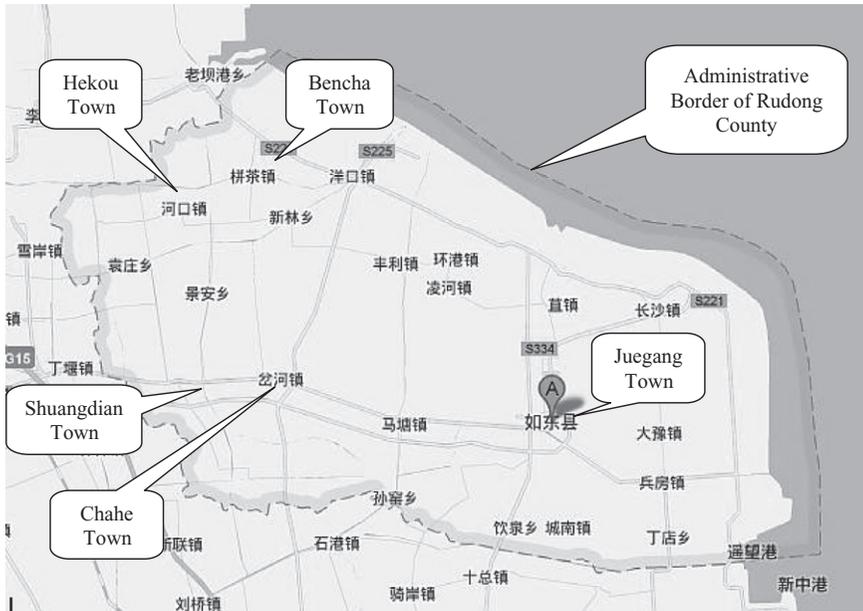
We expected to find:

1. Women are seriously underrepresented in the village governance bodies;
2. Women suffer serious disadvantages in terms of political motivation, political knowledge, and political efficacy; and
3. Widespread social beliefs and gender norms discourage active participation by women.

### **Uneven Participation in Rudong**

According to statistical data, interview responses, and questionnaire surveys we collected, rural females in Rudong County have started to "walk out of their houses" (*zouchu jiamen*) and participate in social and political affairs. They are attentive to national events and social developments as well as to the laws and regulations closely related to their life. To the question "Do you think female cadres are needed in the village?" 81%

FIGURE 2  
Study Sites in Rudong County



of all surveyed female villagers answered yes. This indicates that rural women have paid great attention to their role in the local community's political life, expecting their interests to be represented in the local governance structure. In terms of actual participation, among all the female respondents of our survey, 97% have participated in the election of villager committees. These figures appear to be consistent with Guo, Zheng, and Yang's (2009) findings from neighboring Zhejiang Province, and also reflect the overall level of implementation of village elections across China.<sup>5</sup> The good story, however, seems to stop here. Despite this apparently high level of electoral involvement and interest in participation, women are at a great disadvantage in actual perception and participation of rural governance. We identified the following aspects.

### Restricted Participation

Village self-governance includes various institutions and processes. As explained earlier, Democratic Election, Democratic Decision-Making, Democratic Management, and Democratic Supervision make up the four areas of democratic governance. Each of these aspects provides opportunities for women to get involved. Our survey shows, however, that women's participation in these aspects is highly uneven. As Table 1 shows, while a high percentage of them (97%) did participate in election by casting a vote in the last villager committee elections, their participation in

TABLE 1  
**Uneven Political Participation for Rural Women**

Aspects of Political Involvement	Percentage Responding "Yes"	
	Female	Male
1. <i>Democratic election</i>		
Have you voted in the recent village committee election?	97	99
2. <i>Democratic decision-making</i>		
Have you participated in deliberations with the Villagers' Assembly?	45	76
3. <i>Democratic management</i>		
Have you ever brought any suggestions to the Villagers' Committee?	19	41
Have you ever voluntarily brought governance-related issues to the attention of relevant government offices?	9	22
4. <i>Democratic supervision</i>		
Are you concerned about transparency and disclosure of village finance	33	69
5. <i>Political/social capital</i>		
Do you know the chairperson of the Villagers' Committee well?	12	78

*N* = 200, with 100 male and 100 female subjects.

Data source: Survey by the authors, 2009.

other aspects are much lower. Our survey shows that 76% of male villagers regularly take part in deliberations at Villager's Assembly (*cunmin dahui*), the proportion for females who do so amounts to only 45%. So, about three-quarters of male villagers regularly participate in the deliberation of village affairs, while less than half of women do so.

The degree of women's political involvement, either actual or psychological, continues to decline as we focus on other aspects. Regarding democratic supervision, or transparency in village affairs, only one-third (33%) of women villagers reported that they were "concerned" or "very concerned," compared to 69% of men who reported so. In terms of democratic management, women are much less likely to bring suggestions to the Villager's Committee regarding village affairs (19% vis-à-vis 41%), or contact government offices directly regarding governance-related issues (9% vis-à-vis 22%).

Women also suffer a serious deficit in psychological involvement as well as in daily interactions with local leaders. Given the relatively small size of rural communities, one would expect that frequent interactions take place between village leaders and villagers and that the villagers and their leaders know each other quite well. In fact, leaders (chairs of villager committees and party secretaries of village party branches) are villagers themselves, who often work on pieces of land next to those of other

villagers. Indeed, our data show that close to 80% of male villagers know their village leaders well. Hence, it is surprising that only 12% of surveyed women reported that they know their village leaders well, while 15% of them reported that they did not know the leader *at all* (Table 1). This indicates a far lower degree of interaction between rural women and members in the local governance bodies than the high voting rate would seem to suggest.

Over all, these findings present a picture similar to those observed by earlier studies. Besides Guo, Zheng, and Yang's (2009) and Howell's (2006) findings, Tong (2003) finds that while male and female villagers show similar voting levels, women appear less active in nonelectoral participation. Jennings (1998) similarly finds a large gender gap in a wide range of nonelectoral participation.<sup>6</sup> Such findings suggest that it is highly likely that when dealing with governance and politics-related issues, women tend to stay behind while their husbands, fathers, or sons handle things on their behalf. For example, Guo, Zheng, and Yang (2009) find that many women asked their family members to write the ballot for them at elections. Their findings also revealed that when it comes to which candidate to vote for, women normally receive their opinion from male family members. Our data reveal very few cases of proxy voting, that is, letting others vote on one's behalf (more below), but data presented in Table 1 show that women's participation in politics is highly restricted; except for participation in village committee elections, there is very limited space for more meaningful participation in other aspects of community self-governance. Even in the case of electoral participation, as we will show below, its quality is still problematic: many women go to vote without an aim to influence local affairs, possess very limited information about the candidates, and so forth.

### Representation in the Local Power Structure

Given that women account for more than half of the rural population, the degree of underrepresentation among women in local governance structures is indeed staggering. While the Organic Law has explicitly stated that in the villagers' committee, an "appropriate number" of women should be present, a significant portion of these committees still have no female members. In all of the 218 villager committees in Rudong, 41 of them do not include a female member, accounting for one-fifth (18.8%) of the total. Women's representation in local party organizations is even worse, as just over half (110) of the 218 village party branches do not include any female members (Table 2). In the villages where women are indeed represented in the villagers' committee, the number of female members very rarely exceeds one. In the 177 villages with female cadres on these committees, 171 of them have only one female member. That is, out of 218, only six villages have two female members on the villagers' committee, while no village has three or more female members.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in only two villages

TABLE 2  
Underrepresentation of Women in Local Governing Bodies

The "Two Committees"	Total Number	Number of Committees without any Female Members
Villagers' Committees	218	41 (19%)
Party Branch Committees	218	110 (50%)

does a woman serve as the secretary of the village party branch (a mere 0.9% of 218 villages in the county). In four villages, a woman serves as chairperson of the villagers' committee, a mere 1.8% of the 218 villages in the county (Department of Organization, Rudong County Committee of Communist Party 2008).

Moreover, even those women who make it to these self-governance bodies (the "Two Committees") end up taking roles that perpetuate discrimination. As earlier studies have highlighted, female members in villagers' committees or party branch committees are often assigned *marginal* and *gendered* portfolios such as family planning and women's affairs (Guo, Zheng, and Yang 2009; Howell 2006). It is easy for observers to note that such arrangements result in women cadres being represented simply for "decoration" purposes, that is, to meet the political correctness quota of including at least one female member in the governance body. Meanwhile, it is often neglected that such arrangements in fact reenforce gender inequality in public life. Such an arrangement effectively "genders" government organization, as some portfolios are always kept under male cadres' areas of responsibility, while some other, less crucial portfolios are often explicitly reserved for women cadres.

Indeed, in our study, we find that most female members in villagers' committees serve as directors for women's affairs (*funu zhuren*). Across the whole county, a total of 183 women currently sit on their village's committee. Of these, 170 are their respective village's director for women's affairs, accounting for 92.9% (Department of Organization, Rudong County Committee of Communist Party 2009).<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in the 2005 election held in the Town of Hekou (River Mouth Town), while 13 female stood as candidates, they all ran for the position of commissioner for women's affairs.<sup>9</sup> At the explicit level, this creates a barrier or a "bamboo ceiling" for women's political participation, while at the not-so-obvious level, it reenforces the view that women cadres have no talent or competence for certain portfolios (such as finance). Women cadres are stereotyped as only capable of work in a very limited and highly gendered area.

### Civic Competence

While women's participation has been characterized by a high voting turnout, the quality of their participation has been compromised by lack of

civic competence and initiatives. Civic competence generally refers to the cognitive abilities and skills necessary for participation in politics. For example, an individual's ability in understanding the platforms of two competing candidates will affect whether her vote reflects a genuine political choice. A most important aspect of civic competence relates to a citizen's political knowledge such as her understanding of electoral rules and understanding the role each government institution is supposed to play, among others. A second aspect relates to her ability to understand political issues, such as how a rise in the tax rate will affect her life, what resources are needed for a new public project, and so forth. Because a certain level of civic competence is necessary for a citizen to make informed decisions in political participation, political scientists generally believe that the civic competence of citizens is crucial to the quality of democracy.<sup>10</sup>

Many aspects that affect women's participation in Rudong can be grouped into a civic competence category. We first note a high level of passivity existing in the majority of rural women. While more than 90% of female villagers did cast their votes during the recent village election, our survey reveals that, for most women, their involvement in electoral politics remains marginal and superficial. In the village election, a series of events precedes ballot casting: An election committee will be formed and publicly announced, electoral and campaign rules will be discussed and publicized, candidates will be announced, and campaign speeches will be held, among others. Of the female villagers we surveyed, only 19% reported that they participated in all these events, with 64% attending only parts of such events. Close to one-fifth (18%) of rural women pay only a little attention to any of these events that are supposed to be part of the election process.

Furthermore, of all the female villagers that voted in the election, only 36% made an effort to know the backgrounds and campaign proposals of the candidates. That is, the majority of women casted their votes without knowing what the candidates stood for or what their individual merits were. It is highly possible that they casted their votes according to the opinion of their husbands or other male family members (Guo, Zheng, and Yang 2009), or simply casted their vote according to lineage lines or fellow villagers' views (Hu 2008). In fact, a small number of the surveyed women (3%) let someone else cast the vote on their behalf. During the interviews, many women explained that the reason they went to the poll was that they did not "dare not to go because it is required by the village," they went "mainly in order to finish the task [as required by the village]," or "there were so many people there that it was fun to go to the event (*kan renao*)."

A major indicator of civic competence relates to an individual's knowledge regarding democratic rules. Understanding how government is organized, how his or her representative or leader is chosen, and what powers and duties the elected officials have constitutes the basic knowledge necessary for an active citizen. We found rural women's command of such political or civic knowledge to be highly limited. We asked our

TABLE 3  
**Selected Indicators of Civic Competence of Woman in Rural Rudong**

Survey Questions	Female Villagers' Responses
Do you know the background and proposals of the candidates?	Yes: 36%; No:
How much do you think you understand the Organic Law of Village Committees?	Very well: 6%; A little: 52%; Not at all: 42%
Do you ever think about running as chair of the Villagers' Committee yourself?	Never: 88%

*N* = 100.

interviewees about their knowledge of two important laws: The Organic Law of the Village Committees and The Law on the Guarantee of Women's Rights and Interests. While the first is the legal base on which village self-governance is practiced, the second is the law aiming specifically at protecting and promoting women's rights in family, social, and political lives. We found that the majority of our interviewees have only limited understanding of these two laws. Only 6% reported that they understood The Organic Law of the Village Committees "very well," and another 52% reported that they understood "a little" of it. A staggering 42% reported that they did not understand it "at all" (Table 3).

Besides a belief in one's ability to understand politics (as shown above), a high level of civic competence only comes with a belief in one's ability to play an active role in politics. This major dimension of civic competence represents an individual's self-confidence in her ability to participate in politics or affect government policies, something also known as political efficacy (Kahne and Westheimer 2006). Rural women in Rudong showed a very low level of political efficacy. Very few women we surveyed or interviewed would stand for an election. And even if they do, they seldom stand for leadership positions—they often go for marginal roles, very often the member of the village committee in charge of women's affairs. When asked, "do you ever think about running for the chair position of the villager's committee?" the almost unanimous response is "never" (88%, Table 3). Meanwhile, women cadres, as Howell argues, seldom see themselves as representing the interests of the villagers. Instead, they see their joining the Committee as fulfilling a task given to them by the upper level party organization; that is, serving a role in local governance is a task they received from their superiors, instead of serving the local community (Howell 2006).

### Socioeconomic, Institutional, and Cultural Factors

#### Socioeconomic Constraints

We start now to look at the determinants of the problematic situation in Rudong regarding women's political participation. Above all, a relatively

TABLE 4  
Rural Women's Education Statistics in Rudong County

Education Level	Rural Females in the County	Rural Males in the County	Female Committee Members in the County (Total: 183)
College	0.07%	0.42%	21 (11%)
Senior high school	4.15%	21.51%	103 (56%)
Junior high school	31.17%	66.47%	54 (30%)
Preliminary school	64.61%	11.61%	5 (3%)

Source: Bureau of Civil Affairs, People's Government of Rudong County, Jiangsu Province.

low level of education leads to disadvantages among rural women when compared to male villagers. Social science research has extensively shown education as a critical factor affecting an individual's ability to harness economic, social, and political opportunities. More specific to political participation, education partially determines an individual's cognitive skills, social and political capitals, and civic competence (Jennings and Niemi 1974). Research has shown that girls are given less educational opportunities in rural China. While the 9-year compulsory education as a national policy has been implemented nationwide in present-day China, many rural households are unwilling to support their daughters' education beyond elementary school. During our interviews, both men and women regarded girls' education as less important than boys, anticipating that girls would eventually marry out as "thrown-out water."<sup>11</sup> Data we obtained in Rudong are highly revealing (Table 4). A large majority (about 66%) of all the county's rural women receive only elementary school education. For the rest, 31% received junior high school, and only 4% received senior high school education. An extremely small proportion (less than 1%) were able to go to some kind of college, and in this case, all were able to go to junior college (*zhuanke*) only.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, more than one-fifth (22%) of all rural males received an education level of senior high school or higher, more than five times the female level. The proportion of men receiving some kind of college education is six times that of rural females (0.42% vs. 0.07%).<sup>13</sup>

The educational disadvantages of women are evident in how education affects the likelihood of a woman's involvement in local governance. In Rudong, female villagers involved in local governance possess a level of education much higher than an average female villager. Of the county's 183 female village committee members, 21, or 11%, received junior college education, 103 attended senior high school, 54 junior high school, while only five received only elementary school education. This means those with senior high school education or higher account for about 68% (124 out of 183) of women active in local governance. Keeping in mind that this

level of education accounted for only 4% of all rural women in the county, we can extrapolate from this information that a women with senior high school education or above is 17 times (68 divided by 4) more likely to become a village cadre than other female villagers. More particularly, among the 31 women cadres that were born in the 1940s and 1950s, 12 of them received senior high school or higher levels of education, a percentage of 40%. Considering China's very scarce opportunities for people to receive education during this cohort's school time, probably less than 0.5% of rural women of their age group were able to obtain anything beyond junior middle school. The advantages enjoyed by the more educated women among this cohort in politics are hence even more striking.

Hence, the small number of female villagers who received a relatively high level of education have a much higher probability of involvement in local governance. The positive side of the story is that the local selection process does reward education obtainment—the more educated are more likely to take up leadership roles. However, the negative side is equally if not more important, and that is, because education plays such an important role in determining a person's opportunity for political participation, that on average women in rural Rudong have a much lower level of education than men means that women face very serious disadvantages in local governance.

Education not only prepares an individual with literacy and other cognitive skills. It also helps overcome psychological barriers within an individual that prevent her from becoming an active citizen. For example, we are likely to find in rural women a lack of confidence, even self-contempt, that disables them from actively engaging in village affairs. During our interviews, when asked, "Why did you not stand for the election?" 75% of the subjects answered "I don't think I can do it at all." When asked, "Would you nominate yourself to be elected as a villagers' representative?" our interviewees' initial expression often indicated that they were utterly shocked by the question itself. When they gave their answers, 91% of them said no, and only a few indicated that they "could have a try."

Even those female villagers holding positions in governance bodies often lack the self-confidence, initiative, and assertiveness necessary to be active leaders. This indeed seems to point to the marginalization problem that Howell (2006) and Guo, Zheng, and Yang (2009) discuss. During our fieldwork, we spoke to 20 female villagers who served in their village committees. One question we asked each of them was, "Have you made any governance decision by yourself during your tenure?" The answers were always simply "no."

### **Structural Barriers**

From a social history point of view, the major element affecting female participation in politics is their lower economic status. Guo, Zheng, and Yang (2009) are quick to point out that economic reform in the 1980s and

1990s were highly empowering for rural women, as it brought about a new sense of economic independence in them. This is especially true in an Eastern China province such as Zhejiang (where they carried out their study), where local economic viability increased hugely because of the rapid development of the private and semi-urban sectors (Naughton 1996). The rural economy in Jiangsu was similarly transformed, as the province emerged as one of the champions of the local economic development in the country.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, the traditional society and traditional economy, even though fading away, still exist in large parts of rural China, including much of Jiangsu. At the very least, the lingering impact of the traditional economy still plays a visible role in defining people's attitudes and behavior. In a traditional agricultural society, the division of labor is highly gendered. A "the man takes charge outside the household, while the woman takes charge of domestic issues"<sup>15</sup> mentality still dominates many rural people's thinking. Hence, women are *not* expected to actively engage in public affairs. With men being the main breadwinners for their families, women take a subordinate position, even at home. Our survey shows that 70% of all female subjects said the major income of the family is earned by men, 21% said both husband and wife earn equal amounts, and only 3% said wives earn more than husbands. As most women are economically dependent on their husbands, they also assume much less active roles when it comes to participating in politics. We return to this theme in the discussion section below.

The received marriage arrangement in rural China also has an important influence on women's participation in politics. Migration caused by marriage occurs in most rural areas of China, which means a woman should move to live in her husband's village upon getting married. Of the 84 married women in our survey sample, 31 are natives of their villages, while the other 53 (63%) moved from their home village to live with their husband's family in their present village. Having to leave one's home village equates to an interruption or rupture of the social and political capital accumulation process. It also means a woman's dependence on her husband and his family to build her new capital in the new community. For newly married wives, this influence is mainly shown in their political attitudes and voting behaviors. During the first several years after marrying into a new village, they find themselves lacking knowledge of local affairs and are unattached to local social networks. This naturally leads to superficial participation in political affairs and elections. Their participation in voting and other local events leaves plenty of scope for dependence on and influence by others.

For politically more active female villagers, being a native or not also matters significantly. According to data we collected regarding female cadres, from Chahe Town's 23 villages, the directors of female affairs in 20 of them are locally married. That is, locally married women account for a dominant majority (87%) of female cadres in the village. While women married into their current village almost certainly account for the majority

of all married women (63% of the sample), they enjoy far smaller opportunities for political involvement (13% in this case). Another piece of data also shows the structural barriers against “married-into” women. Of the 23 village directors of women’s affairs, the average age for those who married locally is 30.2, while that of those who married into their current village is 36.8. Assuming other things being equal, this suggests that “married-into” women face a “newcomer premium” of roughly 6.6 years in order to be on the same footing with a native woman in terms of social and political capitals. Migration caused by marriage therefore delays if not suppresses the participation of women in rural governance.

### **The Awareness of Social Gender**

Gender can be distinguished into two types. Biological gender refers to the biological differences between males and females, while social gender refers to the different expectations, demands, and limits society places on males and females. Social gender, therefore, is the social construction of an identity that separates women and men. The inadequate participation of rural females in governance can be widely attributed to inequalities resulting from social gender. Our survey found that 73% of our respondents (male and female) agreed that “participating in politics is men’s business.” Only 27% agreed that “male and female villagers should play equal roles in political participation.” No respondent chose the option that “participating in politics is women’s business.” Such a gender difference is clearly constructed by social beliefs and social practices and is highly effective in shaping people’s behaviors. With such norms and beliefs, aspirations for participating in local governance remain hard to emerge in women, while men also find it inappropriate to see women playing an active role in village affairs.

One challenge is that awareness of social gender is low even among rural women themselves. The data relating to the last question we just discussed are highly revealing. Studies have already shown that rural women are more comfortable with taking the role of a “good wife and good mother,” with close to 80% of them being willing to stay at home even if they move with their husband to live in the city (Guo, Zheng, and Yang 2009). Among the women respondents of our survey, 54% also felt that “participating in politics is males’ business,” accounting for more than half of the total. The majority of rural women regard politics as males’ business, leading to indifference or even negative attitudes toward political participation. The awareness of social gender also falls short even for female villagers who are elected members of villagers’ committees. Women village cadres often consider themselves as less important than their male colleagues. In fact, our data reveal a wide gap between the male and female village cadres’ perception of their importance in village affairs. Only 52.3% of all the female subjects consider themselves as playing a “very significant” or “significant” role in village affairs, compared to

94.2% of all the male cadres who believe so. Furthermore, women cadres are often unaware of the gendered roles they are playing in local politics. For example, they consider it natural that the female member of the villager's committee takes up the women's affairs post.<sup>16</sup>

### **Institutional Factors**

While the current institutions of village election and self-governance have provided the necessary foundation for women's involvement in local governance, many problems still need to be fixed to ensure a stronger representation and more active involvement by women. Many have pointed out insufficiencies in the Organic Law itself. Article Nine of the Law, for example, stipulates: "Female members should fulfill *an appropriate quota* in the membership of village committee (emphasis added)." When this clause was first included in the Law, it was considered a major step forward regarding women's political rights, as the Law now explicitly required the inclusion of women in the village governance structure. However, the unspecified "an appropriate quota" leaves a lot to be desired on the ground. Many local governments interpret the "appropriate quota" as having *one* member in any villager's committee. Hence, a legal clause intended for increasing women's representation in practice became a ceiling that limits female membership in village self-governance bodies (Howell 2006).

The deputy mayor of Juegang Town told us it was vague to refer to "an appropriate quota," for there have been no regulations on how many females should sit on a villagers' committees, nor were there clear methods to guarantee such an "appropriate quota." As a result, this legal requirement failed to improve the political status of rural women substantially. Such vague legal provisions would rather be regarded as a "favor" given to females from males than an endeavor to raise women's political status. Worse, often the one female member in a villagers' committee is assigned the portfolio of women's affairs and family planning, hence reproducing the gender inequality in the local political structure. Woman membership in such governing bodies becomes a decoration for political correctness.

Election irregularities or fraud, referring to the intentional or unintentional violations of rules and regulations during election, or practices that damage the fairness of the elections, are widespread. Such fraud reflects the relatively underdeveloped nature of the village governance system, but it often affects rural women more seriously than men. In other words, electoral irregularities may infringe female villagers' political rights more seriously, and at the same time dampen their enthusiasm and political aspiration. In the first five village elections held in Hekou Town, many villagers complained about irregularities such as cadres forcing villagers into writing their ballots, or appointing team leaders<sup>17</sup> as voting supervisors or vote counters without confirmation by the villagers. As a local cadre told us, "Once the regulations are violated, 'democracy' becomes a sham,

leading to disillusion among the farmers." For female villagers, such disillusion exacerbates the indifference that is already in place. Their negative attitudes may become stronger even though they may still go to cast their votes. The combined result is a sense of helplessness and frustration.

In addition, the weakness of the Women's Federation also exerts substantial damage on females' enthusiasm for political participation. Compared to male candidates, female candidates lack access to local mobilization resources such as lineages or upper level government offices. With the increasing competitiveness of village elections, women candidates should be able to draw support from the Women's Federation in order to win. However, the Federation's presence and capacity in rural society has suffered great declines since the 1990s. Among other complicated factors, this is partly due to the state's retreat from grassroots governance following the 1994 nationwide reform of China's fiscal system (Tao and ping 2007), partly because of societal transformation in rural China and partly because of internal transformations of the Federation itself (Howell 1996). In Shaojia Village of Shuangdian Town, we found that due to the party branch's control of the Women's Federation's personnel and funding, it dominates the village Women's Federation's branch much more than is the case at upper levels of government. As a result, the Women's Federation is only able to play an "assisting role" in integrating women into various key tasks of the village's party branch, while lacking much room for independent activities. Nationwide, successful cases have been reported regarding provincial Women's Federations playing an active role in promoting women's participation in village governance.<sup>18</sup> However, in general, in Rudong and in many other places, local branches of the Women's Federation suffer incapability in promoting women's representation in local governance bodies.

Our survey respondents spoke for such a case. When asked, "Can the women's organization play positive roles in village self-governance?" 78% of them chose "Yes, but not so great." The explanation they chose was, "Yes, meaning it can carry out routine examining for pregnancy in accordance with the order from the upper level government, (but lacking the ability to play a more independent role)." In our interviews, when asked why they did not elect women as their leaders, many villagers answered: "The Women's Federation of the village does not have any influence at all, as it is actually under the control of other cadres. When the secretary of the village party branch blames the female cadres, they often dare not even say a word." "The cadres of the Women's Federation themselves do not have a leg to stand on in politics and only carry out their work under the control of others, how can they represent female villagers? It's useless electing them."

### **The Local Party-State**

The above socioeconomic, cultural, and institutional factors are identified in the rural community. If we look beyond the village level to how the

county-level party-state places its priorities in women's work, we can explain this rather striking underrepresentation of women in village governance much better. Given the focus on economic development by China's local party-state, fostering business and attracting investment, among other drives, dominate local government's work (Duckett 2001; Oi 1995). Promoting gender equality in social and political arenas can only claim a very low place on the leadership's agenda list. This is, of course, true for most county or municipal governments in China throughout the 1990s and 2000s. When it comes to the party-state's limited effort in promoting women's representation in local governance, we identified two problems. First, the county government focuses much more on women's representation in formal government agencies, instead of village committees. In 2006, Rudong County Government released its Eleventh Five-Year Programme on Women's Development, covering the period from 2006 to 2010 (Dongzhengfa 2006). The section dealing with "promoting women's participation in the management and decision making in state and social affairs" was clearly directed toward promoting more women cadres in the agencies, bureaus, and offices of the county and township governments. Of course, women's representation in such agencies also needs to be improved, but women affairs in the villages are given only passing attention in this policy document. In all the documents related to women's work we collected in Rudong, the villages are never the focus.

Second, the Women's Federation at the county level enjoys only limited agency in women's work. While the main focus of the county's Party Committee and government may be on economic and developmental issues, in the party-state, there is indeed an institution specifically focusing on women's work and that is the Women's Federation. Studies of such government-organized nongovernmental organizations in China, including the Women's Federation and All China Labor Union, already make the convincing "state-dependence" argument (Howell 1996; Lee 1999): These institutions are politically and financially dependent on the party and the government and enjoy very limited autonomy. An official document of Rudong's Women's Federation we collected states that women's work should service party building in the county. Their work reports show that the work of the Women's Federation in Rudong largely focuses on urban instead of rural areas and on social and economic instead of political issues. Meanwhile, the Women's Federation is restricted to a very unfavorable position when it comes to accessing the top decision-making bodies of the party and the government. From Women's Federation's documents, we found that as a whole, its leaders have limited opportunities for reporting women's work (*huibao gongzuo*) to the party and government leaders of the county. Unsurprisingly, women's work is highly marginalized in the local party-state's power structure, with the work in rural areas even more so. Eventually, Rudong County's Women's Federation was able to take content in the fact that the target of having one woman in every villagers' committee was met, while downplaying the

problems we identified in this study, such as women cadres taking secondary and marginal roles in the committee (Rudongfulian 2008).

To put this into context, social development in China as well as other developing countries often suffer the so-called “urban bias” (Lipton 1976). That is, developmental and social policies in these countries often favor urban sectors and groups, often at the expense of the rural society. Rudong’s government recognized that in the villages, younger and more educated women (those below 35 years old) have often migrated to take up employment in the cities, making it difficult to identify and promote women leaders in the villages. Yet at the same time, China’s rural society has suffered a serious “retreat of the state” since the 1990s, in that many social services including affirmative action to promote gender equality by the state were downsized. The Women’s Federation as well as the party’s organizational department are finding themselves lacking the capacity to get more involved in rural society.

### Discussions and Conclusions

We have presented our study and findings on women’s participation in village governance in Rudong. With its economic and social development ranking in the upper-middle segment of China,<sup>19</sup> we believe the Rudong’s story is highly representative of other areas of China. Our data show that women accounted for 16.6% of members in villagers’ committees in Rudong, at about the same level of the national average.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, our findings do echo well with findings from neighboring Zhejiang Province as well as with observations made on nationwide analyses (Guo, Zheng, and Yang 2009; Howell 2006; Jennings 1998; Rosen 1995; Tong 2003). In fact, problems presented here regarding women’s participation in village governance may speak for other developing societies as well. Hence, our analyses of causes and effective remedies developed in this article are highly transferable when scholars and development workers consider similar issues in other societies, such as those in South Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America.

In contrast to the villages, women in urban China have been much more successfully represented in local governance. They now account for almost half (49.76%) of the members in urban neighborhood committees (*junmin weiyuanhui*).<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, in Haimen City, which neighbors Rudong to the South, women accounted for 22.3% of the villager committee and party branch secretaries in its 233 villages (Haimenshifulian 2010). Hence, a big space exists for improvement in the countryside in Rudong and across China. Few would deny that since the 1980s, the system of village self-governance has greatly promoted both male and female villagers’ participation in politics, and in the process improved male and female villagers’ civic competence and political efficacy. Arguably, rural governance has also seen great improvement in accountability, transparency, efficiency, and other aspects (Li 2003; Manion 1996; Su and Yang 2005).<sup>22</sup>

But nevertheless, a wide range of institutional, socioeconomic, structural, and cultural factors still prevent a more equal representation of women in rural governance in China. The following efforts may help lead to a stronger presence of women in local governance and a more competent perception of politics by rural women themselves.

### **Legal and Institutional Improvements**

Some local practices have emerged that resulted in a much stronger female presence in local governance bodies. In Hunan Province, for example, during every village election year, the provincial government makes it formal policy that a sufficient number of women are elected (Tang 2010). Such practices need to be formally recognized by the central government and codified into laws and regulations. We were recently told by cadres in Rudong's Women's Federation that the county's Organizational Department has made it a formal policy that women members should be guaranteed in villages' "Two Committees." This is certainly a good sign, but more efforts are needed to improve the quality of elections in the countryside to prevent electoral fraud and irregularities from taking place. High-quality electoral institutions are highly conducive to the emergence of political aspiration among women.

### **Civic Programs for Rural Women**

In China, civic groups are highly underdeveloped due to the government's general distrust of civil society activism (Howell 2003). For sure, some kinds of civic work do exist in the Chinese countryside, but the problem seems to be that only government or party organizations are given the authority to run such programs. As most women-related civic projects need to take place under the patronage of the Women's Federation (Ungers 2008), the autonomy and space for civic groups are highly restricted. Civil society groups should be allowed much more space to run such programs. Programs are also needed to increase women's economic independence and their human, social, and political capital.

### **Civil Society Participation by Women**

While in general civil society organizations are still underdeveloped in China, rural Chinese communities benefit even less from civil society or voluntary groups. The creation and expansion of such groups will make a significant impact on rural society, while involvement in such groups will provide information, training, and networks conducive to women's participation in politics. At present, the number and penetration of civil society in villages is still highly limited. In fact in Rudong, we did not find any civil society groups organized by the farmers. Civil society groups currently active in urban China should be encouraged to expand their

activities to cover more rural areas, and women's rights groups in the cities should look to the villages too.

We conclude this study with a positive note. Recent developments give ground for cautious optimism. The overall quality of grassroots participation in elections, including women's participation, keeps improving. Compared to the 1980s (Jennings 1998), we see much active participation now by both male and female villagers. Other scholars also found that experiences of participating in earlier rounds of village elections will lead to more active and higher quality participation in later rounds (Shi & Lu 2010). Rural women's political awareness now stands comparable with men's, even though women lag behind when it comes to political action (Guo, Zheng, and Yang 2009). The state's legislative and administrative efforts resulted in better awareness of existing gender biases and stronger implementation of Article 9 of The Organic Law of Village Committees. This indicates a certain degree of government commitment to improving the status of women in grassroots politics. In some localities, the All China Women's Federation's branches have introduced specialized training for women to take governing positions in villages as well as lobbied for quotas for women in village governing structures.<sup>23</sup> Recent efforts by the government to employ college graduates as village cadres are attracting female college graduates to work in the countryside, contributing to a stronger female presence in the governance of village affairs.<sup>24</sup> The higher confidence and broadened horizons of increasing numbers of women studying or working in the city may also translate into higher levels of political activity once they return to their home villages.

### Notes

1. The 2010 revision saw to improved institutions in all these four areas by introducing a number of new measures. Interested readers can search for comments on these revisions.
2. These factors seem to be universally at work across countries. Howell (2006) quotes feminist work such as those by Lovenduski and Randall, while Jennings' eight-nation studies confirmed such cross-country patterns.
3. Although the rise in household income due to the father's job in the city may also play a role.
4. Unlike a typical county one would find in central or western China, Rudong's subcounty units are all towns (zhen), with no townships (xiang) that represent less urbanized rural governing bodies. The 15 towns in Rudong are: Juegang, Changsha, Jianzhen, Matang, Shuangdian, Yuanzhuang, Dayu, Chahe, Xindian, Caobu, Bencha, Fengli, Hekou, Bingfang, and Yangkou.
5. For the implementation of village elections, see Ogden (2002).
6. Our findings, however, show a much more active picture regarding both male and female villagers' political participation compared to Jennings' findings in the 1980s. Jennings found only 8% of women and 19% of men have ever "written a letter to a cadre or offered an opinion or suggestion to a cadre," whereas our figures are 19% and 41%, respectively. This probably

shows the overall increase of local democracy in China in the 20 years from Jennings' survey to ours.

7. A typical villagers' committee normally consists of five to seven members. According to national statistics, female members accounted for 21.7% of all village committee members in 2009 (Deng 2009). This figure appears to be much higher than what we found in Rudong County. Another report puts the national figure at 17.6% (Xinhua, March 31, 2009).
8. The Xinhua report cited above shows the national percentage of villagers' committee chairperson being women at 2.7%, again much higher than our findings from Rudong.
9. Direct elections at the township level started to be experimented at various locations across China in the late 1990s. See Li (2002).
10. For civic competence and its importance in democratic politics, see Chrysochoou (2002) and Hoskins et al. (2008).
11. See also Davis et al. (2007) and Howell (2006).
12. The fact that no rural woman (or man) holds a full college degree is mostly because of China's labor regime: A rural resident will acquire an urban identity (*hukou*) once she enters college and will obtain an urban job after graduation. Hence, all rural college goers acquire an urban identity, leaving no college degree holders in the countryside.
13. The level of education obtainment for rural women in Rudong seems lower than the average level for rural women across China, while that of rural men in Rudong seems higher than that of rural men across China. According to the China General Social Survey conducted in 2006, about 7% of all rural women have senior high school education or higher, compared to rural women in Rudong's 5%. For rural men nationwide, about 15% enjoy senior high school education or above, while the figure is 22% in Rudong. The nationwide survey data are available by request from the authors.
14. Bordering Shanghai and in the heartland of the Yangtze Delta, Jiangsu is now one of the most industrialized and internationalized economies in the country. As of 2008, its provincial GDP accounts for almost 10% of the national total.
15. Nan zhunei, nu zhuwai in Chinese.
16. The study in Zhejiang similarly found that the majority of rural women consider politics the "responsibility of men." It also reveals a story about a female village leader having to resign because her parents-in-law did not like her being a leader but instead pressured her into being a domestic caretaker for her husband (Guo, Zheng, and Yang 2009).
17. Within a (administrative) village there are normally a few "teams" (*zu*), which are also referred to as "natural villages."
18. While the Women's Federation activities in Hunan and Shandong Provinces are probably the best known cases of playing an active role in increasing women's representation in village governance, similar efforts have been reported in Tianjin, Inner Mongolia, Shaanxi, and Guizhou. See Dong and Li (2010).
19. In 2007, Rudong's GDP per capita was about RMB 20,000, while the figure for China is RMB 17,000.
20. A 2009 work report from the Civil Affair Ministry of the Central Government pointed out that as of 2008, women accounted for 17.6% of all members of villagers' committees across China. The document is on file with the authors.
21. According to the same 2009 work report by the Civil Affairs Ministry cited above.
22. For an alternative view, see Tan (2010).

23. Hunan and Shandong Provinces seem to stand out in terms of government intervention to improve rural women's political participation. In 2008, women accounted for 31.4% of the villagers' committee memberships (Tang 2010).
24. News reports show, for example, in Xinzhou City of Shanxi Province along, in 2011 a total of 130 female college graduates took up village governance jobs in its 14 counties or districts.

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