

## **From Left Behind to Leader: Gender, Agency, and Food Sovereignty in China**

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### **Abstract**

Capitalist reforms usually drive outmigration of peasants to cities, while elders, children, and women responsible for their care are “left behind” in the countryside. The plight of these “left behind” populations is a major focus of recent agrarian studies in China. However, rural women are not merely passive victims of these transformations. Building on ethnographic research in Guangxi and Henan provinces from 2013 to 2017, and drawing on critical gender studies and feminist political ecology, I show how the food safety crisis in China creates conditions for peasant women to increase control and income from organic food production, often establishing alternative food networks with the support of female scholars and NGO organizers. Thus, I shift focus of scholarship on rural women from “left behind” to leaders in struggles for justice and food sovereignty.

**Keywords** China, left-behind populations, gender, agency, alternative food networks, food sovereignty

### **Abbreviations**

AFN    Alternative Food Network  
BOFM    Beijing Organic Farmers' Market  
CCP    Chinese Communist Party  
COHD    College of Humanities and Development Studies, China Agricultural University  
CSA    Community Supported Agriculture

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## Introduction

A central characteristic of China's recent market-oriented reforms has been the massive outmigration of peasants to the cities, where they take up temporary jobs as migrant workers in industry, construction, and various service sectors. This results from an urban-focused export-oriented industrial policy, price differentials for agricultural and manufactured products, uneven incomes from agriculture and manufacturing/services, and an urban bias in cultural attitudes and the provision of social services (Wen 2001; Yan 2003). Moreover, China's household registration system (*hukou*) generally curtails the permanent settlement of rural populations in major cities, excluding them and their families from essential social services such as education (Wen 2001; Yan 2003). So as the working-age rural population migrates out for temporary urban employment, elders, children, and women responsible for their care are "left behind". The characteristics and plight of these "left behind" populations have become focus of much scholarship in development studies, agrarian studies, and various social sciences (Ye and Wu 2008; Wu and Ye 2016; Ye et al. 2016), and these have contributed to promoting various government policies to address the predicament of these people and the "hollow villages" where they remain. This scholarship and the political mobilization around it are commendable for bringing much needed governmental policies and resources to address the social (economic, cultural, ecological, etc.) problems that come about through increasing rural-urban inequality. However, this scholarship and much of the policy recommendations it provides also faces important limitations. My purpose in this paper is to build upon this literature and advance it further through stronger and deeper engagement with feminist political ecology and critical gender studies.

Two aspects of this literature are particularly useful for expanding and deepening this scholarship. First, there is recognition that women are the pillar of "left behind" populations, as they are "left behind" precisely because they are considered to be responsible for taking care of children who cannot advance their education at the urban centers, and elders who are not capable of migrating to work in new factories and social services. Moreover, since women generally live longer than men, most of the "left-behind elderly" are also women. Second, there is also growing recognition that the tidal waves of migrant workers results in the "feminization" of agriculture, that is, the fact that much agricultural labor and other rural work is being done increasingly by women (Zuo and

Song 2002; Chang et al. 2011). This “feminization” of agriculture had already been widely recognized across India, Africa, Latin America, and much of the rest of the world (Fortmann and Rocheleau 1985; Deere 2005; FAO 2010; de Schutter 2013; Lahiri-Dutt and Adhikari 2016). In China, however, there were powerful voices utilizing neoliberal discourses and patriarchal assumptions (mainly in economics, political science, and sociology) to question the prevalence of “feminization” and challenge those who argued this was taking place extensively (e.g. Zhang et al. 2004; de Brauw et al. 2008), since much of the female work in agriculture focused on household subsistence, and encompassed as well various other forms of unpaid, non-cash “household” economy (cf. Barker 2005; de Schutter 2013). As extensive documentation of “feminization” of agriculture continues to emerge through rigorous, extensive, and in-depth fieldwork-based research (mainly in critical agrarian studies, development studies, anthropology, and to a certain extent sociology as well) critics were forced to revise their previous statements (e.g. de Brauw et al. 2013). This growing recognition of the feminization of agriculture in China, therefore, is an important accomplishment in its own right.

In this paper, I argue that we must advance from merely describing the characteristics of women as “left behind”, and demonstrating the “feminization” of agriculture, to pay more attention to the manner that rural women are not merely passive victims during these transformations. Maintaining this currently limited perspective and purpose in the literature can even risk aggravating the condition of these women, reproducing a discourse of *victimization* that makes their agency invisible and their initiatives unimportant, and may even coopt their self-empowerment efforts (cf. Sangtin Writers Collective 2010; Gilson 2016). This critique is not new in gender studies, including the argument that certain “burdens” may also be opportunities for greater female agency (e.g. Schneider 1993; Chung et al. 2019). However, the growing attention to women and gender issues among overseas development practice, international scholarship, and policy since the 1990s (FAO 1996, 2010; UNDP 2003), including the promotion of women’s rural cooperatives and contract farming schemes (Dolan and Sorby 2003; de Schutter 2011), has generated a powerful new wave of scholarship on this topic, particularly in the way that NGOs and “participatory rural development” initiatives that were designed to “empower women” often failed to do so, and sometimes even have the opposite effect (e.g. Sangtin Writers Collective 2010; Jacka 2013). Albeit focused on empirical cases and literature about China, therefore, my article does not rest upon nor

suggest any exceptionalism about this country, but rather it engages with key debates in the international and interdisciplinary field of “agriculture and human values” worldwide.

In short, I argue we must shift focus of scholarship on rural women from “left behind” to leaders in various forms of resistance to displacement, marginalization, and discrimination. Discussion of “feminization” of agriculture in feminist political ecology, after all, has often indicated this can become an opportunity for female empowerment (Carney and Watts 1990; Rocheleau et al. 1996; Schroeder 1996; Vaz-Jones 2018). With this argument, moreover, we can also begin to deconstruct the dichotomies that separate “left behind” rural women from others in non-rural spaces where they exercise their agency, contributing to new analytic frameworks that recognize “translocal family reproduction” as key to understanding contemporary agrarian change (Jacka 2018), and female-led “rooted networks” as central to rural and environmental social movements (Escobar et al. 2002; Rocheleau and Roth 2007).

Theoretically, I build upon critical agrarian studies, development studies, gender studies, and feminist political ecology, particularly the feminist critique of Nancy Fraser (2003, 2009), Tamara Jacka (1997, 2010, 2013, 2018), Judith Butler (2004), and Erinn Gilson (2016), and both classic and new works of feminist political ecology (Fortmann and Rocheleau 1985; Carney and Watts 1990; Rocheleau et al. 1996; Jarosz 2011; Ge et al. 2011; Elmhirst 2011). Methodologically, I utilized ethnographic methods of semi-structured interviews, qualitative surveys, and participant observation during several months of in-depth fieldwork in Guangxi and Henan provinces from 2014 to 2017, which I supplemented with a critical review of media and government reports.

The paper is organized as follows. In the second section, I review the literature and outline my theoretical framework. In the third section, I present my methods and field sites. Then in the fourth section, I discuss various findings from my fieldwork to highlight how the feminization of agriculture and the ongoing food safety crisis in China are creating conditions for peasant women to increase control over food production and increase their income through sales of safer, organic food through “alternative food networks” (AFNs).<sup>1</sup> In the fifth section, I briefly discuss the

<sup>1</sup> AFNs contrast with mainstream agri-food commercial channels (such as major agribusiness companies, wholesalers, supermarkets, institutional canteens and restaurants), and include community-supported agriculture (CSA) initiatives,

ongoing challenges and obstacles faced by these female leaders, who are still subjected to the multiple burdens of advancing their agricultural, community, and/or political work alongside extensive unpaid domestic labor, and pervasive sexism and discrimination. In the conclusion, I revisit feminist debates in agrarian studies to argue that shifting our focus to women's role as leaders contributes to a better understanding of the complex manner in which the feminization of agriculture constitutes both a disproportionate burden for rural women and an important opportunity for female empowerment. This generates conceptualizations that better reflect these women's subjective understandings of their own condition and experiences, but also more productive grounds for scholarship that does not simply describe their plight, but also recognizes and contributes to the advancement of their struggles.

## **Literature review and theoretical frameworks**

### Critical agrarian studies and development studies

Scholarship from and about China has been formative to the international and interdisciplinary fields of agrarian and development studies. Arguably, Mao Zedong himself introduced the idea of the revolutionary leadership of the peasantry to the communist movement through his studies of the conditions of the peasantry in his native Hunan province (Mao [1926-1927] 1971). Liang Shuming and Yan Yangchu also led the creation of a non-communist "rural construction movement", advancing both social science scholarship on agrarian societies and a broader social movement for peasant cooperatives (Si and Scott 2019). In addition, Fei Xiaotong is widely considered the founder of Chinese sociology through his ethnographic studies of the rural foundations of Chinese modernizing society (Fei [1948] 1992). Across all their scholarly and political differences, however, there is a theoretical commitment to researching the *agency* of peasants, a basic but fundamental insight that should orient critical agrarian studies worldwide.

Chinese agrarian studies then transformed radically from the socialist period, when the peasantry was discussed (at least officially among scholars and government officials) in very high regard,

farmers' markets, buying clubs, peasant cooperatives and even informal (e.g. family) producer-consumer connections that embed agri-food distribution in stronger social and ecological relations. For more details see Si and Scott (2019).

into the period of “reform and opening up”, when “members of the urban educated elite [began] seeking to reclaim a positive status and future for both themselves and the Chinese nation in the aftermath of late Maoist zealotry, in part by emphasizing the ‘backwardness’ of the peasantry” (Jacka 2013, p. 986; Schneider 2015). The peasantry began to be seen as “low quality” people whose numbers had to be contained through the one-child policy, and “backward” people who needed to be “modernized” (Jacka 2013; Schneider 2015). An anti-Marxist and anti-Maoist neoliberal consensus began to emerge that agricultural development takes place through “technological modernization”, reducing the need for labor in the countryside while increasing “economic efficiency” and “productivity” of agriculture (e.g. Zhang et al. 2004; Huang et al. 2008; de Brauw et al. 2008, 2013). Such neoliberal agrarian studies became mainstream during the 1990s and 2000s, informing and supporting capitalist reforms, and removing the agency of the peasants from theoretical discussion.

In opposition to such neoliberal agrarian studies, there has been an increasingly strong current of what we call critical agrarian studies. These are largely driven by scholars who refer back to the non-communist currents of agrarian studies and “rural construction movement”, particularly Wen Tiejun (Wen 2001) and He Xuefeng (He X. 2007), as well as new Marxist scholarship in anthropology and sociology (Yan 2003, 2008; Yan and Chen 2013; Zhang 2015), and critical development studies (Ye and Wu 2008; Ye 2010). These scholars criticize the capitalist reforms in the Chinese countryside and offer alternative visions for Chinese development. They call attention to the historical and ongoing contributions of the peasantry to the wellbeing and advancement of society, and the need for continued and/or renewed labor-intensive agro-ecological production to reverse the socio-ecological crisis that China is facing.

A central aspect of this crisis turns on food safety, as became widely recognized in 2008 when adulterated milk formula caused the death of many infants. Major incidents of food contamination have continued to cause national public health scares each year. This crisis results from the commodification of food and farming, which enables and incentivizes overuse of toxic agrochemicals and adulteration of agri-food products (Zhang 2017; Zhang and Qi 2019). Consequently, Chinese society has a growing concern to access safer and organic food, creating conditions for peasant women to increase control and income from organic food production by

establishing AFNs in collaboration with female scholars and NGO organizers. In this context, the struggles of peasants and urban food consumers to network for the provision of safer foods is fundamentally about regaining control (sovereignty) over food by re-embedding agri-food markets into social relations (as in a Polanyian countermovement). My contribution to this literature, therefore, simultaneously expands the empirical and theoretical scope of food sovereignty, and interlinks critical agrarian studies with broader debates about development studies.

Development studies emerged as a distinct field in China following upon the expansion of overseas development aid during the 1980s and 1990s. Since that time, overseas development agencies began funding not only development projects directly, but also an increasingly large number of development research initiatives, and training in development project implementation and research (Ye 2010; Jacka 2013). This led to the creation of China's first College of Rural Development at the China Agricultural University in 1998, which later became the College of Humanities and Development Studies (COHD). The emergence of development studies, and its close association with critical agrarian studies, "reflected a broad shift in scholarly approaches to rural issues, away from a predominant focus on achieving increases in agricultural productivity toward a broader, more holistic conceptualization of rural social and economic development" (Jacka 2013, p. 988; cf. Ye 2010), including most prominently the need to recognize and address the plight of the "left behind" populations.

The terms "left behind" used to describe rural people who (mostly) remain in the countryside while others migrate for temporary employment in urban areas first emerged in short local news articles in the mid 1990s (Shangguan 1994; Yi 1994; Lu 1996), and the first scholars to discuss the topic academically began publishing in 2004 (Du 2004; Luo and Chai 2004). This issue of "left behind" populations continued gathering academic attention during the late 2000s, and received even more academic attention when Ye Jingzhong's team at the COHD gathered substantial resources to conduct national-level quantitative and qualitative surveys of "left behind" populations, triggering a larger wave of publications and even government attention to the topic (Ye and Wu 2008; Wu and Ye 2016; Ye et al. 2016).

These efforts have produced very empirically rich scholarship on the topic, demonstrating in very vivid terms the plight and suffering of “left behind” women, children, and elders, and critiquing this as a serious problem of contemporary Chinese development. These include mainly examination of the economic hardship faced by these individuals (low income, heavy workloads in agricultural production and care work, limited financial and other contributions from family members who migrated for temporary urban employment, and limited access to good quality social services, particularly healthcare and education), and their personal and psychological suffering (loneliness, depression, anxiety, problems with self-esteem, etc.). These challenges are especially difficult for women who suffer multiple layers of these problems, who are described as “burdened” with agricultural work to maintain the family’s fields in addition to all the care work for elders and children, while receiving the least economic and social recognition, and facing the worst exclusion and marginalization among the family clans and villages of their husbands, as women traditionally “marry out” of their own family to go live *and work for* the husband’s family (Zhang 2009).

Yet this literature has come under increasingly more sustained criticism in recent years for remaining limited to a description of the negative experiences of these victimized individuals, without theoretical advancements about their condition or recognition of their agency.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the most explicit attempt by members of the COHD team to advance this scholarship continue to frame the issue in terms of “burdens” and victimization (Ye 2018, 2019). When Ye Jingzhong (2018) wrote most explicitly about “left behind women’s contribution to development”, for example, he still regarded this contribution as the passive “sacrifice” of these women so that men can migrate to work in the cities, sustaining household reproduction and cheap labor for export-oriented industrialization. Evidently, this scholarship continues to neglect longstanding feminist debates regarding female agency, subjective interpretations of burden/care, and the opportunities that feminization of agriculture may generate for female empowerment (Carney and Watts 1990; Schneider 1993; Schroeder 1996; Chung et al. 2019), sidestepping the feminist arguments of female scholars, even when produced and/or presented at the COHD (Jacka 2012; Zhang 2016, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Remarks made by Luo Cheng, professor at the Shaanxi Academy of Social Sciences, prefacing his presentation “Current situation and recommendations of support for poor rural left behind families”, at the seminar on Rural Left Behind Populations: New Questions, New Characters, New Actions, China Agricultural University, College of Humanities and Development Studies (COHD), Beijing, March 23, 2019.

## Gender studies and feminist political ecology

To build upon and advance this scholarship, I turn to critical gender studies and feminist political ecology. In particular, I draw upon Nancy Fraser for a feminist theory of justice that is especially attentive to the post-socialist condition and everyday capitalist relations (Fraser 2003, 2009), and build upon Tamara Jacka's feminist critique of the "rural reconstruction movement" and participatory development scholarship and practice in China (Jacka 2013). This feminist scholarship has shown that justice and injustice have multiple dimensions that go beyond economic exploitation and political oppression, and I focus particularly on what they call "cultural injustice", which includes not only cultural imposition or appropriation, but broader forms of disrespect, marginalization, and "non-recognition", that is, the rendering of a person as "invisible" (Jacka 2013, p. 984; Fraser 2003). Critical agrarian studies and development studies literature on "left behind" populations have explicitly sought to make these persons "visible" in a context where neoliberal agrarian studies, mainstream culture, and government policy was making them "invisible", and in this regard this literature has contributed to overcoming this cultural injustice.<sup>3</sup>

However, this scholarship would be problematic if it remains limited to this discourse of "the plight of the left behind", since it is a reductionist approach to understanding a complex social problem that (1) does not necessarily identify concrete and constructive solutions to this crisis, (2) generates a discourse of victimization that makes the agency of these people invisible, and (3) may even aggravate their condition by undermining their initiatives, agency, self-esteem, or even coopt their self-empowerment efforts. In other words, this scholarship can "potentially help to address economic and cultural injustice by shifting understandings of 'development' and how it is achieved, and by changing perceptions of rural citizens and rural culture", but since it also reproduces a discourse of victimization at the same time, the emancipatory potential of this scholarship could possibly be "undermined by a failure to develop effective strategies for overcoming gender injustice" and may even "contribute to the reproduction of injustice" (Jacka 2013, p. 985).

<sup>3</sup> Since the publication of the Chinese Central Government Document Number 1 of 2008, for example, the government utilizes the explicit terms of this scholarship in its rural development efforts.

A common challenge to this critique has been that victimization and stigmatization are not actually *created* or *imposed* by scholars who research it, and in fact this concern amounts merely to a “misunderstanding” that results from the “shallow imagination” of society and “one-sided” presentation of information in the media (Ye 2019, p. 24). In order to advance this debate, I follow Judith Butler (2004) and Erinn Gilson (2016) in theorizing stigmatization, victimization, vulnerability, and precarity in relation to various expressions of human identity and agency. Even when these women *become victims* of increased exploitation and oppression, “being a victim” is not their personal identity as the discourse of “left behind women” appears to suggest. Therefore, our own scholarship must shift theoretical focus to follow these women in their own agency, recognizing how their choices – albeit from precarious positions of vulnerability – still reveal daily-life struggles against displacement, marginalization, and discrimination. This includes their work in agriculture, rural cooperatives, and rural livelihoods, but also other work in non-rural spaces where they exercise agency, particularly their efforts to restructure gender, class, and rural-urban relations in the first place, and implicitly, address the greater social injustices engendered by these inequalities.

In this way, my feminist critique also builds on the theoretical advances of female Chinese scholars who already deconstructed similar victimization discourses about women who *did* migrate for temporary work in urban industries (e.g. Lee 1998; Ngai 2005; Yan 2008), and post-colonial studies of “quiet social movements” and “everyday life” resistance among the poor and marginalized elsewhere in the Global South (Bayat 2000, 2013; Roy 2015; Vaz-Jones 2018). In particular, I theorize food sovereignty initiatives among rural women as a *feminist movement* in China, which is unlike the high-profile account of middle-class liberal feminism that is gaining attention recently (Milwertz 2002; Fincher 2016), as those accounts are almost entirely disconnected from the deeper social, political, economic, and ecological analysis present in critical agrarian studies and feminist political ecology.

Thus, I bring Fraser's (2003) and Jacka's (2013) feminist theory of justice to bear upon the broader fields of critical agrarian studies and feminist political ecology, enabling us to recognize the limitations of the existing literature on “left behind” women and promote distinct frameworks in the following manner. The mere description of rural women as simply “left behind” with the

“burdens” of farming and social reproduction – which isolates rural women from their translocal family reproduction and political networks, and reduces them to a homogeneous and isolated group of victims – constitutes what Fraser (2003) and Jacka (2013) call an “affirmative” conception and strategy of justice. Affirmative approaches pivot on “inclusion”. They seek to address injustices by “identifying” and “including” victims of injustice in social, political, and economic structures, yet they do not call attention to or challenge the underlying structures of power that produce “invisibility” and “burdens” in the first place, nor do they reflect the agency of those who actively struggle against these conditions. In part as a result of scholarship on “left behind” populations, for example, the Chinese government is now superficially including women and other “left behind” populations in government policies for “poverty alleviation” and “rural vitalization” without challenging the capitalist reforms that generate this condition, or supporting the rooted networks and bottom-up initiatives of these vulnerable persons themselves to overcome this injustice.

Transitional conceptions and strategies of justice, on the other hand, do not simply rest upon the “inclusion” of the marginalized, but pivot upon their own agency to “alter the terrain” upon which struggles are waged in ways that may ultimately transform the underlying structures that generate injustice in the first place (Fraser 2003, p. 74; Jacka 2013, p. 985). Developing our conceptual framework from “left behind” to “leaders” harnesses the commitment to scholarship and engagement with people’s agency, and enables recognition of their quiet struggles in everyday life as a form of transitional approach to justice. Women across China’s villages, townships, and cities – including women who migrate from rural to urban spaces for higher education – are engaged in various forms of agroecological production to satisfy their household’s basic needs for food, especially safer, organic food in face of an aggravating food safety crisis (Zhang and Qi 2019). They are also collaborating in the creation of AFNs designed to cultivate and support the livelihoods of women, children, the elderly, the disabled, and other vulnerable persons, particularly through alliances between female scholars who may have their own roots in the countryside, and now partner with those who remain engaged in agricultural production. As women take up leadership roles and positions of power and authority in rural cooperatives, local governments, universities, and AFNs, they *alter the terrain of struggle* and open the possibility for additional claims and forms of recognition that can *transform the underlying structures of power* that cause injustice. While both “affirmative” and “transitional” conceptions of justice have been features of

critical agrarian studies and feminist political ecology, this explicit analysis of their different approaches enables us to recognize the limitations of the former and the need to expand the latter.

This work resonates with earlier critiques of liberal feminism and capitalist development from more radical perspectives (Carney and Watts 1990; Schroeder 1996), including feminist political ecology arguments that has dismissed the “myths” that women do not engage in agricultural production and leadership of political struggles (Fortmann and Rocheleau 1985; Rocheleau et al. 1996), and that calls attention to the “rooted networks” of female-led social movements (Escobar et al. 2002; Rocheleau and Roth 2007). The merits of this approach includes a refusal of simple binary thinking (such as rural/urban, producer/consumer, passive victim/active organizer, etc.), an attention to entanglements of power within networks, and a recognition that networks both shape and are shaped by territories (Escobar et al. 2002; Rocheleau and Roth 2007). Thus, the agency of peasant women in AFNs can be theorized as a form of “self-organization from below”, which reveals their “power of mobility and connectivity in horizontal and vertical dimensions” (Rocheleau and Roth 2007, p. 436) in ways that transcend the static imagined territoriality of the “rural left behind”, and the powerless condition of passive victim this discourse engenders.

## **Methods and field sites**

I draw upon ethnographic research methods, including participant observation (of AFNs and government regulations of food safety), semi-structured interviews, and qualitative surveys. These methods have been widely used in interdisciplinary social sciences, and proved to be particularly useful in identifying the nuances of gender injustices in everyday life situations such as the plight and agency of female migrant workers in China (e.g. Lee 1998; Ngai 2005; Yan 2008) and female leaders and critics of rural development initiatives in China, India, Latin America, and beyond (Escobar et al. 2002; Rocheleau and Roth 2007; Jacka 2010, 2013, 2018; Deere 2005; Sangting Writers Collective 2010; de Schutter 2013; Ge et al. 2011; Elmhirst 2011).

Most of my fieldwork was undertaken in Gu<sup>4</sup> village in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and Bian<sup>5</sup> village in Henan province during the Summer of 2014, Spring of 2015, and Spring of 2017. I undertook 126 semi-structured interviews in Gu and Bian villages with peasant households, which included interviews with ten childless elders, disabled and orphans (五保户), six school teachers, and four spiritual leaders, the majority of whom were all female. I also undertook 86 semi-structured interviews with other key informants, including rural cooperative leaders, county and township officials, food vendors and brokers, agricultural input vendors and brokers, local food market and restaurant managers, and urban representatives of food safety-oriented NGOs, community supported agriculture (CSA) initiatives, and buyers' groups.

The main focus of my research at the time was the establishment of new top-down government laws and regulations on food safety, and the AFNs among peasants and between peasants and urban consumers to produce and distribute safer, organic food (Zhang 2017; Zhang and Qi 2019). But one of my key findings was that the articulation of gender, ethnic, and class identity among peasants and rural cooperative leaders appears to influence how much they prioritize the production of safer organic food, as the female-led cooperative was doing in the ethnic minority village of Gu, or the scaling-up and commercial success of agricultural production, as was taking place in the male-led cooperative in Bian village (Zhang 2016, 2018). This two-case comparison may not be sufficient to draw clear conclusions about gender as a determinant factor, which requires not only more case studies but also clearer analysis of the way gender, class, ethnic identity, and other factors articulate in each situation. But it certainly enables us to pose questions about gender, agrarian studies, and rural development politics as undertaken in this present article.

### **Female leadership in food sovereignty**

Many believe that China does not have “social movements” because of the authoritarian nature of its state, and the limited space for “civil society” to coordinate nationwide protests and organize openly, independently, and especially in opposition to the Communist Party (Ho and Edmonds 2007). Yet I argue bottom-up initiatives for self-protection in face of China's ongoing food safety

<sup>4</sup> Pseudonym.

<sup>5</sup> Pseudonym.

crisis (i.e. the establishment of AFNs) constitutes a key aspect of the global social movement for *food sovereignty*. This fits the theoretical foundations of “food sovereignty” as a political struggle for greater control and autonomy over food production and consumption, contrasting it with commercial and distributive frameworks of “food security” that have not prioritized issues of quality or the agency of food producers (Wittman et al. 2010; McMichael 2013; Bezner Kerr 2013). Moreover, the literature on food sovereignty has become increasingly attentive to household-level power and gender dynamics (Wittman et al. 2010; McMichael 2013; Bezner Kerr 2013), and by reflecting upon female-led AFNs as part of the global food sovereignty movement, my work also expands upon the role of women in this struggle. In order to sustain this argument, I call attention to the growing literature on “everyday life” resistance among the poor and marginalized in the Global South as a form of “quiet social movement” (Zhang and Qi 2019; cf. Bayat 2000, 2013; Roy 2015; Vaz-Jones 2018). In this context, I discuss female leadership not merely in rural cooperatives, agrarian studies, development initiatives, CSAs and other AFNs, but collectively as female leadership in the food sovereignty movement in China, echoing the work of Diane Rocheleau and other feminist political ecologists on rooted networks of environmental and rural social movements worldwide (Rocheleau et al. 1996; Escobar et al. 2002; Rocheleau and Roth 2007; Jarosz 2011; Nyantakyi-Frimpong 2017). Identifying these AFNs as female-led rooted networks for food sovereignty accomplishes two theoretical and empirical purposes: first, it delineates the translocal connections through which so-called “left behind” women exercise agency and power, and second, it enriches formulations of the global food sovereignty movement with attention to these less confrontational everyday life practices and the centrality of food safety concerns for such struggles in places under more authoritarian regimes.

### The role of female scholars and educated young women

First, it is worth highlighting that even though male scholars like Wen Tiejun usually get credit for leading the “new rural reconstruction movement” and several of their associated initiatives, very often there are younger people, and particularly younger women, who actually do the hard work of organizing, implementing, and cultivating these initiatives. This is particularly evident in some of the most famous AFNs emerging in China. One example is the Little Donkey Farm, a peri-urban farm in Beijing where urban intellectuals and young volunteers have been establishing a

CSA and organic farming initiative. Its core founder was Shi Yan, a young woman who was a PhD student of Wen Tiejun, and spent some time as exchange student in a US university, where she learned the CSA model and practice. Upon her return to China, Shi Yan became one of the founders the Little Donkey Farm in 2008, and continues to play a leading role in promoting organic food production in China as founder of Shared Harvest, another high-profile CSA-turned-agribusiness in Beijing.

The situation is similar with the Beijing Organic Farmers' Market (BOFM), another very high-profile AFN in China. Chang Tianle was a young female social activist among the first group of volunteers of the BOFM, joining it upon her return from studying abroad in the US in 2010, while working in the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy think tank. The BOFM was originally founded by a foreign couple, but it was Chang Tianle's initiative to create an online presence for the BOFM. Her online promotion was extremely successful, and as the market grew, Chang Tianle became increasingly involved, eventually leaving her other work to assume full-time management of the BOFM, and networking even more to expand China's organic food social movement.

But the majority of female scholars and educated women cultivating their own and other female leadership in food sovereignty in China obtained their education and remain firmly rooted within China itself. Their input as critical agrarian scholars has been instrumental for the development of multiple other AFNs and food sovereignty initiatives in China. Tamara Jacka was supportive of the transformative potential of their work, yet apprehensive and critical of their limitations in addressing gender justice explicitly (Jacka 2013). My research findings support some of her critique, but also reveal more positive and optimistic trajectories. One of the female scholars somewhat critiqued by Tamara Jacka was He Huili, a professor of development studies at COHD who was very involved in the creation of the Bian rural cooperative and CSA in Henan province. As Jacka correctly points out, He Huili's community engagement did attempt to empower women and improve the condition of the most marginalized persons – the “left behind” women, elders, and children – more clearly than Wen Tiejun or He Xuefeng, yet her publications never addressed gender issues directly (e.g. He H. 2007). After Tamara Jacka's publication, I began my own fieldwork in Bian village, and examined the development of the Bian village cooperative that He Huili helped create.

The Bian village cooperative was created in 2004 with 39 households adapting the CSA model, in a village highly controlled by five men from the leading family clans. The only exception was He Huili herself, who was not only responsible for academic support for the project, but also politically responsible as deputy governor of the county in which Bian village is located. Their original aim was to produce organic rice for members who paid in advance to assist the cooperative with production. However, the cooperative was not able to fully abandon the use of synthetic fertilizers, and they failed to obtain government certification as “organic”, so they marketed it instead as “pollution free” (Zhang and Qi 2019). In 2009, the Bian village case received national attention, as their cooperative was showcased by then-vice president Xi Jinping as an example to be followed for rural development. He Huili was a key organizer of this political and publicity stunt.

However, as expected from Tamara Jacka's (2013) critical assessment of the “new rural reconstruction” movement and other critical scholarship of the limitations and cooptation of China's new cooperatives (e.g. Yan and Chen 2015; Zhang 2015), the efforts of the Bian village cooperative to produce “pollution free” rice were largely coopted by male local cadres for their own personal gains. This happened especially after severe droughts affected the cooperative's own rice production in 2014, threatening the economic viability of the project. After all, the cooperative was contracting over 300 households to provide an ever growing amount of rice, even selling beyond their own CSA members, especially after their case gained national-level attention. And the male cooperative leaders feared their customers would not accept the CSA terms of shared cost, shared risk, and shared results. Therefore, the male leadership of the cooperative began buying up regular (i.e. not “pollution free”) rice from neighboring villages, processing and repackaging them with the cooperative's brand, and selling it as if it was their own “pollution free” production. In other words, focusing on branding and sales instead of production. This was never admitted publically, but it was an open secret among residents of Bian village and in the surrounding area at the time I conducted my fieldwork from 2014 to 2017.<sup>6</sup> He Huili herself became frustrated with this outcome (and other complicated issues beyond the scope of this article), withdrew her

<sup>6</sup> Field site observations in 2014, 2015, and 2017, and various surveys and interviews with peasant households and key informants in and around Bian village, Henan.

leadership role in the Bian village project, and shifted instead to new collaborative research in her own home village, where she is placing culture and gender issues more prominently in her research and development agenda, as she indicated to me in a personal conversation in 2017.

He Huili's new collaborative research project in her own village (in Lingbao, Henan province) started around 2013, when she was growing distant from the Bian village cooperative to which she devoted her work for ten years. She realized it was not enough to promote economic production alone, and it was necessary to refocus on cultural and gender issues in their own right, as she perceived women to be "more active" in such initiatives already. Therefore, she combined various existing peasant cooperatives to established the Peasant Grassroots College (弘农书院), focusing on cultivating the traditional Chinese agricultural practice and spirit. All key leaders of the Peasant Grassroots College are female, after the only young man who participated its core group gave up the project. When I first met one of the young leaders at Grassroots College in 2014, she was still very shy and nervous. With He Huili's support and encouragement, and especially after they transitioned to a female-only core leadership group, she was transformed. When I met her again, she was a strong and confident leader, even acting as the main organizer of the province-wide Grassroots College Forum in 2017. Despite the shift away from He Huili's intellectual leadership in the Bian village case, therefore, her own leadership role and attention to gender issues continues to grow with transitional approaches to justice, creating conditions for transformation of the structural conditions that negatively affect rural women.

In other words, when women advance in their own education, they can lead food sovereignty initiatives like Shi Yan and Chang Tianle have done, thus contributing to a change in the social and economic terrain upon which female peasants are marginalized (i.e. mainstream food networks), creating new markets and discourses that can empower broader counter-movements to the capitalist reforms that are aggravating women's exploitation and marginalization in Chinese society (Zhang 2016, 2018). When women take up leadership in academia and local government, as He Huili has done, they may even undertake efforts to alter more directly the structural conditions that preclude or enable other women to empower themselves, as illustrated by the case of this young female leader who emerged from the Grassroots College. These are not merely affirmative strategies of justice, but rather transitional strategies, since they alter the terrain upon

which justice is conceived and grappled. Rather than merely affirming the existence of such women, or pivoting on their “inclusion” in agroecological initiatives, we can only fully grasp their significance when emphasizing their agency in a struggle for transitional justice.

### Female leaders in local government, cooperatives, and AFNs

As implicit in the sub-section above, the role of female scholars and young social activists requires networking with the rooted leadership of cooperatives and CSAs. A clearer example of women networking in leadership across all these roles was evident in my second case study in Gu village, Guangxi province.<sup>7</sup> In 2001, a female scholar and proponent of participatory rural development from the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Song Yiqing, went to Gu village to launch a development project focused on breeding local maize varieties and sustaining local culture. There she collaborated primarily with Lu Yanyan<sup>8</sup>, a female cadre who joined the village committee in 1991, and was vice-director of the village since 1999. Lu Yanyan was also among the most well-educated people in the village, having completed high school in a remote mountainous region where most ethnic minority children abandon school much earlier to work in the fields or migrate out to work in the factories and social services of neighboring Guangdong province. In addition, she is a committed CCP member, and received several awards from the CCP for the work I describe below.

Song Yiqing went to work in Gu village because Lu Yanyan had already established a cultural cooperative – which was composed almost exclusively of “left behind” women and female elders – to sustain Zhuang and Yao ethnic minority dances and traditions since 1998. Like He Huili, Song Yiqing believe they could develop from these cultural initiatives to economic projects (Zuo and Song 2002). Her initial efforts were limited to a traditional participatory rural development approach involving participatory mapping, rapid rural appraisal through surveying, and provision of seed varieties and short-term extension of breeding assistance. As was also found in several other similar cases (cf. Cahn and Liu 2008; Jacka 2010, 2013; Zhao 2011; Ge et al. 2011), these efforts themselves failed to produce any significant transformation of Gu village’s difficult social

<sup>7</sup> The information in this and the following paragraphs comes from my field site observations in 2014, 2015, and 2017, and various interviews with peasant households and key informants in and around Gu village, Guangxi.

<sup>8</sup> Pseudonym.

and economic condition. On the other hand, Song Yiqing's intervention did serve a *transitional* function for Lu Yanyan and her female partners in the village to advance *their own* initiatives afterwards, shifting the conditions of the terrain of struggle and opening new opportunities for mobilization (cf. Fraser 2003). In particular, it enabled Lu Yanyan to lead the transformation of the cultural cooperative into bottom-up construction of AFNs of their own.

Lu Yanyan and her whole cultural cooperative were invited to the COHD in Beijing to give a show and participate in workshops, and connected with other peasant and ethnic minority leaders to cultivate a network of solidarity, especially in the practice of saving and reproducing local seed varieties. She continues to be frequently invited to national and even international workshops and meetings organized by critical agrarian studies scholars, but she almost always politely declines these invitations. Lu Yanyan explained to me in one of our many personal conversations

I don't have time for all those meetings... my work needs to continue to focus on our cooperative, our village government, our own problems at home. All that training and experience-sharing are not really applicable to our village and cooperative, so instead of spending time on that, now I am more and more focused on our own things and experiences.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, Lu Yanyan herself deserves credit for the most successful advancements in her village. In 2006, she led the development of their cooperative from merely cultural activities to the organization of organic vegetable production.<sup>10</sup> Her efforts were directed primarily at improving the economic condition of "left behind" women, and particularly elderly women. As she explained to me in an interview:

Only the poorest villagers have the willingness to join the ecological cooperative to produce pollution-free vegetables and raise pigs and chickens. This is because they are old,

<sup>9</sup> Personal interview with Lu Yanyan, Gu village, Guangxi, January 15, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Their production was not certified organic, because the cost of obtaining and renewing government certification was beyond their capacity, so it was marketed as 'green food' instead. But the cooperative members and its CSA consumers both recognized it as 'organic' (绿色有机的). I verified through field site visits in 2014, 2015, and 2017 that in fact they do not use chemical pesticides and fertilizers, and so in this article I follow their convention in calling it 'organic'.

and cannot migrate out of the village to earn cash. So this is a source of sustainable livelihood for them.<sup>11</sup>

At first their production focused on distribution among the “left behind” households. But due to Lu Yanyan’s efforts, the cooperative grew from an initial 11 members to over 57 by 2010, renamed Yangshan Yanyan Ecological Planting and Breeding Cooperative<sup>12</sup>, and expanded distribution to a NGO-operated farm-to-table restaurant in the provincial capital of Nanning (the Farmer’s Friend restaurant). In an even more illustrative contrast with the case of Bian village cooperative in Henan, when drastic floods destroyed much of the production of the cooperative in Gu village, Lu Yanyan and her female partners in the cooperative preferred to sustain organic production for their own household consumption, rather than scale-up production with a greenwashed alternative that could maintain their commercial supplies to the farm-to-table restaurant in Nanning. As Lu Yanyan explained to me, this required active leadership by her and the other elder women in the cooperative:

The ecological planting and breeding cooperative is facing a problematic issue: the younger peasants want to use a modern way to produce with hybrid seeds and fertilizer to sell to the ordinary market. However, the elderly members and I insist on using the ecological way to produce less but safer and good food to sell to those who think it is worthy to buy.<sup>13</sup>

The restaurant was also pushing down prices by purchasing from various other villages, and complaining that Gu’s cooperative could not scale-up and guarantee a steady supply of all the vegetables they needed, so Lu Yanyan led efforts to establish new marketing channels at farmers’ markets in their own county. Through her leadership, Lu Yanyan not only improved the economic conditions of the “left behind” women in her village, but also gained further political power for herself, becoming village director and Communist Party secretary since 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Personal interview with Lu Yanyan, Gu village, Guangxi, January 15, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Pseudonym.

<sup>13</sup> Personal interview with Lu Yanyan, Gu village, Guangxi, May 12, 2015.

We can conclude, therefore, the case of Gu village demonstrates precisely a successful case of the strategy of developing from cultural initiatives to economic cooperatives, and although external support was important, the determinant factor was essentially the strong female leadership by Lu Yanyan. Her bottom-up initiatives effectively transformed the “burden” of agricultural production faced by women labeled as “left behind” into a more fundamentally transitional strategy that is enabling vulnerable women, particularly elderly women, to transform structural conditions through self-empowerment by cooperation in agricultural production, self-governance, and food sovereignty. Affirmative approaches to justice, such as the simple identification of these women as “left behind” and their inclusion in externally-organized development projects, are not sufficient to recognize and leverage their self-empowerment initiatives. These initiatives rest upon their own agency and leadership, which improves both their livelihoods and their self-esteem, as they do not identify themselves as “left behind” victims, but women leading efforts in the production of safe and organic food for themselves and their own alternative markets.

### **Continuing challenges and obstacles**

Despite the advancement of all these transitional approaches to gender justice across China's countryside and their networking with urban-based scholars and consumers, with their potential for transforming the structural conditions of power that make women more vulnerable to exploitation and oppression, there are still various challenges and obstacles to be overcome. As documented in several other cases across the “developing world”, the “economic inclusion” of women in capitalist societies and the inclusion of “gender issues” in new governmental initiatives may actually strengthen hierarchical power relations of female subordination to fathers, husbands, their families and clans, and even patriarchal states themselves (Ge et al. 2011; Lyon et al. 2017). Moreover, “female empowerment” initiatives may even become coopted to sustain neoliberal discourses and practices that ultimately undermine gender justice even further (e.g. World Bank and IFPRI 2010; cf. Sangtin Writers Collective 2010; Fraser 2009). Real transformations of society ultimately require radical shifts in social norms and institutional organizations.

Social and political conditions in China, however, remain very challenging for transitional strategies for gender justice. These range from social norms that discriminate against women in

educational and employment opportunities, differential incomes and advancement trajectories for women in the workplace, gender bias in the recruitment and advancement in political offices, and social practices in both domestic and political spaces that are “both unappealing and risky for women” (Howell 2008, p. 76). Recognizing and encouraging women’s leadership is therefore necessary, but not sufficient. In addition, it is also necessary to simultaneously redistribute unpaid care work and other *domestic* labor from women to men, and alter the social norms and institutional structures of *political* life. Otherwise, these new roles and responsibilities of female leadership may compound burdens rather than become a means for empowerment, as has been widely acknowledged in feminist literature (de Schutter 2013; Lyon et al. 2017).

The case of Lu Yanyan can be used once again for illustration, yet the narrative below is representative of virtually every single female leader who I have encountered through the course of this research. Many of the key challenges and obstacles she identified ultimately arise from the patriarchal relations with her husband, his family clan, and their children:

I got married when I was only 17 years old, and came from another poorer village. I am not a local person here and have different family name. I have to be very cautious to do anything, even to be excellent, because my husband belongs to the biggest clan in this village. There are more eyes on my behavior. When I began to engage in the village management affairs, my husband and his relatives did not believe that I could do well as a woman who came from outside [the village]. So I had to try very hard to convince them that I can take charge the village even though I am an “outside woman”. Now I became very busy with my work, so I do not have time to cook for the family and to take care of my grandchildren. So sometimes my husband, my sons, especially my two daughters-in-law complain with me about this. I have no choice now because I have to sacrifice the time with them to help more the others.<sup>14</sup>

Additional challenges include women’s systematic disenfranchisement from property ownership in both urban and rural areas, particularly in cases of divorce and displacement (Li and Bruce 2005; Sargeson and Song 2010; Fincher 2016), the destabilization of peasant knowledge for

<sup>14</sup> Personal interview with Lu Yanyan, Gu village, Guangxi, June 5, 2015.

agroecological production (Bezner Kerr 2013), the limited understanding of middle-class consumers about the nature of the food safety crisis and the challenges of peasant production, and the sustainability of networks of mutual trust between peasant producers and urban consumers (Zhang and Qi 2019), all of which are especially serious obstacles for China's food sovereignty movement, and consequently women's leadership within it. Further empirical evidence of what is often termed the "multiple burdens" faced by women engaged in economic and political leadership seems hardly necessary in this article, as this finding is widespread among scholars who examine this topic in China (e.g. Howell 2008; Jacka 1997, 2018; Ge et al. 2011). Rather, it is more important to relate feminist theories of justice to the complexity of burden and opportunity for empowerment that results from the feminization of agriculture, and how this approach enables us to move beyond the victimization of supposedly isolated and homogeneous "left behind" rural women.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued that the scholarship and advocacy on "left behind" populations, particularly women, needs to advance through deeper engagement with feminist theories of justice and feminist political ecology. Therefore, I developed a theoretical framework and illustrated it with my empirical research on how we can and must pay more attention to the manner that rural women are not merely passive victims during recent social transformations associated with rapid rural-to-urban migration and new dynamics of translocal family reproduction (Jacka 2018). In fact, these women are becoming leaders in agricultural production initiatives, particularly for safer and organic foods to address China's ongoing food safety crisis. This constitutes a "quiet" social movement for feminism and food sovereignty, as it addresses various forms of resistance to displacement, marginalization, and discrimination.

My theoretical contribution and empirical findings thus contribute to broader debates about capitalist transformation, rural activism and the "politics of possibility" in China (Ho and Edmonds 2007; Day and Schneider 2018), and broader feminist debates about the feminization of agriculture as a burden involving socio-economic exploitation on the one hand, and opportunities for female leadership and empowerment on the other. In problematizing state efforts and academic

scholarship that focus on “left behind” populations merely as victims, I contribute to the advancement of a collective argument that simply including women and other vulnerable populations in affirmative approaches to justice may still aggravate social relations of production that exclude, marginalize, and exploit women (Ge et al. 2011; Jacka 2013; Day and Schneider 2018). Moreover, such “affirmation” of rural women as a supposedly homogenous and isolated group of victims overlooks their agency, their heterogeneity in terms of socio-economic and geographical mobility, and their rooted networks that constitute a quiet social movement for food sovereignty. The significance and implications of my research are the following: shifting focus to women’s role as leaders – rooted and networked peasant women, local cadre, scholars and NGO organizers – identifies a more productive path for research in critical agrarian studies and development studies in China, recognizing and supporting female-led transitional strategies that may transform the basic conditions of struggle for social justice, the reproduction of livelihoods, and food sovereignty in China.

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