Chapter Nine

Village Women’s Participation in Local Public Affairs

Test Results from Democratic Consultative Meetings in Zhejiang

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Introduction

Do women have the same set of skills for engaging in decision-making and management as men? This question can be answered from different perspectives. Since the mid-1990s, activists in China have, with the help of funds from sources both domestic and from abroad, put great effort into training women to participate in village politics. The purpose has been both to improve and to demonstrate rural women’s ability to participate in local decision-making and community management.¹ Meanwhile, researchers who have performed empirical studies have fervently argued about women’s potential for political participation—paying particular attention to why such a potential might be weak and coming up with possible remedies (Lin 2004, 35; Zuo 2005, 163–164; Sun 2000, 97–103; Li and Yin 2004, 39–42; Wang and Shi 2005, 31–33). Activists and researchers have all evaluated the political ability of rural women by comparing their score on an evaluation index to the score achieved by rural men, and on this basis they have all concluded that rural women are less politically competent than rural men. This has usually lead to two different “solutions.” The first solution relies on having women compete politically with men on a “level playing field,” which has often led to the marginalization of women in the power structure. Alternatively, under the assumption that women have lower political competence than men, affirmative policies have been adopted and seats allocated
for women. This second solution, though, only serves to affirm that women are inherently less qualified to serve in politics.\textsuperscript{2}

In this chapter, we take a different perspective. We use a series of experimental consultative meetings in the township of Zeguo as a “controlled experiment”\textsuperscript{3} to examine three questions: (1) in which ways did these meetings manage to create an equal condition for village men and women to participate in politics? (2) How did men and women learn about and debate the township’s public affairs in this controlled setting? (3) How did these meetings function as kind of “democratic experiment,” allowing men and women to exercise their rights on a relatively equal footing? By analyzing the responses to 1190 questionnaires that were distributed to the participants before and after three such rounds of consultative meetings between the years 2005 and 2008, we compare the performance of men and women, evaluate women’s ability to assess and prioritize local public affairs, and from there we further discuss the potential political abilities of village women.

How did these experimental consultative meetings, which have been convened annually in Zeguo Township under the administration of Wenling Municipality in Zhejiang since 2005, create fair and equal opportunities for men and women to participate? To answer this question, we need to look into the various new forms of “experimental” deliberative meetings, known as \textit{kentan} (heart-to-heart talks) in Chinese. At these deliberative meetings, the township government presents their policy proposals to the delegates, listens to the delegates debate, and evaluates the proposed policies.

The format of these meetings was innovative in the following three ways. First, in contrast to the traditional approach of “guiding public opinion,” the township government made their policy proposals known to the general public prior to the meetings, and at the meetings the participants were invited to voice their opinions and suggestions. At the meeting in 2005, 30 construction projects, estimated to cost 136,920,000 RMB, were put on the table, but since the Zeguo Township government had only 40 million RMB to spend on construction, the purpose of the consultative meeting was to foster debate over which projects to prioritize and to obtain public support for the government’s eventual decision. In 2006, 38 construction projects were proposed needing a total of 98,690,000 RMB against a budget of 50 million RMB. In 2008, the township government took a step further by announcing its entire 2008 budget of 248 million RMB and asking the consultative meeting participants to help the government decide how to allocate its funds. The proposed projects,