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From “Left Behind” to Leader

Female Leadership in Food Sovereignty and Local Governance in China

Li Zhang

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by Li Zhang, China Agricultural University / Cornell University

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Universidade de Brasília – UnB
Brasília, Brazil
Website: <http://www.unb.br/>

International Institute of Social Studies
The Hague, The Netherlands
E-mail: information@iss.nl *Website:* www.iss.nl

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Future Agricultures Consortium
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E-mail: info@future-agricultures.org *Website:* <http://www.future-agricultures.org/>

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E-mail: information@ranepa.ru *Website:* www.ranepa.ru

College of Humanities and Development Studies
China Agricultural University, Beijing, China
E-mail: yejz@cau.edu.cn
Website: <http://cohds.cau.edu.cn/>

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Terra de Direitos
Curitiba, Brazil
E-mail: terradedireitos@terradedireitos.org.br
Website: terradedireitos.org.br

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Abstract

China's capitalist reforms rest on massive outmigration of peasants to the cities, while elders, children, and women responsible for their care are "left behind" in the countryside. The plight of these "left behind" populations have become focus of much scholarship, showing that women are the pillar of these populations, and the waves of migrant workers results in the "feminization" of agriculture. However, I argue we must pay more attention to the manner that rural women are not merely passive victims during these transformations. Building on ethnographic research in Guangxi, Henan, and Jilin provinces from 2013 to 2018, and drawing on critical gender studies, I shift focus of scholarship on rural women from "left behind" to "leaders" in various forms of resistance to displacement, marginalization, and discrimination. I highlight how the ongoing food safety crisis in China create conditions for peasant women to increase control over production and increase their income through sales of organic food; establishing cooperatives and other "alternative food networks", largely supported by groups of scholars, among whom women feature prominently. Second, I demonstrate how recent transformations in local governance also create conditions for women to take up positions of power and authority, particularly in new institutions focused on care-work, and social protest. Yet, these female leaders are still subjected to the "double burden" of advancing their agricultural, community, and/or political work alongside extensive unpaid domestic labor, and pervasive sexism and discrimination. Still, shifting focus to women's role as leaders contributes to a transitional strategy for transformative justice.

Keywords

Feminism, China, left behind women, leadership, development

Acronyms

AFN	Alternative food networks
BFM	Beijing Farmers' Market
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
COHD	College of Humanities and Development Studies, China Agricultural University
CSA	Community supporter agriculture

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1. 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. But 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 Rao, 2009; Ye et al., 2013; 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. Therefore, 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 political consultation 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 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 – in fact, they are burdened with this responsibility 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 is resulting 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; Wu and Rao, 2009; Chang et al., 2011). The fact of “feminization” of agriculture had already been widely recognized across India, Africa, Latin America, and much of the rest of the world (Gill, 2001; Deere, 2005; FAO 2010; de Schutter, 2013). 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 field-work based research (mainly in critical agrarian studies, development studies, anthropology, and to a certain extent sociology as well) critics were forced revise their previous statements (e.g. de Brauw et al., 2012). 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. Parker, 2005; Sangtin Writers Collective 2006, 2010; Gilson, 2016). Therefore, 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 – and in doing so, 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, particularly new forms of local governance in villages, townships and new urban districts. Theoretically, I build upon critical agrarian studies, development studies, and gender studies, particularly the feminist critique of Nancy Fraser (1997, 2003, 2009), Tamara Jacka (1997, 2010, 2013), Judith Butler (2004), and Erinn Gilson (2016), and the contributors to the book *The Agency of Women in Asia* (Parker, 2005). Methodologically, I utilized ethnographic methods during several months of in-depth fieldwork in Guangxi and Henan provinces from 2014 to 2017, and a shorter period of research in Jilin province during 2018, which I supplement with a review of media and government reports.

The paper is organized as follows. In the second section, I briefly review the literature and outline my theoretical frameworks, grounded in critical agrarian studies, development studies, and the feminist critique of the literatures and discourses of victimization that surround discussion of rural women in China. Then in the third section, I briefly present my methods and field sites. 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. This includes widespread but dispersed and unorganized individual initiatives, as well as more organized efforts in the establishment of cooperatives and other “alternative food networks” or AFNs (such as community supported initiatives or CSAs, farmers’ markets, and buying groups).¹ In addition, I also demonstrate how these initiatives are largely supported by groups of scholars, among whom women feature prominently. In section number five, I demonstrate how recent transformations in local governance to address the ongoing food safety crisis, the plight of “left behind” populations, and the broader crisis of social reproduction facing Chinese society also creates conditions for women to take up positions of power and authority, and openings for women to lead social protests for social services and, more implicitly, social justice. This is particularly the case in the creation of new (party-organized) community social service centers in villages, townships, and new urban districts, where young women are the predominant staff and leaders. In the sixth section, I briefly discuss the ongoing challenges and obstacles faced by these female leaders in rural cooperatives and local governance, who are still subjected to the “double burden” of advancing their agricultural, community, and/or political work alongside extensive unpaid domestic labor, and pervasive sexism and discrimination. This means that even as they become leaders in rural society, food sovereignty, and social service initiatives, they are still struggling with pressure from traditional family structures and gender hierarchy, particularly from the husband’s clan structure and progeny relations. In the conclusion, I revisit the feminist critique in my theoretical framework to argue that shifting our focus to women’s role as leaders contributes to a transitional strategy for transformative justice.

2. Theoretical frameworks: Critical agrarian studies, development studies, and feminist critique

Agrarian studies have been central to modern Chinese scholarship, and also to political consultancy and social mobilization for various forms of rural development. 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). The scholars Liang Shuming and Yan Yangchu also led the creation of a non-communist “rural construction movement”, advancing both social science scholarship on China’s agrarian society and a broader social

¹ For more details on “alternative food networks” in China, see Si and Scott (2016).

movement for peasant cooperatives (Si and Scott, 2016). 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, remains a theoretical commitment to researching the *agency* of peasants, a basic but fundamental insight that should orient agrarian studies.

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, 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 emphasising the ‘backwardness’ of the peasantry” (Jacka, 2013: 986; Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005). 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” (ibid.). 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, 2012). 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 oriented 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, or even alternatives *to* development. They call attention to the historical and ongoing contributions of the Chinese peasantry to the wellbeing and advancement of Chinese society, and the need for continued and/or renewed labor-intensive agro-ecological production to reverse the socio-ecological crisis that China is facing, especially in its rural areas and in the form of a dramatic food safety crisis. Consequently, some of these scholars are identifying and actively constructing a food sovereignty social movement in China. It is this strand of critical agrarian studies that I contribute to and build upon with my work, and the connection with development studies is particularly relevant.

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 ultimately 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), where I obtained my own PhD degree in 2017. The emergence of development studies as a distinct field of scholarship, and its close association with critical development 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: 988; cf. Ye, 2010). The terms “left behind” and “left behind women” used to describe rural women who (mostly) remain in the countryside while most others migrate for temporary employment in urban areas first emerged in a short local news article in 1996 (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 a 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 Rao, 2009; Ye et al., 2013; 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, 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 (Yan, 2003; Zhang, 2009). Yet this literature still tends to treat people in the categories of "left behind" or "migrant worker" as more stable than they really are, since most people shift between the conditions of "left behind" and "migrant worker" at various points in their life – and this is especially the case with the younger generation born in the 1990s. Still, as explained in the introduction, the recognition of the plight of rural women, including recognition of their productive work in agricultural production, or the "feminization" of agriculture, is an important result of all the scholarship and social mobilizations that has called attention to this form of injustice.

To build upon and advance this scholarship, I turn to critical gender studies. In particular, I draw upon Nancy Fraser for a feminist theory of justice that is especially attentive to the post-socialist condition (Fraser, 1997) 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). According to these feminist scholars, 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" (Fraser 1997: 14, Jacka, 2013: 984). 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.

However, this scholarship would be problematic if it remained 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: 985).

The feminist critique that scholarship and engagement with women (and other people, particularly in vulnerable situations) may take place in ways that reproduce *victimization* discourses, particularly masking and undermining the *agency* of these women (and other vulnerable groups) is not new in gender studies (e.g. Schneider, 1993). However, the growing attention to “women and gender issues” among overseas development practice, scholarship, and policy since the 1990s (FAO, 1996, 2010; UNDP, 2003), including the promotion of rural cooperatives and contract farming schemes (Braverman et al., 1991; Gill, 2001; 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, 2006; Jacka, 2013).

A common challenge to this critique has been that “victimization” is not actually *created* or *imposed* by scholars who research it, and there is in fact no contradiction between “victimization” and “agency” in calling attention to the plight of those suffering exploitation and oppression (cf. Schneider, 1993; Sangtin Writers Collective, 2010). In order to overcome these challenges, I follow Judith Butler (2004) and Erinn Gilson (2016) in theorizing victimization in relation to various complex forms of *vulnerability*. Rural women who stay in the countryside to continue farming and caring for elders and children become *more vulnerable* to various forms of economic exploitation and social oppression, even if staying behind is also an expression of their agency, or in other words, even if their choice is limited by a difficult situation. Moreover, 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. Finally, when women struggle against exploitation and oppression, they do not limit themselves to rural life and village spaces – and in doing so, they also deconstruct the separation of rural and urban society. Therefore, our own scholarship must shift theoretical focus to follow these women in their own agency: we must shift from simply describing rural women as “left behind” people to recognize how they are also “leaders” in various forms of resistance to 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 their agency, particularly new forms of local governance in villages, townships and new urban districts focused upon care work, and social protests for better social services, and implicitly, greater social justice.

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; Parker, 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). In particular, I theorize food sovereignty initiatives among rural women, and women working in new local governance initiatives (or protests) for social services as a *feminist movement* in China, unlike the high-profile account of middle-class liberal feminism that is gaining attention recently (Milwertz, 2002; Fincher, 2016), even though those accounts are almost entirely disconnected from the deeper social, political, economic, and ecological analysis present in critical agrarian studies and development studies.

Finally, I continue to follow Fraser’s (2003) and Jacka’s (2013) feminist theory of justice to distinguish between “affirmative”, “transformative”, and “transitional” strategies and approaches to justice. Affirmative strategies “aim to correct inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying social structures that generate them,” while

transformative strategies “aim to correct unjust outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework” (Fraser, 2003: 74; Jacka, 2013: 985). Transitional strategies “engage people’s identities and satisfy some of their needs as interpreted within existing frameworks of recognition and distribution” but at the same time they also “alter the terrain upon which later struggles will be waged [and] expand the set of feasible options for future reform. Over time their cumulative effect could be to transform the underlying structures that generate injustice” (Fraser, 2003: 79-80; Jacka, 2013: 1002). Critical agrarian studies and development studies have sought to identify and cultivate transformative approaches to injustice in rural China, and in so far as they make effective critiques of capitalist reform there is potential for this to succeed. But if this scholarship limits itself to mere descriptions of “left behind” populations and reproduces discourses of victimization, this transformative potential can be lost. This is especially the case in the present moment, when the Chinese government is rewarding these scholars with increased recognition and resources for research on “left behind” populations, but at the same time reducing engagement with the topic to what Fraser (2003, 2009) and Jacka (2013) call “weakly affirmative” strategies: superficially “including” women and other “left behind” persons in government policies for “poverty alleviation” and “rural revitalization” without challenging the capitalist reforms that generate this condition, or supporting the bottom-up initiatives of these vulnerable persons themselves to overcome this injustice.

Developing our theoretical 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, 2018). They are also struggling for more and better quality social services, and taking up leading roles in new party-led local governance institutions designed to cultivate and support care work for children, the elderly, the disabled, and other vulnerable persons. As women take up leadership roles and positions of power and authority in rural cooperatives, local governments, social protests, and new party-led local governance initiatives for care work, 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.

3. Methods and field sites

I draw upon ethnographic research methods, including participant observation (of food safety regulation and bottom-up self-protection initiatives), 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 (Jacka, 2010, 2013; Deere, 2005; Sangting Writers Collective, 2006, 2010; de Schutter, 2010, 2013).

Most of my fieldwork was undertaken in Gu² village in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and Bian³ village in Henan province during the Summer of 2014, Spring of 2015, and Spring of 2017. I undertook a brief extension of research in the periphery of Changchun, Jilin province, in the Summer of 2018, which is still at the preliminary stages. 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 80 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 bottom-up self-protection initiatives among peasants and between peasants and urban consumers to produce and distribute safer, organic food (Zhang and Qi, 2018). But one of my key findings was that the gender (and ethnic) identity of peasants and rural cooperative leaders largely determined whether they would 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 (ibid.). That research, therefore, can be utilized also for this broader discussion of gender, agrarian studies, and rural development politics in China in this present article as well.

My brief fieldwork in the outskirts of Changchun, Jilin province, was facilitated by the Department of Sociology at Jilin University, following a conference they hosted in development sociology in June, 2018. We visited two university- and party-organized initiatives for local governance created around the time of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, which focus on providing social services to local communities. Only preliminary interviews and observations have been undertaken so far, but this has been sufficient to notice and document how both initiatives are led by young, college-educated women, they are staffed mostly by women, and those engaging with and drawing upon its social services are also mostly women, particularly elderly women. I have supplemented these observations with an examination of the very limited recent literature in media and government reports about similar party-led local governance initiatives for the provision of social services across villages, townships, and other new urban districts throughout China, which also shows that women are playing a leading role in these initiatives.

4. Female leadership in food sovereignty

When I presented my research on bottom-up self-protection responses to China's food safety crisis at the 4th BRICS Initiative for Critical Agrarian Studies conference (in Beijing, November, 2016), and again at the 18th International Symposium on Agroecology and Ecological Agriculture in China (which took place in Yan'an, Shaanxi province, August, 2017), I was criticized and challenged by some colleagues about my characterization of these bottom-up initiatives as a *countermovement* to the commodification of food in China (cf. Polanyi, 2001), which I argue constitutes a key aspect of the global social movement for *food sovereignty* (van der Ploeg, 2008; Wittman, Desmarais, and Wiebe 2010; McMichael 2013). Many still 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

² Pseudonym.

³ Pseudonym.

opposition to the Communist Party. On the other hand, 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” (Bayat, 2000, 2013; Roy, 2015). 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.

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 about with 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 Farmers’ Market (BFM), another very high-profile AFN in China. Chang Tianle was a young female social activist among the first group of volunteers of the BFM, 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 BFM was originally founded by a foreign couple, but it was Chang Tianle’s initiative to create an online presence for the BFM. 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 BFM, and networking even more to expand China’s organic food social movement.

Still, the input of 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 (He Huili, 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 by adapting the CSA model to China, in a village highly controlled by 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, 2018). In 2009, the Bian village case received national-level attention, as their cooperative was showcased by then-vice president Xi Jinping as an example to be followed for rural development. He Huili a key organizer of this political and publicity stunt.

However, as expected from Tamara Jacka’s critical assessment of the “new rural reconstruction” movement (Jacka, 2013) and other critical scholarship of the limitations and cooptation of China’s new cooperatives (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 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, 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 publicly, 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 2017.⁴ He Huili herself became frustrated with this outcome (and other complicated issues beyond the scope of this article), withdrew her leadership role in the Bian village project, and shifted instead to new collaborative research in her own home village, where she is placing gender issues more prominently in her research and development cooperation agenda, as she reported 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. 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 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.

Female scholars and social activists also played a prominent role in the origins of the cooperative and CSA examined in my second case study in Gu village, Guangxi province.⁵ In 2001, a female scholar and proponent of participatory rural development from the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Song Yiqing, went to Gu to initiative a development project focused on breeding local maize varieties and sustaining local culture. There she collaborated primarily with Lu Yanyan⁶, 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

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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.

⁶ Pseudonym.

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), these efforts themselves failed to produce any significant transformation of Gu village’s difficult social and economic condition. On the other hand, Song Yiqing’s intervention did serve a transitional function for Lu Yanyan’s 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).

Lu Yanyan 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 experiences 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.⁷

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.⁸ 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, and cannot go migrate out of the village to earn cash. So this is a source of sustainable livelihood for them.⁹

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

⁷ Personal interview with Lu Yanyan, Gu village, Guangxi, January 15, 2017.

⁸ 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”.

⁹ *ibid.*

Breeding Cooperative¹⁰, 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.¹¹

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. We can conclude, therefore, the case of Gu demonstrates precisely a successful case of the “two step” 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 used an opportunity that could have remained limited to “weakly affirmative” approach to justice in the inclusion of women in a participatory rural development project, to 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.

5. Female leadership in local governance and social services

Women have been historically underrepresented in government at every level, and this continues to be the case in the present (Howell, 2008). Nevertheless, the Communist Party did encourage incorporation of women in its revolutionary zeal, and created organizations for women that continue to play a significant role in shaping women's social relations (Cooke, 2008). While market-oriented reforms are widely celebrated for reducing poverty and improving the condition of the general population in China, few gains have been made in terms of gender justice. In fact, there is strong evidence that the situation of women became worse through the double-burden of domestic labor and paid employment once the socialist structures of public welfare began to be dismantled (Yan, 2003; Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005). These renewed forms of female exploitation and oppression, alongside with the growing environmental and food safety crisis (Zhang and Qi, 2018), have generated an increasingly serious social crisis in China. In this context, rural outmigration and the ageing population are the fundamental processes that produce “left behind” populations, yet their consequences extend far beyond “hollow villages” in the countryside. Continuing with my theoretical framework of shifting focus from the victimization to the agency

¹⁰ Pseudonym.

¹¹ Personal interview with Lu Yanyan, Gu village, Guangxi, May 12, 2015.

of women in China, in this section I show that when women struggle against exploitation and oppression, they do not limit themselves to rural life and village spaces – they also deconstruct the separation of rural and urban society.

I can mention very briefly the growing prominence of women in social protest for better quality education for their children in my hometown of Gushi county, Henan province, witnessed in the summers of 2017 and 2018. These are all women with rural *hukou*, yet their families bought expensive new apartments in the county with the promise that their children would be able to enroll in the higher quality urban schools in the area of their new apartments. When the county government declared that the urban school in that area had reached full capacity and refused to enroll new students in 2017, several women took up leadership in vocal protest. Soon, corruption involving education officials at various level of government in Henan was revealed, those officials were removed, and some protest leaders were arrested and intimidated. In the summer of 2018, however, large groups of women were again gathering to protest the continued exclusion of their children from the urban schools, demonstrating their continued leadership despite the awareness of state repression, and political impact in local governance even while they are formally excluded from formal political power.

Less dramatic examples involve the creation of new (CCP-organized) community social service centers in villages, townships, and new urban districts, where young women are the predominant staff and leaders. Called CCP Members and Mass Service Centers¹², these are an important new phenomenon emerging in local governance in China, and there is still very little literature about this topic. CNKI search results with these key words reveal the first two newspaper articles about the pioneering models in Tuchang county (Liaoning province), and the Guangming New District to Shenzhen city (Guangdong province) were published in 2010. By 2014, there were eight newspaper articles: two of them tracing the development of the service center in Shenzhen, another about a second service center in Liaoning, and five more about new service centers in Yongfeng county (Jiangxi province), and four in the cities of Pingdingshan (Henan province), Qinzhou (Guangxi province), Wuxi (Jiangsu province), and Ningbo (Zhejiang province). The number of newspaper articles about these and other new service centers increased to 11 in 2015, and 12 in 2016, before doubling to 25 in 2017. Also in 2017 emerge the first 19 academic publications on these service centers, mainly in journals of social work, and the first MA thesis on the topic (Tu, 2017). There are another 19 academic articles published so far in 2018, and two of my own students at Henan Agricultural University wrote their bachelor's thesis about this. This literature reveals that these new CCP Members and Mass Service Centers are being created mostly in new urban districts, unlike most AFNs that emerge primarily in the wealthier centers of the largest cities like Beijing and Shanghai, and integrate themselves with other primary-level CCP (not government) institutions that already existed to assist local residents.

My survey of this literature reveals CCP Members and Mass Service Centers are mostly party-led and government funded (ibid.), occasionally receiving financial support from new foundations associated with major companies, or smaller-scale philanthropy by new rural and urban elites. Across China, these initiatives are combining current village and township provision of social services with urban grassroots (基层) governance units like districts (区). Most significantly, these centers were recognized and promoted in Xi Jinping's report to the 19th National Congress of the CCP, which highlights "strengthening primary-level Party organization" not only "to strengthen the Party's leadership", but also to "mobilize the masses" to "ensur[e] people's access to childcare, education, employment, medical services, elderly care, housing, and social assistance" (Xi, 2017: 66, 20). Xi Jinping's embrace of the new CCP Members and Mass Service Centers was made most explicit in his call to "institutionalize volunteer services" as a way to "improve our systems for social assistance, social

¹² 党员群众服务中心

welfare, charity, and entitled groups’ benefits and services” particularly for “supporting and caring for children, women, and elderly people left behind in rural areas” (ibid.: 38, 42). Given the historical division of political labor in China (Cooke, 2008; Howell, 2008), my survey of the existing literature and the two field site visits I undertook in 2018 reveal that these new social centers are also becoming a key site for “coordinated training and selection of female officials” as Xi Jinping calls for in his report to the 19th National Congress of the CCP (Xi, 2017: 58).

The two service centers I visited are located in the outskirts of Changchun, capital of Jilin province. The first one is called the Zhongxin Community Center in Jingyue New District, which also received funding by the CITIC (Zhongxin) corporation. Upon my arrival with a group of sociologists led by our colleagues from Jilin University, we were received by a young female and college-educated CCP official who directs the center. She showed us very proudly and confidently how their new service center was operating. It was evident from my observation of the staff board on the wall that the vast majority of volunteers and party officials working at there were women. Young women staffed all offices, answering phone calls and taking care of paperwork for social services to the community members. When the female director then led us through a tour of the center, we saw a group of retired women performing folk songs, and another group of middle-aged women doing yoga and practicing dancing. It was clear from that visit and short conversations with the director and several of the women who volunteer at and use the services of the center that they found it to be a very comfortable, enjoyable, and useful space for them. It was also very clear, on the other hand, that very few men seemed to use the service center for daily life activities. The other CCP Members and Mass Service Centers I visited was dedicated to serving the Jingyue High-tech Industrial Development Zone. Although it is still party-led, it has strong connection with the department of social work at Jilin University. Once again, we were received by a young and college-educated female director, who told us about the operations of their brand new center. Once again, female internship students and middle-aged volunteers led all the activities of the center.

Further research is needed to accompany the development of these new CCP Members and Mass Service Centers, and investigate if they will indeed provide conditions for the improvement of vulnerable persons, particularly elderly women, and platforms for the political empowerment of young women who tend to volunteer at, staff, and direct these initiatives. Nevertheless, initial observations are very encouraging, and they fit well with the more optimistic assessment that new initiatives in local governance can indeed provide fruitful ground for transitional strategies of struggling for gender justice, engaging people’s identities and to satisfy some of their basic needs, and at the same time they also “alter the terrain upon which later struggles will be waged [and] expand the set of feasible options for future reform” (Fraser, 2003: 80; Howell, 2008; Jacka, 2013).

6. Continuing challenges and obstacles

Despite the advancement of all these transitional approaches to gender justice across China’s countryside and new urban districts, with their potential for transforming the structural conditions of power that make women more and more vulnerable to exploitation and oppression, there are still various challenges and obstacles to be overcome. As documented in several other cases across East Asia and the rest of the “developing world” as well, 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 (Edwards and Roces, 2000; Gills and Piper, 2002; Gunewardena and Kingsolver, 2007; Burghoorn et al., 2008; Elson, 2010). 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; Zoeller Veras, 2014; cf. Sangtin Writers Collective 2006, 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 include social norms and practices that discriminate against women as well as institutional barriers such as the ‘ceiling effect’ of quotas, the gendered nature of Party recruitment and promotion processes, male bias in election procedures, the lack of clear selection criteria in village elections, institutional discrimination and gendered differences in career trajectories. They also include structural barriers such as marriage practices in rural areas, the household division of labour, lower educational opportunities for girls, especially in rural areas, gendered patterns of mobility, and women’s position in the waged economy. Added to these are the male-dominated style of politics that lays down the terms of engagement in a way that is both unappealing and risky for women. (Howell, 2008: 76)

Recognizing and encouraging women’s leadership is therefore necessary, but not sufficient. In addition to recognizing and advancing opportunities for women to take greater control over agricultural production, economic cooperation, local governance, social welfare, and political organizing, it is also necessary to simultaneously redistribute unpaid care work and other *domestic* labor from women to men. Otherwise, these new roles and responsibilities may become additional burdens rather than means for empowerment, as has been widely acknowledged in feminist literature (Falth and Blackden, 2009; Elson, 2010; Eyden and Fontana, 2011; de Schutter, 2013). To use again the case of Lu Yanyan for illustration, some 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.¹³

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 agroecological production, 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, 2018), all of which are especially serious obstacles for China’s food sovereignty movement, and consequently women’s leadership within it.

¹³ Personal interview with Lu Yanyan, Gu village, Guangxi, June 5, 2015.

7. Conclusion

I have argued that the scholarship and advocacy on “left behind” populations, particularly women, needs to advance through deeper engagement with critical gender studies. 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. 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. In addition, I demonstrated how recent transformations in local governance also appear to be creating conditions for women to take up positions of power and authority, particularly in new institutions focused on care-work, and women are also leading social protest that destabilize the rural-urban separation of social services. Yet, these female leaders are still subjected to the “double burden” of advancing their agricultural, community, and/or political work alongside extensive unpaid domestic labor, and pervasive sexism and discrimination. Still, I demonstrated that shifting focus to women’s role as leaders can effectively contribute to a recognition of and support for transitional strategies for transformative justice.

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about the author

Dr. Li Zhang obtained her PhD from the College of Humanities and Development Studies (COHD), China Agricultural University. She was visiting fellow in the Department of Development Sociology at Cornell University in 2015–2016, and remains a research fellow at the Cornell Contemporary China Initiative. She worked as assistant professor of sociology at Henan Agricultural University, and returned to the China Agricultural University – COHD to collaborate in new research initiatives. Using ethnographic methods, her research focuses on food sovereignty, rural politics, gender and ethnic identities, and sustainable development. She has also published widely on democracy and socialist theory, ecological agriculture, urban farming, and the contradictions between top-down regulations and bottom-up responses to China's food safety crisis.

lili439666@126.com

