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Representing Women in Chinese Village Self-Government: A New Perspective on Gender, Representation, and Democracy

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ABSTRACT: Recent feminist debate about how to achieve the substantive representation of women in government has been conducted largely in relation to national parliaments in democratic states. This article brings a new perspective by examining grassroots rural government in contemporary China – an authoritarian state, which, however, began implementing village “self-government,” including elections, in 1987. The article draws on qualitative fieldwork in the Chinese provinces of Zhejiang and Yunnan. The authors went into this fieldwork with an understanding that women’s substantive representation, democracy, and gender equality are mutually constituted and with an expectation that village self-government might make a much-needed contribution to the achievement of all three. However, we ran into trouble with this analytical framework. First, there were marked variations in villagers’ practices and understandings of “representation.” Second, we found that democracy was not a prerequisite for substantive representation. Third, most villagers we talked with claimed that “men and women are equal” and there was little conception of villagers’ interests diverging by gender. This article explores our analytical “trouble,” with a view to advancing scholarship on constraints to democracy in authoritarian states and suggesting fruitful directions for feminist theorists interested in the relationship between gender, representation and democracy.

Keywords: representation; gender; democracy; village self-government; China

In recent years, feminist scholars have challenged the widespread assumption that increasing the number of women in government naturally leads to improvements in women’s substantive representation, defined as “acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them.”¹ Most nevertheless accept the idea that furthering the political representation of women

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¹Pitkin 1967, 209.

and their interests is vital for both democracy and gender equality. To date, however, debate about women's representation has been conducted largely in relation to national parliaments in democratic states.² Meanwhile, mainstream literature on democratic constraints in authoritarian states has had little to say about the representation of women's interests.³ This article contributes to both these conversations by examining women's substantive representation in grassroots rural government in China – an authoritarian state, which, however, began implementing village “self-government,” including elections, in 1987. In Chinese villages, we ask, what does women's substantive representation entail? How and by whom is it achieved? And what is the relationship between women's substantive representation, democracy and gender equality?

The article draws on qualitative fieldwork research in villages in Zhejiang, a wealthy coastal province and Yunnan, a poorer province in China's southwest. Two features distinguish it from other studies of Chinese village self-government. First, instead of examining the procedural quality of village self-government, especially elections and the degree to which they have been implemented fully and fairly, our focus is on the social construction of governing roles and practices in village politics. Second, we are interested in whether or not the gender of those elected to village government determines the extent to which, and how they represent village women. This advances existing research, which attempts to explain the low numbers of women elected, but neglects the impact of village government members' gender on their governing practices.⁴

Drawing on deliberative and feminist theories of substantive representation, we initially assumed that women's substantive representation, democracy and gender equality are mutually constituted, and village self-government could make a much-needed contribution to the achievement of all three. We were particularly interested in the potential for the substantive representation of women to contribute to a reduction in gender inequalities in village life. This, we felt, is important because Chinese rural women as a group are disadvantaged relative to men, especially with regard to incomes, access to key resources such as land, and political participation.⁵

We ran into trouble with this normative and analytical framework, however, when we began our fieldwork. For one thing, there were marked variations in practices and understandings of representation in the villages we researched. In some sites, villagers expected members of village government to represent them; in others, they did not. Second, while we found a correlation between higher-quality democratic procedures and stronger substantive representation of women, democracy was not a necessary precondition for women's substantive representation. Third, most villagers we talked with – male and female – claimed that “men and women are equal.” Furthermore, there was little conception of villagers' interests diverging by gender. By exploring the contours of our analytical “trouble,” we aim to advance scholarship on constraints to democracy in authoritarian states and suggest fruitful directions for feminist theorists interested in the relationship between gender, representation and democracy. We begin by locating our study in relation to theorizations of democracy, gender, and substantive representation. The second part of the article discusses the political economy and self-government institutions in our field sites. Part three presents fieldwork findings about local social constructions of governing. The final

²For an unusual discussion of the representation of women's interests in democratic governance at the local rather than national level, see Jayal 2006.

³Waylen 2003, 157; Gilley 2010.

⁴A summary discussion of scholarship on elections and other aspects of Chinese village self-government is provided by Schubert and Ahlers (2012). Two recent works explaining women's low rates of participation in village government are Guo, Zheng, and Yang (2009); and Wang and Dai (2013). For rare examples of studies focusing on other questions relating to gender and village government, see Jacka (2008); Sargeson and Song (2010); and Pang, Zeng, and Rozelle (2013).

⁵For discussion of some of the main gender inequalities in rural China, see Jacka and Sargeson (2011).

part of the article draws on those findings to contribute to scholarly debates about the relationship between women's substantive representation, gender equality, and democracy.

Theorizing Democracy and Women's Substantive Representation

We accept the proposition fundamental to deliberative democracy, that governance is democratic to the extent that all individuals with potential interests in collective decisions can have effective input into the making of those decisions.⁶ Institutions and practices that further this norm help to ensure that collective decisions are responsive to the needs and interests of the diverse range of individuals affected. Consequently, while democratic governance may be harder to enact where there is a high level of social inequality, it may also help to reduce such inequality.⁷

We agree with David Plotke that rather than being "an unfortunate compromise between an ideal of direct democracy and messy modern realities," representation is crucial for enhancing democracy.⁸ However, we add caveats to Plotke's statement. First, it is substantive, and specifically, *responsive* representation that is crucial. Principals must have the means and opportunity to express their preferences, interests and needs to agents, and agents must not only act for the principals, but their actions must reflect the principals' expressed views. Principals must also be able to hold their agents to account. The greater the degree of communication between principals and agents, the more robust the information on which both can act. Communication can be achieved through informal social interactions, formal mechanisms for accountability and authorization, such as elections, and fora for people's direct participation and expression of their interests, such as public meetings. This leads to our second caveat: to contribute to democratic governance, representation must supplement, rather than replace or preclude direct citizen participation. Our final caveat is that to enhance democracy, substantive representation must be inclusive of the diverse perspectives and interests of all who comprise the collective. Representation of those subgroups, such as women, who suffer the brunt of structural inequalities is particularly important, both for democracy and for the achievement of equality. This is partly because the interests of disadvantaged groups are most likely to be overlooked by the majority, and also because "[their] situated knowledges can both pluralize and relativize hegemonic discourses, and offer otherwise unspoken knowledge to contribute to wise decisions."⁹

Recent global gender and development statements typically assume that women's substantive representation requires the participation of women in government. For example, a recent UNIFEM briefing paper claims that "Women's participation is essential to gender-responsive governance. Where women's voices are heard, policy better reflects their lives. Where under-representation persists, women's interests are repeatedly ignored."¹⁰ In the last two decades, however, numerous feminist scholars have challenged the supposition underpinning statements such as these, that women in government "naturally" represent women and further their interests. Some have argued that there is no conclusive empirical evidence that increasing the number of women elected automatically results in improvements in women's substantial representation, and the emphasis on increasing women's proportional representation overlooks the potential for men to act as agents for change on behalf of women as a group.¹¹ Others have drawn attention

⁶Saward 1998, 15.

⁷Young 2000, 33–36.

⁸Plotke 1997, 19.

⁹Young 2000, 7.

¹⁰UNIFEM 2010, 13.

¹¹Celis, Childs, Kantola, and Crook 2008, 99–110; Grey 2006.

to the difficulties of identifying the interests of “women” as a single group, and from there, measuring the extent to which those interests are addressed by representatives.

Most scholars have attempted to overcome these difficulties by examining the policies promoted by representatives for signs of congruence either with what the analyst understands to be women’s “strategic gender interests” (that is, interests that, if addressed, would ameliorate gender inequalities)¹² or with the interests female constituents express, regardless of whether or not they are strategic gender interests. As Karen Celis and colleagues note, “the problem with [the former] method is that it involves making a-priori assumptions about the nature of ‘women’ as a group, thus essentialising women and their interests and ... eliding SRW [substantive representation of women] with the feminist SRW.”¹³ Furthermore, practices of representation that involve presuming the interests of others rather than responding to their own articulation of their interests do not conform to the definition of substantive representation noted above, and are inherently anti-democratic.

Comparing the actions taken or policies promoted by representatives with the interests or preferences expressed by female constituents intuitively seems more democratic. Yet this approach still involves making essentializing judgments – in this case about which of the potentially huge variety of interests expressed by different women at different times should count as “women’s interests” worthy of representation. From another perspective, asking women to identify their own interests is problematic because it fails to account for the socialization of disadvantaged people into adaptive preferences and behaviors that suppress or go against their strategic gender interests.¹⁴ Therefore, as Laurel Weldon notes, “efforts to redefine interests as subjective, contingent and/or context sensitive are unsatisfying for those who want to link women’s representation to the fact of their oppression, exploitation, and discrimination.”¹⁵

Concerned to promote gender equality while also avoiding essentialism, Iris Young and Laurel Weldon advocate a shift in emphasis from women’s “interests” to their “social perspectives.” Young draws on Sartre’s notion of seriality to suggest that, like class, “women” can be thought of either as a group who self-consciously identify with each other, or as a “series” of individuals similarly positioned with respect to structural relations.¹⁶ Extending this idea, Young and Weldon argue that women are needed as representatives of other women not because they share the same interests, but because they belong to the same series. Consequently, it is easier for female representatives to respond to women because they share a common social perspective, derived from their disadvantaged structural positioning relative to men.¹⁷

These theoretical debates not only highlight the difficulties of determining whether substantive representation has occurred and whether female representatives are any better at representing other women than male representatives. They also suggest a need to rethink both the focus on (women’s) “interests” and the very grouping “women,” and to explore in more detail the relationship between “representatives” and their constituencies, and what is entailed in practices of representation.

Recently, some feminists have made significant contributions to discussions of these issues by taking a constructivist approach to the study of representation. Inspired, in particular, by Michael Saward’s argument that representatives “have to make claims, about themselves and their would-be constituencies, and use these claims in order to try to impose, or encourage a belief in, a

¹²Molyneux 1985; Jayal 2006, 16.

¹³Celis, Childs, Kantola, and Crook 2008, 105.

¹⁴Weldon 2011, 442; Nussbaum 2000, 111–166.

¹⁵Weldon 2011, 441.

¹⁶Young 1994.

¹⁷Weldon 2011, 444–445.

particular set of ‘interests’ as an unavoidable precondition of speaking for those interests,”¹⁸ they have begun investigating how understandings of gender, and specifically women’s identities and interests, are socially constructed. For example, Judith Squires suggests that all representative claims build on and contribute to the “constitutive representation of gender.”¹⁹ Sarah Childs, Karen Celis, and colleagues have applied Saward’s and Squires’s theorizations to textual analysis of how gender relations have been constructed in manifestos, press releases and other documents from a range of political actors across Europe.²⁰ Their empirical study serves as a model for research employing an inductive approach to map diverse visions of *who* “women” are and *what* women need, as constituted in representative claims.²¹

In conducting fieldwork in China, we asked questions aimed at determining whether or not members of village governments substantively represent women, defined in terms of responding to what village women said are their interests and needs. But we also looked for signs of women’s representation, defined as efforts to address women’s strategic gender interests. This research taught us a great deal about local constructions of gender and representation. However, the approach advocated by Saward, Childs, and others, focusing specifically on the constitutive effect of representatives’ claims, was of limited utility. This was partly because members of Chinese village governments rarely make claims of the kind that Saward, Squires, Childs, Celis, and others have in mind – apart from set campaign speeches, they seldom appeal to their constituencies, and they do not produce manifestos. Furthermore, while village government members do of course make political claims in a general sense, these are only sometimes claims to *represent*.²² Of even greater importance, though, was our finding that whereas Saward privileges representative’s claims, he understates how constituencies interactively constitute representatives’ roles. Hence, although it was illuminating to examine the political claims of members of village government, it was even more useful to compare these with the constructions of representatives’ roles and work evident in the claims of ordinary villagers. As illustrated in the next part of the article, this examination of competing social constructions of governing roles and work yielded a number of insights into the substantive representation of women.

Field Sites: Political Economy and Governance Institutions

Fieldwork was conducted between January 2013 and May 2014 in four villages in Zhejiang and four villages in Yunnan (Figures 1 and 2). The villages were selected to reflect a range of different political economies, incomes, and rates of women’s proportionate representation in village government.²³

According to China’s *Organic Law of Villagers’ Committees* (henceforth the *Organic Law*), villages are “self-governed” and are required to exercise democratic decision-making,

¹⁸Saward 2010, 44.

¹⁹Squires 2008.

²⁰Childs, Webb, and Mathaler 2010; Celis, Childs, Kantola, and Crook 2014.

²¹Celis, Childs, Kantola, and Crook 2014, 151.

²²For further discussion of the usefulness of Saward’s approach for understanding village governance in Yunnan, see Jacka and Wu 2015.

²³Being interested in whether or not the gender of village leadership makes any difference to women’s substantive representation, we selected three villages with female leaders (Party secretaries and/or village directors) as well as five without. This makes our sample highly unrepresentative: Nationally, women comprise no more than a few percent of village leaders. However, with respect to the percentage of women on village committees (0–33 percent), our sample is typical of the range found across the country (see Wang and Dai 2013, 93).

Figure 1. Cutting greenhouse vegetables. Zhejiang, 2013 (Sally Sargeson).

management, and supervision of village affairs and convey villagers' opinions to the local government.²⁴ Village-level government comprises two committees, assemblies of villagers (or their representatives), and hamlet-level leaders. The Party committee is elected by members of the village Communist Party branch and headed by the Party secretary. The village committee members are chosen by adult villagers in direct, multi-candidate elections every three years. Each village committee consists of a director and between two and six other members, depending on the size of the population. In Yunnan (but not in Zhejiang), there is a great deal of overlap in the membership of these two committees. All but two of our village committees include a women's director who liaises with the All China Women's Federation, a quasi-state body responsible for furthering women's interests and mobilizing them for Communist Party goals.²⁵ Village committees formally are accountable to and supervised by villager and villager representative assemblies. Villager representatives are supposed to be elected by households in each of the hamlets (*xiaozu* 小组) in a village, though as we explain below, villager representatives play only a minor role in governing the Yunnan villages. Hamlets also have their own, elected leaders.

Village governments' principal responsibilities are to apply for state grants to improve the village economy and infrastructure, manage collective income and expenditure, allocate land contracts, house sites and water, mediate disputes, keep population and production records, and process welfare applications. In tobacco-growing villages in Yunnan, village committees are heavily involved in planning and managing tobacco production. Hamlet heads are responsible for managing hamlet resources, including land, and collecting villager contributions, for

²⁴Village committees are formally not part of the state, but are "guided" by the village Communist Party branch, and the Party committee and government of the township in whose jurisdiction they are located (*Organic Law 2010*, articles 4 and 5).

²⁵In Y1, the village director/Party secretary previously served for many years as the village women's director. When she became village leader in 2010, she was not replaced with a new women's director. The Y3 female Party secretary had also previously served as the women's director. After she became the Party secretary, a second woman was appointed women's director but not included in the village committee. This person was not available for interview, and most women in Y3 could not identify the women's director or claimed the position was still held by the Party secretary.

Figure 2. (L) Elderly woman tilling the soil. Yunnan, 2013. (R) Preparing tobacco leaves for drying. Yunnan, 2012 (Tamara Jacka).

example for the collective purchasing of seed, silkworm eggs, and crop insurance. In Yunnan, hamlet heads also mobilize villagers to contribute labor and cash to collective infrastructural projects, manage tobacco production and decide on the distribution of government welfare payments.²⁶ Hamlet-level governance is less important in Zhejiang than in Yunnan, and Yunnan villagers' relationships with the hamlet head are closer than with the Party secretary and the village director.

To examine constructions of all these governing roles, in each village we conducted semi-structured interviews with the members of the two committees and hamlet heads, who we refer to collectively as cadres,²⁷ as well as villager representatives. In addition, depending on the population of each site, we interviewed between twenty and fifty male and female villagers. Some informants were interviewed more than once, before and after the village elections held in 2013. We visited one village in Yunnan (Y4) once and the others two or three times, with each visit lasting from two to ten days. Interviews in Mandarin were taped and transcribed. In what follows, we draw heavily on these transcripts because they offer insights into how different villagers construct governing roles.

Descriptive data about our field sites are set out in Table 1.

The Zhejiang villages are less reliant on agricultural production and much wealthier than those in Yunnan. Almost all Zhejiang villagers under the age of forty either commute to small businesses or jobs off-farm, or live and work in nearby cities, including Shanghai. Older villagers work in specialized, capital-intensive agriculture. Zhejiang villages not only generate more collective revenue than those in Yunnan, but also benefit from large provincial government subsidies and grants for physical and social infrastructure and welfare. In the Yunnan villages, resident populations are dominated by middle-aged and older people working in agriculture, the majority of men and women under forty spending most of the year away from home, working as migrant laborers. Village governments have next to no collective revenue and rely heavily on the state to

²⁶More specifically, they determine the distribution of the minimum livelihood guarantee payment (*dibao* 低保) among poverty-stricken individuals and households.

²⁷Formally speaking, "cadres" are state officials and, because village government is not part of the state, there is no such thing as "village cadres" (*cun ganbu* 村干部). Villagers, however, commonly use the term to refer to all those appointed or elected to positions of governance in the village or hamlet, except villager representatives. We adopt this usage here.

Table 1. Village Population, Economy and Composition of Village Government (2012).

	Zhejiang villages	Yunnan villages
Village population	406–2600	1080–5934
Annual per capita income (yuan)	11,000–20,000	2400–5200
Main source of livelihoods	Commuter jobs, small businesses, rice, silk, and specialised agriculture (Z1: fruit nurseries, Z2: greenhouse vegs, Z3: tree nurseries, Z4 aquaculture)	Y1–Y3: tobacco and outmigration. Y4: silk, commuter jobs and outmigration
Gender of village leaders	Z1–Z3: male Party secretary, male village director. Z4: female Party secretary, male village director	Y1: female Party secretary/village director. Y2: male Party secretary, male village director. Y3: female Party secretary, male village director. Y4: male Party secretary/village director
Percentage of women on village committee	20–33	0–28.6
Percentage of women villager representatives	30–50	13–40
Percentage of women hamlet heads	0–5	0–18

fund infrastructural projects, especially for the building and repair of roads, dams and irrigation channels. State funding is not enough, however, to fully cover the costs of infrastructural projects in the Yunnan villages, so, as mentioned, village governments also mobilize villagers to contribute labor and cash to complete them. Basic infrastructure is far less developed in Yunnan than in Zhejiang.

Broad economic differences between the villages in Zhejiang and Yunnan are matched by differences in the extent to which clauses of the *Organic Law* are implemented. In Zhejiang, village elections usually comply with the *Law* and are fair and transparent. Cadre accountability is supported by the periodic inspection of village accounts by a village supervision committee and publication of the accounts. Villager representatives also meet with the village committee several times a year to discuss proposals regarding policy, projects and expenditure. Villager assemblies rarely meet, but ordinary villagers sometimes attend representatives' meetings in order to defend their interests. Though not achieving parity in village and hamlet meetings, some women insisted they would speak out on matters of interest to them.

Democratic institutions have been implemented to a much lesser degree in Yunnan. In each of the Yunnan villages, villagers spoke of election results being skewed by family and clan politics, vote buying and the rigging of nomination processes or vote counting. Village accounts are posted on noticeboards in most villages, but they are often incomplete and villagers are ignorant of their contents. In addition, while the leaders of all four Yunnan villages claimed that hamlets each elect villager representatives, in practice, representatives are commonly appointed by village leaders. Most male representatives are hamlet heads and deputy heads, and most female representatives are family planning assistants. As in Zhejiang, villager assemblies are rare, but in all but Y4, household heads regularly meet at the hamlet level. The function of these meetings is primarily to inform villagers and mobilize them for tobacco production and the completion of infrastructural projects, rather than to involve them in village decision-making. These meetings, do, nevertheless, provide an opportunity for villagers to voice complaints or disagreement with decisions taken by village and hamlet leaders. Meetings are usually dominated numerically by women,

Figure 3. (L) Village committee office in Zhejiang, 2013 (Sally Sargeson). (R) Village committee office in Yunnan, 2013 (Tamara Jacka).

who form the majority of the resident population. According to most villagers, however, while women occasionally speak out at meetings, they do so less often than men.

Zhejiang and Yunnan villages also differ in their implementation of the *Organic Law*'s requirement that female representatives account for at least one-third of all members of each villager representative assembly, and that a village committee include at least one woman.²⁸ As illustrated in Table 1, women make up one-third of villager representatives in Zhejiang but not in Yunnan. All except one village committee (Y3) includes at least one woman, but only two (Y1 and Y4) include two women (Figure 3).

Social Constructions of Representation, Governing and Gender Inequality

Substantive Representation

Our Zhejiang and Yunnan field sites differed in social constructions of the roles of village cadres and villager representatives, and the extent to which these roles are understood to involve substantive representation of villagers.

In Zhejiang, villagers said they vote for leaders who are proactive in identifying and addressing their needs. They also expect leaders to listen and respond to them. Indeed, in Z1, where villagers had been clamoring for village-wide land reallocation for several years, one candidate's promise to address their demands determined the outcome of the 2013 village election.

Answering to voters' demands also figured in village leaders' description of their roles. As the director of Z4 put it,

I said I'd complete the "beautiful village" project. And the sanitation; clean up the environment. As director you have to consider the whole village, otherwise it's unacceptable. If you leave even one task undone over the three years, they won't vote for you in the next election.

Villager representatives in Zhejiang also were more likely to claim and to be expected to represent villagers than those in Yunnan. When asked to explain the term "represent" (*daibiao* 代表), representatives defined it as transmitting villagers' opinions to the leaders and ensuring that everyone's interests were considered. Some also mentioned their responsibility to act as villagers' legal

²⁸*Organic Law* 2010, article 6 & 25.

representatives when voting and signing off on committee decisions. A forty-four-year-old female villager representative in Z1 expressed an understanding typical in Zhejiang:

[*Daibiao* (代表)] means to represent the villagers. So if a woman comes to me to say something, that something isn't right, I should listen to them, listen to the people who voted for me, shouldn't I? And convey their opinions to the village leaders. Otherwise it'd be like voting for a wall, a wall that can't talk! I'll listen to whoever comes along otherwise I would've been elected for nothing. ... The villagers believe I'll represent them, so I do!

Zhejiang villagers' constructions of representation were in stark contrast to those in Yunnan. There, only a tiny minority of either villagers or representatives themselves talked about representatives' role as being to represent villagers or convey villagers' views to the leaders. In fact, most villagers could not identify the villager representatives in their hamlet, and were unable to explain the role that representatives play. For their part, most villager representatives spoke of their role as being to help hamlet heads to manage (*guanli* 管理) villagers and mobilize them for production and infrastructural projects.

On the other hand, the Yunnan village hamlet heads play a pivotal, intermediary role between the committees and ordinary villagers. Very few people used the word "represent" to describe what hamlet heads do. However, hamlet heads claimed that they respond to villagers who come to them for advice or assistance, including financial assistance, help in the fields, and mediation in domestic and neighborhood disputes. Villagers confirmed this. Minor requests for help are addressed by hamlet heads themselves, but because hamlet heads have no money and little power, they take serious concerns to the village leaders. A number of villagers told us, for example, that they had complained about water access to the hamlet head, who then raised the matter with the leaders. Aware of hamlet heads' limited power and reluctance to take sides in community disputes, however, villagers with major requests or concerns about injustice often directly approach the villager leaders.

Villagers in Yunnan were unclear about their leaders' roles and responsibilities. None mentioned without prompting that leaders should represent villagers and respond to their requests. Some, though, mentioned that village leaders should serve and "do things" for villagers. This last understanding was also highlighted in conversations about what makes a good leader and in comments about the strengths and weaknesses of particular leaders, in which "good" leaders who introduce measures benefiting villagers were juxtaposed against individuals who are lazy and do nothing, and those who favor their own relatives. Leaders, on the other hand, most commonly referred to their main responsibilities as being to manage and serve (*fuwu* 服务) villagers and do practical things in the village (*cunzi li zuo shishi* 村里做实事). Mostly, though, leaders rejected the notion that they should "represent" villagers. As the first author discusses elsewhere, the term "represent" has negative connotations of particularism for some cadres in Yunnan, being understood in terms of the representation of family, clan or hamlet interests.²⁹

One might expect the role of village women's director to be conceived in terms of representing women and promoting gender equality. However, as we explain below, only one women's director claimed to represent women, and none said they promote gender equality. Instead, most said their main responsibility is family planning. In Yunnan, both villagers and the two village women's directors we interviewed said this involves promoting birth control, and monitoring women of child-bearing age to ensure they do not contravene the policy of two children per couple. Family planning was universally seen to be "women's work," understood, however, primarily as a matter of managing women, rather than serving, helping or representing them.

²⁹Jacka and Wu 2015.

The women's directors claimed also to run some activities for women on International Women's Day (8 March), but almost all our interviewees said either that there are no activities run for women in their village, or they had not participated in any such activities in the last several years.

In Zhejiang, women directors more often described their family planning role as providing a reproductive health service. In Z3, for example, the women's director said much of her time is spent visiting and receiving visits from women needing assistance or advice on gynecological issues about which they feel uncomfortable talking with men. In Z2, someone other than the women's director is responsible for family planning. On our first visit to this village in 2013, several women complained that the women's director had done nothing for them. In the election at the end of that year, they chose a new women's director who immediately began crafting a role specifically as a women's representative, attending to what she saw as women's needs: "Getting them out dancing, taking them on excursions. I just organize the women, get them out to relax, and also organize the women's representatives to do some voluntary work cleaning up the village." When asked why she did not include men, she said that as all the other village committee members are male, they should do things for men (Figure 4).

Gender Claims and Governing

In both provinces, the work of village cadres and representatives commonly was understood to relate to functional responsibilities, regardless of the gender of the person occupying the position. Yet the "default" cadre was portrayed as a man, with responsibility to work with both men and women.

For varying reasons, though, many people also claimed there is a need for women in village government. Some village leaders made this claim on the grounds that women and men have different strengths and weaknesses. The female leader of Y1, for example, countered male leaders' stereotypes of women as being narrow-minded and gossipy by saying that villagers

Figure 4. A women's director and her village cleaning crew. Zhejiang, 2014 (Sally Sargeson).

benefit from having female leaders because they are less likely to be irresponsible with collective funds or use them for private purposes, more careful and sensitive to detail, and patient in communicating with villagers.

Although gender stereotypes were expressed by a few male and female leaders in both provinces, less than half our villager interviewees identified any differences between male and female cadres' work method or style of communicating with villagers. Take Y1, for example. On one visit, four out of nine female interviewees said male and female cadres' work method and style of communication are the same, and another three were unable to identify any differences. In the hamlet in which the female leader of Y1 lives, one thirty-six-year-old woman saw no differences between male and female cadres, and no particular advantages in having women as cadres. However, she said that if she had a problem or an opinion to express, she would more likely go to a female, than male cadre because "it's easier to talk with a woman – there are some things you can't say to a man that you can say a little more easily to a woman without misgivings. You can say whatever is on your mind (to a woman)." A thirty-four-year-old woman in the same hamlet claimed, in contrast, that "men just manage the big picture, they're not as good as women at managing details," but denied there are either advantages or disadvantages in having female cadres. When asked whether she was more likely to go to a male or female cadre with a problem or to voice an opinion, she responded that she would go to whomever was responsible for the issue at hand, regardless of their gender.

Gender divisions of labor also were said to require women's participation in village government. In Yunnan, the expectation that "men rule outside, women rule inside" (*nan zhu wai, nü zhu nei* 男主外, 女主内) played a powerful part in the social construction of governing roles. Women's "inside work" was seen as including agriculture as well as domestic work and childrearing, while "outside work" was understood primarily in terms of waged labor outside the village, undertaken more commonly by men. As a result, some male cadres said, women are needed in government because they are better able to understand and communicate with women, and therefore manage and mobilize them for agricultural work. Among female cadres and villagers, too, women in government were considered better able to understand and communicate with other women because they belong to a similar sphere of life and work. Unlike male cadres, who emphasized the advantages this gave female cadres in mobilizing village women, female cadres claimed it makes it easier for them to work for and help village women. This did not lead female cadres to say they *represent* women, but some did express a sense of solidarity with women or claim to give them special consideration. In Y4, for example, the women's director, who is also a hamlet head, claimed that women find it easier to communicate with female, rather than male cadres, especially about reproductive health. Unlike other cadres in Yunnan, who referred to villagers as "the masses" (*qunzhong* 群众) and those "below" them (*xiamian* 下面), this women's director repeatedly used the pronoun "we" when describing women's struggles with poverty, heavy workloads and illness. Female villagers in this hamlet confirmed that she is particularly considerate and responsive to their needs, and that they often go to her to discuss family and personal concerns, borrow small sums of money, or ask her to mediate conflicts. By her own admission, though, her ability to address women's needs is limited: She is not a "key leader" (*zhuyao lingdao* 主要领导), so she cannot determine whether or not a villager should receive significant financial assistance for example – only the Party secretary can make that decision.

Acceptance of gender divisions of labor was less common among villagers in Zhejiang. As one interviewee in Z2 explained, "It's much the same now. Generally, it's not like men do one sort of job and women another, just staying at home. We spend a lot on our son's and daughter's education. We pay for them both to go to school, and they'll both go out to work." Here, as in Z1 and Z4, only elderly villagers expected that "men rule outside, women rule inside." In Z3, however, where women lacked the strength for work in the tree nurseries, a higher percentage

of interviewees said that an understanding of women's domestic sphere is required in village government. These expectations led the female cadre and villager representatives to claim that their gendered comprehension equips them to *represent* women:

There are differences between men and women in terms of how they think, their views on things. So I certainly can't represent men, I can only represent people around my own age, and of the same sex. Women and men my age, the women look after the homes, men do business. ... We should allow whoever can best represent [particular people] to represent them.

A thirty-year-old woman in Z3 also said more women cadres are needed in government specifically so they will represent women's interests and needs:

The woman's director certainly represents us women – especially her because she really understands us. She listens to our problems. And she accepts anything we suggest with an open mind. ... It would be better to have another couple of female cadres as well, so they'd consider women a bit more. Because all the others are men, and men don't give us as much thought, they just look at things from a man's perspective.

However, Zhejiang male cadres contested women's claims about gender differences in men's and women's governing roles, and insisted that they also consider and respond to both men's and women's needs. In Z2, at least, this claim seemed well founded. Villagers there commented that their male Party secretary had made a particular effort to arrange jobs and welfare for poor villagers, including two women suffering from mental illnesses. And by socializing caring chores once considered women's "inside work," he helped reconcile employment and familial obligations: with a grant from the government and some village funds, he converted the ground floor of the village office into a recreation center and canteen providing subsidized lunches for elderly villagers, a move welcomed by villagers concerned about the welfare of their parents while they are at work (Figure 5).

We conclude, then, that the belief that women in village government are better at communicating with and responding to women than their male counterparts does not lead to any observable gender difference in cadres' substantive representation of women. This is because village women turn to the cadre they think is most likely to address their concerns effectively. If their concern relates to a "women's issue" such as reproductive health, they are likely to seek help from another woman. Otherwise, though, they usually go to whoever has the power and resources to address their concern. Further to this, while female cadres and representatives are more likely than their male counterparts to claim that they respond to specifically "women's interests," these are only a minority of the interests that women express, as we discuss in more detail below. And men in government are just as likely as their female counterparts to respond effectively to other interests expressed by women.

Gender Inequality, Interests, and Needs

Female cadres and village women sometimes claim that, owing to gender divisions of labor, women share similar perspectives. This claim rarely reflects an awareness of common gender inequalities or strategic gender interests, however. To return, for example, to the hamlet head and women's director in Y4: while solicitous of village women and aware of their problems, she asserted that "men and women are equal ... what men can do, women can do too." When asked about the difficulties faced specifically by women, she noted that the demands on "us" have increased in recent years as a result of men's outmigration. However, she did not identify men's outmigration or women's resultant heavy workloads as either a cause or consequence of gender inequality.

In fact, very few people identified any form of gender inequality in village life. In response to the question “are men and women equal?” the great majority of both cadres and villagers said “yes.” This might be an automatic response to a well-recognized, but empty Party slogan; it was clear that the abstract concept of “(in) equality” was not part of their usual way of thinking. In Yunnan, in particular, only a couple of women commented that the slogan of gender equality does not match reality. Although references to gender divisions of labor and spheres of life – especially between women’s “inside” sphere and men’s “outside” sphere – were common, it was unusual for this to be linked to gender inequality. The great majority of villagers claimed simultaneously that “men rule outside, women rule inside” and “men and women are equal.”

In Zhejiang, somewhat more women identified gender inequalities, which they attributed to gender divisions of labor and village government. In Z3, for example, several women complained that the village leadership’s decision to specialize in the male-dominated tree nursery business, rather than fostering industries that would provide jobs for both men and women, had sustained discriminatory attitudes about men’s normative role as breadwinners. A few women in other Zhejiang villages, such as this sixty-year-old in Z4, also spoke about the elision of women’s voices in public as a sign of inequality:

They aren’t equal, men and women. They can’t be. When my husband speaks people listen to him, but no one listens to me so we aren’t equal. ... At home it’s more equal, but not outside [the home]. Outside, men have much more say than women.

These examples aside, most interviewees in both Yunnan and Zhejiang attached little weight to either gender inequalities or gender divisions of labor as factors shaping villagers’ interests. When asked to identify their most important interests, needs or problems, both women and men commonly identified interests and problems shared with their spouse and other household members, and did not distinguish between men’s and women’s interests. In Zhejiang, only in Z3 did some women point to a gender-specific need or concern – in their case, jobs for women. In Yunnan just a handful of women identified gender-specific issues – a rape in one case, and domestic violence in two others, although they described the latter problem as a minor, domestic issue rather than one to be addressed by village government.

Figure 5. Subsidized lunch for the elderly in the village committee office. Zhejiang, 2014 (Sally Sargeson).

In Yunnan, kinship and hamlet identities also divided women and were far more significant than gender in shaping their interests. In Y3, for example, some villagers complained that the female Party secretary distributes welfare to her relatives, rather than to the truly deserving. And one female hamlet head was very bitter about the Party secretary having cut her out of village decision-making processes and directing funds for house and road building to all but her hamlet. Hamlet and kinship-based divisions of this kind were not apparent in Zhejiang, however.

Another difference between Zhejiang and Yunnan lay in the range of household and collective needs identified by villagers. Zhejiang villagers are comparatively well off and satisfied with their leaders' provision of basic infrastructure. Several pointed out that their needs, for example, for improved air and water quality, cannot be met by village levels of government. In contrast, when asked about their own needs or difficulties, most Yunnan villagers talked about households' pressing financial needs. And when asked what issues village governments should devote money to addressing, most responded in terms of basic infrastructure. In other contexts, Yunnan villagers complained about similar issues: lack of compensation for land taken or labor contributed to build a village road or dam; a failure to mediate justly in disputes between neighbors; and cadre corruption and favoritism in decisions about eligibility for welfare, the siting of a dam or water pipes, and the sale of villagers' tobacco.

Discussion and Conclusions

What do the fieldwork findings reported above contribute to recent discussions of democracy in authoritarian states, and theorizations of gender, representation and democracy? In this final section, we draw on our findings to reflect on the questions posed at the beginning of the article.

What Does Women's Substantive Representation Entail, and How and by Whom Is It Achieved?

To date, feminist debate on the substantive representation of women has been dominated by the question of *who* represents women – specifically, do women substantively represent other women more effectively than do men? Our answer is a qualified “no.” We have found no evidence that female members of village government are intrinsically or always better at representing women than their male counterparts. On the one hand, many village women claim that female members of village government do nothing to substantively represent them. On the other hand, some women, especially in Zhejiang, point to examples of both male and female members of village government taking effective measures to substantively represent them.

Above, we noted that feminists disagree as to how to define and measure women's interests and about whether women represent other women on the basis of shared interests or because they share similar perspectives, derived from common, structural disadvantages. These disagreements notwithstanding, scholars of women's substantive representation generally assume not only that women share “women's interests” or “women's perspectives,” but also that these are different from “men's interests” and “men's perspectives.” Our study poses a challenge to these understandings. Sometimes, on some issues, gender stereotypes and divisions of labor translate into the view that, compared to men, women in government are more understanding and responsive to other women. In other words, when the issues are germane to a gendered sphere of work and life, women might share the same perspective. However, this women's perspective is not understood in terms of a common location with respect to structural gender inequalities, as in Young and Weldon's theorizations of women's social perspectives. Nor is there any sense among women that, as women, they share strategic gender interests or needs. As we discussed, although

many village women agree that “men rule outside, women rule inside,” the great majority claim that “men and women are equal.” Beyond this, understandings of women’s shared perspectives usually only shape the substantive representation of what are understood to be specifically “women’s interests,” but these interests are generally given far less weight than interests and needs held in common by men as well as women. In sum, the automatic equation between women’s gender, perspectives and interests, which we find in theorizations of women’s substantive representation, is of questionable validity in Chinese villages. Female villagers and cadres in Zhejiang and Yunnan articulate a range of interests. However, they only occasionally articulate “women’s interests” or allude to perspectives shared among themselves but not with men.

What Is the Relationship between Women’s Substantive Representation, Democracy, and Gender Equality?

Most studies of women’s substantive representation have been conducted in democratic nations. Our research demonstrates the value of extending those discussions, for it shows that national-level democracy is not a prerequisite for substantive representation. In authoritarian China, substantive representation can occur at the sub-national, village level, where elections and other democratic practices have been implemented. A comparison of our field sites in Yunnan and Zhejiang suggests that the higher the procedural quality of village democracy, the stronger the evidence of substantive representation. As we have shown, in Zhejiang villages where democracy is more fully institutionalized, substantive representation – of both men and women – has been socially constructed by cadres as a measure of satisfactory leadership, and also has been introduced into the repertoire of village cadres’ roles by voters’ lobbying.

Our fieldwork further demonstrates that gender equality is not a prerequisite for the substantive representation of women. This applies even if we limit consideration to gender parity in political participation, which does not exist in our field sites, or any other sites in China that we know of. The correlation we observed between the larger proportion of women in village government and greater substantive representation of women in Zhejiang villages has little to do with gender equality, and more to do with the higher quality of democracy and substantive representation of all villagers, compared to the Yunnan villages.

It is worth noting, though, that in both Yunnan and Zhejiang, local social constructions of gender difference – specifically, the notion that women are responsible for reproduction and work in the “inside sphere” while men are responsible for the “outside” sphere – impede democracy because they undermine women’s substantive representation and gender equality. While not preventing women from participating in village government or being politically active in other ways, these ideas restrict most female cadres to the position of women’s director, and produce expectations that the women’s director must be a woman who will work solely with (and for) women, while male cadres work with and for both women and men. Combined, these norms undermine women candidates’ competitiveness relative to male candidates, and contribute to a situation in which women cadres usually have less power than male cadres, thereby reducing their ability to effectively represent voters and protect their interests. On the other hand, the more powerful male cadres are less likely to respond to specifically “women’s interests” because these are seen to be the domain of female cadres.

Women’s substantive representation contributes to democracy by broadening both the range of people able to shape collective decision-making, and the range of interests and needs that are considered in collective decision-making processes. We find no evidence, though, that it contributes to gender equality in Chinese villages. This is because women’s strategic gender interests are neither articulated by villagers nor addressed by those in village government. We have noted a lack of awareness of gender inequalities in all our field site villages. However, this may not be

the main problem here. Like other societies, rural China is characterized by divisions, including those due to socio-economic inequalities and family and clan identities, which cut across gender. These divisions can lead to serious conflicts between women, as we noted in Y3, where the Party secretary's interest in maintaining her standing in her family led her to favor her relatives in the distribution of welfare payments, to the serious detriment of poorer women in the village. It is hard to see how an awareness of women's shared social perspectives could unite them in the face of divisions such as these. In fact, the existence of such divisions suggests that, contra Young and Weldon, women do not all share the same social perspectives any more than they share the same interests.

In conclusion, our study shows that women's substantive representation can be achieved even within an authoritarian state, by weakly democratic sub-national governments that include few women. In such environments, it is particularly important because it enhances democracy. However, aside from improving women's contribution to collective decisions, it does little to reduce gender inequality. Further research is needed to determine how and under what conditions women's substantive representation enhances gender equality.

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