

RURAL WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN CHINA: AN ANALYSIS OF THE METHODS OF RURAL GOVERNANCE MODERNIZATION

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Abstract With the development of China's industrialization and urbanization, many young and middle-aged men in rural China have moved to urban areas to work. The elderly, women and children are the main permanent residents in rural China, and women account for more than half of the agricultural labour force. However, Chinese rural women are obviously in a weak and marginal position in rural political participation, which is not equal to their contribution to rural development. In 2019, China announced plans to modernize rural governance. The core is to adapt to the change of time, reform the rural governance system that does not meet the requirements of practice and development, improve the new rural governance system that combines autonomy, rule of law, and rule of virtue under the leadership of party organizations, make the rural systems more scientific and perfect, and realize the institutional, standardized, and procedural governance of rural social affairs. Rural governance is the basis of national governance. Without the modernization of rural governance, there will be no modernization of national governance, and there will be no modernization of the country. At present, China is in the stage of building socialist modernization in an all-round way, and the modernization of rural governance has been put on the agenda. Therefore, this paper assumes that the modernization of rural governance in China provides a good opportunity to improve the political participation of Chinese rural women. It aims to explore effective approaches to enhancing the level of political participation among rural women and

promoting the process of rural democratization in China within the context of rural governance modernization. It achieves this by examining the primary issues surrounding the current political participation of rural women in China and analyzing the main factors contributing to these issues.

Keywords: Rural governance modernization, rural women political participation, gender equality in political participation, rural democratization, China.

INTRODUCTION

With the development of China's industrialization and urbanization, many young and middle-aged men in rural China have moved to urban areas to work. Since the 1990s, the elderly, women and children have been the main permanent residents in China's rural areas. Women account for more than half of the agricultural labor force, and in some provinces the proportion is as high as 70 per cent (Liao & Zhu, 2021). However, Chinese rural women are obviously in a weak and marginal position in rural political participation, which is not equal to their contribution to rural development. In 2019, women accounted for 11.9 per cent of village committee heads, reaching the target of "women making up more than 10 per cent of village committee heads" in the Program for the Development of Chinese Women (2011 – 2020) (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020), but this proportion did not fit in with the reality that women made up the majority of the rural labor force since most male young and middle-aged people go out to work. In 2022, the proportion of women in village committee members was 28.1 per cent, falling short of the target of "more than 30 per cent of women in village committee members" in the Program for the Development of Chinese Women (2011-2020) (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Therefore, this paper assumes that the modernization of rural governance in China provides a good opportunity to improve the political participation of Chinese rural women. It aims to explore effective approaches to enhance the level of political participation among rural women in China within the context of rural governance modernization. It achieves this by examining the primary issues surrounding the current political participation of rural women in China and analyzing the main factors contributing to these issues.

Modernization of rural governance means modernization of rural governance system and capacity in China (Xinhua News Agency, 2019). The core is to adapt to the change of time reform the rural governance system that does not meet the requirements of practice and development, improve the new rural governance system that combines autonomy, rule of law and rule of virtue under the leadership of party organizations, make the rural systems more scientific and perfect, and realize the institutional, standardized, and procedural governance of rural social affairs (Xinhua News Agency, 2019). This means that the legal system and social and cultural atmosphere for women's political participation in rural China can be improved. Because Chinese rural women's political participation means that rural women participate in villagers' self-governance and manage their own affairs according to law. Specifically, rural women care about village-level affairs and participate in and try to influence village-level political and social affairs in accordance with legal procedures (Che, 2020). It is mainly manifested in two levels of suffrage participation and democratic participation. Suffrage participation refers to the fact that rural women join the village two committees (The CPC Village Branch Committee and the Villagers' Self-government Committee) to hold the leadership positions at the village level, directly manage the village affairs, and control the decision-making power of the village affairs. Democratic participation refers to rural women exercising the right to vote and stand for election, reflecting individual or group political demands by participating in elections and making suggestions, and thus influencing activities related to political and social affairs at and above the village level. The background of the new rural governance system combining autonomy, rule of law and rule of virtue is just a good environment for the political participation of rural women.

However, few studies have been conducted on the methods of promoting rural women's political participation from the perspective of rural governance modernization. In the full-text database of China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), which is the largest continuously updated full-text database of Chinese journals in the world, there are few articles on the topic of modernization of rural governance and rural women's political participation in China. Academic research on methods to promote rural women's political participation is mainly reflected in the analysis of

factors affecting rural women's political participation in different periods, backgrounds, and research perspectives such as the background of social transformation (Guo et al., 2016) and socialist new countryside (Jin, 2009), gender (Guo, 2013) and social capital perspective (You et al., 2017) and so on, then put forward corresponding ways. They can be divided into two categories: one is to promote the active participation of rural women from the main body of political participation, for example, to improve women's political participation awareness, ability, cultural quality and confidence of women; The second is to improve the external environment of rural women's political participation from the objective environment of political participation, such as developing economy and education, improving laws and regulations, creating social and cultural environment, and socializing domestic work. It is worth mentioning that Jude Howell, professor and Director of the Centre for Civil Society at the London School of Economics and Political Science, also studied the low participation rate of rural women and the continuous decline of participation level after the trial implementation of villager election system in 1988. Jude Howell did not think the feudalism and women's diffidence of mainstream research was the root cause, but social practice, economical structures, institutional norms and procedures, and political culture all prey on, revitalize and reproduce gendered notions of the appropriate place of women and men in political life, and held that perhaps most challenging of all will be the need to examine the culture of politics, and in particular the exclusionary effects, both for women and men, of a political style that relies on heavy drinking, smoking and banqueting (Howell, 2006). Indeed, these research results provide a good reference value for this study.

The first part of this paper briefly summarizes the situation of rural women's political participation in China, the second part sorts out the main problems existing in the current Chinese rural women's political participation, the third part analyzes the specific reasons, and the fourth part explores effective ways to promote the political participation of Chinese rural women in the process of the modernization of Chinese rural governance from the three aspects of autonomy, rule of law and rule of virtue, in order to improve the level of Chinese rural women's political participation, and promote the process of rural democratization in China.

Political Participation of Rural Women in China: An Overview

The early Chinese women's political participation movement originated from the spread of modern democratic thought and the rise of bourgeois democratic revolution, which was mainly led by urban bourgeois women. As the bourgeois revolution ended in failure, the early women's political participation movement in China also disappeared. The political participation of rural women in China rose and developed in the course of the Chinese revolution, construction, reform and development led by the Communist Party of China. During the period of the New Democratic Revolutionary War, wherever the Communist Party of China was in power, rural women enjoyed the same political rights as men. In order to promote rural women's participation in politics, the proportion of women's participation in politics has been stipulated. Since most of the men were at the front fighting or working away, it was mainly women who remained behind to take part in political life. Hence, women's participation in politics was once high. The idea of women in politics has never been more popular. Revolutionary activists stepped up to leadership positions.

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the state has ensured equal political rights for men and women in terms of laws and institutions, and women's participation in politics remains proportional. In response to the call of the state, Chinese rural women have taken part in socialist revolution and construction. They held up half of the sky on the agricultural production front, and their contribution was equal to that of men. During this period, female model workers took leadership positions one after another, and once reached the peak of "*xiangxiang you xiangzhang, sheshe you shezhang*" [there were female heads of townships and female presidents of communes]. In the tortuous course of China's socialist construction, rural women's political participation has also experienced several twists and turns.

After the reform and opening in 1978, the people's commune system, which had been combined with the government and the community for nearly 20 years since the founding of the People's Republic of China, retired from the stage of history, and was replaced by the system established by the government and the community respectively. That is, the state

grass-roots political power is set up at the township level, and the villager self-governance system is implemented at the village level. The system of villagers' self-governance means that "villagers set up villagers' committees under the leadership of grassroots party organizations to directly exercise democratic rights and manage village-level public affairs and public welfare undertakings according to law (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China [China SCIO], 2021)." Chinese rural women take the villagers' autonomy as the carrier to participate in political life. The political participation of rural women in this paper refers to the political participation of rural women under the system of villager autonomy.

However, from 1982, when China's Constitution made it clear that "villagers' committees set up in rural areas according to where residents live are mass self-governing organizations at the grassroots level" to 1988 (Xinhua News Agency, 2018), when the villagers' self-government system was put into practice temporarily, to 1995, when the Fourth World Conference on Women was held in China, the issue of women's political participation in rural China was ignored. After the 1995 World Conference on Women was held in China, some provincial and municipal governments and women's organizations began to pay attention to the issue of rural women's participation in village committees. Ding Juan mentioned in her article "Women's Political Participation in China" that the proportion of women in village committees in China was 15.7 per cent in 1995 (Liu, 2019).

In 1998, China permanently implemented the system of villagers' self-governance. By the end of 2000, women accounted for 15.66 per cent of the members of village committees nationwide, with an average of 0.67 women in each village. According to the average size of village committee members in that year (4.3), one third of the country's village committees had no female members (Liu, 2019). The low proportion of rural women in village committees has attracted great attention from the state. Ministry of Civil Affairs that administers the Villager Committees in China and the All-China Women's Federation have actively taken measures to make a breakthrough in 2006 (23.16 per cent) after the low point in 2004 (15.15 per cent) (Liu, 2019).

In 2007, when China's National Bureau of Statistics first counted the number of female village directors, the figure was 14.88 per cent. By 2019, the proportion of women in village heads had fallen to 11.9 per cent, and by 2020, the proportion of women in village committees was 24.2 per cent, only 1.04 percentage points higher than in 2006 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). The process of rural women's political participation in China developed very slowly from 2006 to 2020. In 2021, China has lifted the absolute poverty of 1.4 billion people on schedule and completed the building of a moderately prosperous society in all respects, and rural China has also ushered in a new round of elections. According to the results of the latest general election, the proportion of female village committee members reached a record high of 28.1 per cent, an increase of 3.9 percentage points from 2019 (Fan, 2022).

The political participation of Chinese rural women has finally made obvious progress and is expected to get breakthrough development in the process of modernization of Chinese rural governance. Therefore, it is necessary to first find out the main problems existing in the current Chinese rural women's political participation and their causes, to implement effective measures to improve the level of their political participation in the process of the modernization of Chinese rural governance.

The Main Problems of Rural Women's Political Participation in China

This paper sorts out the main problems of female political participation in rural China from two aspects: suffrage participation and democratic participation.

Low efficiency and limited role of women in suffrage participation in rural China

The suffrage participation of rural women in China is reflected in their role and status in the village committee. It is inadequate in two ways. First, the proportion of women in the villagers' committee is low and their influence is limited. The United Nations (UN) has conducted a study and proposed that the proportion of political participation of any gender should not be

lower than 33 per cent. If the proportion of political participation is only 10 per cent 20 per cent, it is difficult to have a real impact on policies (Li, 2014). With too low a proportion of women in politics, or even a single female spokesperson and all the other decision-makers being men, it is difficult for women's issues to be transformed from gender issues into policy issues. In 2022, the proportion of women in village committee members was 28.1 per cent in China (Fan, 2022). It falls far short of the international target of 33 per cent. It also falls short of the target of 30 per cent at least set in the Program for the Development of Chinese Women (2011-2020) for the proportion of women in village committees and does not match the proportion of rural women in the population. Although, rural women have become the main body promoting rural economic development and political civilization, the proportion of their representatives in village committees is still not high compared with the proportion of women in the population, which will discourage their enthusiasm to participate in politics.

Secondly, the status and role of women in the village committee members have been marginalized. On the one hand, the proportion of women heads of the village committees is very low, which has been hovering around 10 per cent to 12 per cent from 2007 to 2019 (Liu, 2019), forming a stereotype that women have limited abilities and can only conduct deputy or auxiliary work. On the other hand, the female members of the village committees are usually engaged in the routine work affairs traditionally held by women, such as women directors, family planning and pension insurance. If the women on the village committees are engaged in so-called female-only jobs for a long period of time, it sexualizes the work and is considered sufficient to have one woman in the job, reducing the opportunities for other women to enter the village committee. If women do not engage in important work such as economic and political development in the village for a long time, and do not have comprehensive and in-depth practical experience, they will not have much say when participating in major decisions at the village level. As time goes by, the importance of women in the village committee will not be obvious and they will be marginalized.

Limited practice of rural women in democratic participation

Democratic participation of Chinese rural women is reflected by their participation in the whole process of democratic election, democratic consultation, democratic decision-making, democratic management, and democratic supervision. There are nevertheless several existing problems which arguably undermine their quality of participation in these avenues.

First, in terms of democratic election participation, rural women are not strongly willing to run for village committee members. According to the data of the fourth survey on the Status of Chinese Women, “in the election of village committees, 87.5 per cent of female voters voted seriously”, but only “31.1 per cent of women expressed their willingness to run for village committee members in the future” (Yang, 2021). This indicates that most rural women have a sense of democratic participation and can initially ensure the right to political participation and put it into practice, but they do not have a strong desire for power participation that requires more political talent. Without a strong desire, they will not study and strive for it, still less actively practice it, and it will be difficult to stimulate their potential for political participation.

Second, women's participation in democratic decision-making is low in rural China. Village Organization Law stipulated that women villagers' representatives should make up more than one third of the villagers' representatives' meeting. However, it was only in 2007 that female villager representatives were included in the statistical index and nationwide data became available. The proportion of female members of the National Villagers' Congress that year was 26.60 per cent (Liu, 2019). Since then, it has fluctuated between 20 and 30 per cent, never reaching 30 per cent. Data on the proportion of female villager representatives in different regions are rarely released publicly, which is not conducive to promoting rural women's participation in democratic decision-making.

Third, in terms of democratic management, the effectiveness of female participation in rural areas is low. Democratic management in villagers' self-governance mainly refers to that of village affairs through

villagers' self-governance constitution, village rules and conventions. This requires that the opinions and ideas of all villagers, including rural women, should be taken into account in the process of formulating various systems, so as to safeguard the rights and obligations of villagers to the greatest extent, because the rules and regulations once passed by the villagers' assembly or the villagers' congress must be strictly standardized implementation, in order to achieve self-management, self-service, self-education, self-supervision. However, the reality is that many village rules and regulations infringe the interests of rural women reasonably due to gender inequality and gender discrimination. Take land contracting, in which farmers are the lifeblood, for example. According to the sample survey of rural areas nationwide conducted by the All-China Women's Federation, "26.3 per cent of women have never been allocated land, 43.8 per cent have lost land because of marriage, and 0.7 per cent have lost land after divorce" (Cui, 2006). This shows that rural women play a small role in the participation of democratic management and find it difficult to safeguard their rights.

Fourth, in terms of democratic supervision, rural women's participation is weak. According to the data of the fourth survey on the Status of Chinese Women, 31.9 per cent of rural women participated in at least one kind of democratic management, democratic supervision, and social welfare activities in the past three years (Wu, 2021). If rural women cannot effectively participate in supervision, it will be difficult to find problems and drawbacks in democratic procedures or policies, and it will be difficult to put forward reasonable and effective suggestions. Thus, it is even less conducive to further political participation.

Finally, there are few opportunities for rural women to participate in democratic consultation. "There are matters to be consulted, and the business of all shall be consulted by all. The essence of people's democracy is to find the greatest common divisor of the will and demand of the whole society" (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China [China SCIO], 2021). However, the traditional way of consultation is mainly for the members of the village committee to consult and seek advice from the village elites, such as the elderly or the rich talents or intellectuals. Consultative participation thus implies a gathering of elites from all walks

of life, which leads to the exclusion of most women and the distancing of democratic consultative participation.

The Reasons for the Problems of Female Political Participation in Rural China

There are many reasons for the lack of political participation of rural women in China. This paper mainly analyzes that of the uncondusive environment.

Unsound legal system

Villagers' self-governance is a form of rural grassroots democracy arranged according to the national legal system, and its actual operation is closely related to the legal system (Xu, 2018). The political participation of rural women is regulated and guaranteed by laws and regulations at the national, local (provinces, cities, counties, towns, and townships) and village levels (Xu, 2018). At present, there are great deficiencies in these three levels of the legal system.

First, the content of women's political participation in the national legal provisions is too general, vague, and not strong in terms of operability. At present, the national legal systems related to women's political participation mainly include the Constitution, the Village Organization Law, the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests, and the Program for the Development of Chinese Women. These legal systems only stipulate the principle of women's political participation and specify the goals to be achieved, but do not specify the specific implementation path, resulting in the difficulty of implementing the spirit of the law. For example, the provision on women's participation in the Village Organic Law was expressed as "Women shall have an appropriate number of members of the villagers' committees" in 1987 (Feng, 2019). In 2018, it was revised to "women shall be included in the members of the villagers' committees" (Feng, 2019). Among them, "appropriate quota" and "there are women members" are vague expressions, exactly how many quotas are appropriate and how many women members should be, the law is not clear. And the word "should" be suggested rather than mandatory, so how many women

should there be on the village committee? This can only be decided by local policy makers. Thus, it resulted in the unbalanced and inadequate level of female political participation in China.

In addition, even if there are specific provisions on the proportion of rural women in political participation, the regulation is too low. For example, the Program for the Development of Chinese Women (2011 – 2020) stipulates that “women make up more than 30 per cent of the members of village committees” and “more than 10 per cent of the heads of village committees” (Xinhua News Agency, 2011). With such low ratios, it is easy to think that women are not qualified to be village directors in the first place, and that only a super small number of women are qualified to be village directors. Also, they may not be women in the ordinary sense, they are already masculine. The conclusion is still that only men are suitable to be village directors, because the female members of the village committee are basically engaged in partial work -- women’s work, and the overall control of the village director’s work must be held by men.

Secondly, at the local level, the legal system of women’s political participation is very different, resulting in inadequate implementation of the legal spirit. The province is the highest local legislature. It conducts provincial legislation in accordance with national laws and regulations and the actual conditions of the province. It is universally applicable and universal throughout the province and has a practical guiding role for the rules and regulations below the provincial level. However, some provincial legislation directly follows the vague expressions of national law, and more than half of the provinces have specified in their local regulations that village committees include at least one woman (Yu, 2010).

However, an unspoken rule has been formed in the actual operation. No matter the members of the village committee are three or seven, there can only be one woman at most among the members of the village committee, which makes it more competitive and difficult for women to enter the village committee. Because women must compete not only with men, but also with women, and for up to one spot. In addition, there are no penalties for violating the regulations on women’s participation in politics in both national

and local laws, and even those who fail to meet the requirements are not liable. Therefore, the guarantee of women's participation in politics is often only kept in the form, instead of trying to achieve it, so that women's political participation is often in a passive state and difficult to make progress.

Finally, in the rules and regulations at the village level, women's participation in villager autonomy even goes against the national law, which directly hinders women's political participation. In particular, the basic national policy of gender equality is ignored, traditional customs and habits are used, and women are directly excluded from participating in village affairs. For example, in a village regulation, it is clear that women in the village must move their household registration within a long period of time after marriage. Otherwise, the village will directly cancel married women's household registration, making married women lose the qualification of villagers and lose the protection of rights in the village. The practice of cancelling married women's household registration has a certain representative in the country (Li, 2019). Article 1050 of the Chinese Civil Code stipulates: "After marriage registration, the woman may become a member of the man's family and the man may become a member of the woman's family as agreed by the two parties." After marriage, the man can live in the woman's family, and she does not have to move out of the village. However, in traditional marriages, it is customary for the married woman to live in the husband's home. Therefore, some village-level management system is formulated according to customs and habits, illegally depriving married women of the villagers' rights, not to mention the right to participate in all village-level affairs.

Rural women's participation in villager autonomy is hindered by the vague expression of legal provisions and severely restricted by the illegal rules and regulations at the village level.

Unconducive cultural atmosphere

Today, in China, the concept of gender equality has been deeply rooted in the hearts of the people, but there is a misleading understanding of gender equality, that is, the pursuit of gender equality is only a matter for women.

Because women's quality is generally worse than men's in history, now in order to achieve gender equality, women need to constantly try to catch up with men. So just give women the opportunity to enter the society, the things that women traditionally do should be done by women of course, the man is still the man himself without any change. Although more and more women have entered the society and even made great contributions, the traditional gender cultural concepts of "*nu zhu nei nan zhu wai*" [women live inside men outside] "*nan zhu nu cong*" [men are dominant and women subordinate] and the marriage customs of "*cong fu ju*" [married women live in the husband's family] have not changed, and even deeply influence the gender division of labor mode in the political field, which seriously hinders women's participation in political affairs.

First of all, the family gender culture of "*nan zhuwai, nv zhunei*" [men live outside, women inside] hinders rural women's political participation. In rural families, men mainly earn money to support the family, while women mainly have children and take care of their families. This gender division of labor pattern of "*nan zhuwai, nv zhunei*" [men live outside, women inside] is considered to be a natural thing, thus forming the phenomenon of "*nan gong nv nong*" [men engage in industrial labor and women engage in agricultural labor] in which men go out for work and women farm at home. Rural women who stay at home not only have to take care of the family, but also must shoulder the agricultural work of the family. More importantly, they must fulfill the obligations of the villagers on behalf of the family and complete various affairs arranged by the village. However, they are marginal figures in the decision-making of village affairs. The root cause is the thinking of gender division of "*nan zhuwai, nv zhunei*" [men live outside, women inside]. Village affairs are public affairs and belong to the domain of men outside and family belongs to that of women inside. When male and female candidates who lack influence and popularity appear, villagers tend to show more doubts about female candidates and tend to vote for male candidates. Therefore, if rural women participate in the management of village-level affairs, it is more difficult for them to gain the trust of villagers and leaders, and they are faced with the unspoken rule of giving priority to men.

Secondly, the political gender culture of “*nan zheng nv fu*” [men hold main position and women deputy ones] and “*nan shi nv xv*” [men hold actual posts and women nominal ones] hinders the political participation of rural women. Chinese village committee generally has 3 to 7 positions, respectively are the village head, deputy village head, secretarial accounting, public security coordination, family planning, economic work, women's work. According to the survey: What are women suited to do? As a result, more than 80 per cent of villagers believed that the suitable positions for women were family planning and women's work, and that the first and second positions, economy, public security, and accounting were all suitable for men (Li, 2014). This has resulted in a significant reduction in the number of posts and positions for which rural women are competing. In theory, every position on the village committee is up for grabs. However, in practice the number of women on village committees has changed from seven in principle to one in practice, or at most two, almost five to one. This means that men can compete for five positions and women can only compete for one position. The path for women to participate in politics is greatly narrowed. It also leads to the marginalization of rural women in the power structure and difficulty in entering the core of power. Women's positions are not based on their ability and potential, but on their gender, which is carried out within the scope of gender culture and is a reflection of political gender culture.

Finally, traditional marriage customs and culture hinder rural women's political participation. The traditional marriage and family system in China is that women move to the husband's family after marriage. This is still the dominant pattern of marriage and family in China today, especially in rural areas. The influence of this marriage and family system on women's political participation is as follows. First, rural women from adulthood to marriage will not be the village reserve cadre training candidates, unless they are planning to recruit a son-in-law and still living in the village. It is also difficult to be elected as a representative of the villagers, and there are few opportunities to participate in the decision-making of village-level affairs. The cultivation of women's political quality depends entirely on individual development. Second, after marriage, it is difficult to establish their own social relations and social influence in the husband's residence. Women move into unfamiliar environments, differences in customs and

lifestyle, sparse interpersonal network and weak public opinion foundation, all of which have become adverse factors limiting women's participation in villager autonomy. Third, even if they can overcome all the difficulties in the husband's village to stand out on the village committee, or as a leader, the recognition of the whole society is still not high. Society often casts a sympathetic eye on a successful woman, thinking that she must be unworthy of her family and that her family must be unhappy. It forms a paradox that women who do not participate in politics are considered to be of low quality and low consciousness, while those who enter the field of political power are considered to be unhappy in their families, which prompts most women to choose the middle way and ultimately encourages the prevalence of the idea of men are dominant and women are subordinate.

In short, no matter in the family, society or political field, there are all kinds of traditional gender culture where men are dominant, and women are subordinate. Women face great obstacles every time they move forward, especially in the political field that traditionally belongs to men.

Methods to Promote Political Participation of Chinese Rural Women in the Process of Rural Governance Modernization

The modernization of rural governance in China needs to build a new system of modern rural governance. Namely, according to the practical needs of rural governance, a new modern rural governance system which combines autonomy, rule of law and rule of virtue under the leadership of the party organization should be built to realize effective rural governance. Meanwhile, through the analysis of the main problems and reasons for the current political participation of rural women in China mentioned earlier, it can be concluded that the main obstacles to their political participation are institutional and cultural factors. Therefore, it is of great importance to address the issue of promoting the political participation of rural women in the process of improving the rural governance system. It is necessary to actively formulate relevant measures and implement them in the practice of women's political participation. This will contribute to the improvement of the level of political participation of rural women and accelerate the progress of rural democratic politics. The specific measures are as follows:

Villager autonomy: Improving the political participation system of women in rural China

The main body of villager autonomy is the villagers. To carry out the activities of villager autonomy normally, the villagers must formulate various rules and regulations in accordance with the relevant laws and regulations and documents considering the actual situation of the village. Since villager autonomy is run under the arrangement of the national legal system, its legislation or establishment has many main levels, including the national, local and village level, so the perfection of its system also involves three levels.

First, establish and improve the legal system at the national and local levels with villagers' autonomy as the core and villagers as the subject of autonomy. At present, the villagers' self-government has formed a legal system based on the Constitution and the Village Organic Law, with provincial legislation as the main body and supplemented by regulations of departments and local governments. However, from the perspective of national legislation, for the villager autonomy involving hundreds of millions of farmers, there is no one law governing the overall system. At the national level, there is only the Village Organic Law which mainly aims at the village committee of the permanent organization of villager autonomy, and it is difficult to accommodate and cover a series of corresponding norms that should be included in villager autonomy (Xu, 2018). Many important contents about villagers' self-governance are not clearly specified in it such as the definition of villagers' qualification, the status, rights and obligations of villagers, the status and authority of villagers' meetings, the participation of villagers in village affairs management, the forms and authority of villagers, the operation and guarantee mechanism of villagers' self-governance et cetera. Especially the definition of villager qualification. Due to the traditional custom of "*cong fu ju*" [married women live in their husband's family], rural women will face the change of villager status, which is the basic condition for participating in villager autonomy and determines their rights in the village, such as participation in political power and property rights. The law of villager autonomy should be clearly defined to ensure the basic identity rights of women.

Therefore, to perfect the system of villager autonomy, “there also needs to be a Law of Villager Autonomy with a dominant nature to regulate” (Tang M., 2006). The Law on Villagers’ Autonomy is a basic national law on villagers’ autonomy formulated in accordance with the Constitution and is the superior law of the Organic Law of Villagers’ Committees. With such a basic law, the legal source is more standardized, and the local legislation enacted by provincial and local governments has a clearer legal basis. Meanwhile, as the basic law of villager autonomy, the Villager Autonomy Law needs to be regulated and guaranteed by supporting individual laws and regulations stipulating specific aspects of villager autonomy. These individual laws and regulations can be legislated at the national level, such as the Village Organic Law, or they can appear in the form of local legislation through authorization, so as to reflect the flexibility of villager autonomy and the difference of local practice (Xie, 2010). Only when the legal system of villager autonomy is perfected in China, can Chinese rural women’s participation in villager autonomy be institutionalized, standardized, and guaranteed.

Secondly, the gender quota system should be explicitly implemented in the national law. In the Constitution or the Law on Villagers’ Autonomy or the Law on Village Organization, the gender ratio of rural women’s political participation and the corresponding punishment measures for violating this clause are clearly stipulated. Internationally, gender quotas have long been considered a key step in promoting gender equality. In 2020, women made up an average of 25.5 per cent of parliamentarians worldwide, with Rwanda, Cuba and the United Arab Emirates having women in their parliaments holding half or more seats (Tian, 2021). In 2022, the proportion of female members of the village committee is only 28.1 per cent in China (Fan, 2022), which is just a little bit higher than the world average level and still far behind the level of developed countries.

Therefore, China should learn from the successful experience of international development and actively implement gender quota system. Laws at the national level clearly stipulate that the proportion of female reserved candidates for village committee, female candidates for village committee, female members and female directors of village committee, female representatives of villagers and female deputies to villagers’ meetings

should all be at least one-third, and the minimum proportion should be continuously raised. At the same time, the relevant laws guaranteeing women's participation in politics are further revised and improved, and supervisory bodies for safeguarding women's rights and interests are added to ensure that the prescribed proportion of women enter the decision-making level. The implementation situation is regularly reviewed, relevant evaluation seminars are organized, and a feedback mechanism is established according to the evaluation results (Qiu, 2014). In addition, the auxiliary means of reward and punishment when the minimum scale system is implemented abroad should be learned from. In the countries where proportional system is stipulated by constitution and law, the punishment for the violation of the rules is very crucial, which determines whether the proportional system exists as an effective system or just a symbol. In some countries, the scale system is promoted through incentives.

Finally, the villager autonomy system at the village level should be strictly formulated and examined in accordance with the law. The village-level autonomy system is a variety of rules, regulations and systems formulated with the participation of villagers. It not only reflects the spirit of laws and regulations related to villager autonomy, but also involves other national legal documents, regulations, decrees, and policies, with very rich content. These rules, regulations and systems do not have the special compulsion of national laws and administrative orders, and mainly reflect the relationship between villagers' mutual agreement and mutual compliance (Xu, 2018). Therefore, in addition to the national statutory law, part of its content also comes from the village customs.

The feudal system of more than 2,000 years in China has made rural folk customs contain many cultural habits of “*nan zhu nv cong*” [Men are dominant, and women subordinate] and transformed the fixed gender identities of men and women into daily life, thus making the patriarchy with special vitality and construction force (Li, 2019). This not only leads to the obvious gender inequality clauses in some village rules and conventions, but also the tendency of village cadres and villagers to seek solutions from traditional customs rather than gender equality in dealing with village public affairs. For example, some villages clearly stipulate

that sons can get a homestead upon birth, but daughters cannot. In Baizhi Village, Honghu City (County), Hubei Province, if a son is born, he can get two homesteads for free, while if a daughter is born, she can get no homesteads (Li, 2019). Therefore, for rules and regulations at the village level, grassroots governments need to organize professional personnel, including gender equality experts or professional institutions, to review the legality and gender equality, so as to ensure the rights of rural women and pave the way for women to participate in village governance.

It can be seen that women's right to participate in villagers' autonomy can be ensured by a unified national law on villagers' autonomy that contains a clear gender ratio quota and matching individual laws and regulations, and by examining the illegality and gender equality of villagers' autonomy regulations or village rules and people's contracts, so as to make the content of villagers' autonomy regulations or village rules and people's contracts legal and reasonable. It can also encourage rural women to take the initiative to participate in politics, promote the standardized operation of villagers' autonomy, and realize grassroots democracy in rural areas.

The rule of law: Guaranteeing the political participation of women in rural China.

Villagers' self-governance should not only be established according to the law, but also be governed according to the system to test the effectiveness of governance. At present, in the field of villager autonomy, scholars generally feel that "the development of the four democracies is unbalanced" and "the four democracies are disconnected", that is, they put emphasis on democratic elections, ignore democratic decision-making, democratic management and democratic supervision, and fall into the "fallacy of electionism" (Zhang et al., 2020). Local governments also put emphasis on democratic elections when making policies. As a result, the tasks of democratic elections, which are clear, easy to decompose, easy to operate and can be quantified, have driven out the tasks that are difficult to quantify, such as democratic decision-making, management, and supervision, which have resulted in policy deviation.

In addition, rural women's political participation is mainly manifested in voting, which hinders their deeper participation. The modernization of rural governance is to develop the advantages and avoid the disadvantages of the existing system to promote the balanced development of the "four democracies" and make villagers' self-governance the cornerstone of the whole process of people's democracy at the grass-roots level. The state and local governments should introduce an effective legal system to promote democratic decision-making, management, and supervision in rural areas. In the practice of promoting democratic decision-making, management and supervision, villagers' committees should strictly protect the rights of rural women to participate in accordance with the law, fully respect the will of rural women, highlight the dominant position of rural women, and stimulate their participation vitality.

For example, in democratic elections, national laws are strictly enforced to ensure that all eligible female villagers participate in the elections and the proportion of female candidates is ensured. Of course, in order to ensure the quality of female candidates, it is necessary to cultivate the same proportion of female candidates as male candidates as reserve talents before the election, especially in daily work, so as to put male and female candidates on a relatively equal competitive position. In democratic decision-making, it is necessary to ensure that women are represented in the village assembly or the village representative meeting, and that only when at least one third of the women are present, can it be possible to make gender-equal decisions. In democratic management, villages should be established according to the law and governed according to the system, ensuring that at least one third of women participate in the establishment process and ensure that the system complies with the principle of gender equality. In democratic oversight, ensure at least one third of women are on various oversight committees.

The rule of virtue: Creating a cultural atmosphere for women's political participation in rural China.

The rule of virtue has a subtle influence. It is also indispensable in the new system of rural governance. The rule of virtue in China is to carry on the fine

traditional Chinese culture, eradicate bad customs, and cultivate advanced socialist culture. This can provide a good atmosphere for rural women to participate in politics.

First, it is necessary to promote the excellent rural traditional culture to cultivate the excellent quality of rural women and lay the foundation for their political participation. As a big agricultural country, China has always attached importance to agriculture, rural development, and wealthy farmers in the long period of agricultural production and life. It cultivates the excellent qualities of rural women who endure hardships, live frugally, love relatives, are filial to the old and good-neighborly and friendly. There is a need to praise their virtues, organize civilized activities such as “*xiangcun jingguo*” [Rural Splendid Women], “*hao xiufu*” [Good Mother-in-law] and so on, so that they can establish a good reputation and gain public respect and recognition, and build a mass base for further political participation. Of course, to avoid stereotyping women into family roles, family civilization projects such as “*hao nvxu*” [Good Father-in-law], “*hao zhangfu*” [Good Husband] and “*hao erzi*” [Good Son] should also be carried out, and clauses to practice the concept of gender equality should be added to the selection criteria.

Secondly, there is a need to carry out the action of transforming bad traditional customs and remove obstacles to rural women’s political participation. In China, the countryside is the main habitat for traditional customs. The first step in changing customs is to trace the causes behind them and make villagers understand what is at stake. And then replace them with new and accepted concepts of value. Only in this way can really succeed in getting rid of bad habits and setting up new fashions. Take, for example, the high price of betrothal gifts in rural practices. In some remote areas, the woman’s family needs ¥200,000 from the man’s family before discussing marriage matters, not including the house, car, and jewelry. It is not uncommon for some families to borrow as much as they can to get a wife for their son, leaving the husband’s family destitute. And the families who marry their daughters often invest in the marriage of their sons after receiving high betrothal gifts, which forms a vicious circle. On the surface, it looks like women have higher status and need high betrothal gifts to get

married. In fact, it is the evil result of gender imbalance of more men and less women caused by the gender inequality concept of son preference under the patriarchy.

The fundamental way to solve this bad habit is to implement the policy of gender equality in marriage and family. Therefore, it is necessary to remove the male privilege in the marriage and family. For example, there is a need to make it common for children to take their mother's surname and live in the woman's family after marriage. The village ensures that both married men and women can enjoy the interests of collective resources according to the population living situation. Daughters can also do things traditionally only reserved for sons, such as visiting ancestral temples to worship their ancestors, or carrying the coffin for their parents when they are buried. Only when the villagers really believe that daughters and sons are completely equal, will they change their preference to sons. If the villagers truly practice the concept of gender equality, it will clear the obstacles for rural women to participate in politics.

Finally, there is a need to practice socialist core values, cultivate advanced gender culture, and create a good atmosphere for rural women's political participation in China. No matter inheriting the excellent traditional Chinese culture or breaking the old customs, which must meet the needs of the people and adapt to the development of society. In China, the socialist core values whose principle is "prosperity, democracy, civilization and harmony; Freedom, equality, justice, and the rule of law; Patriotic, dedicated, honest, friendly", are the core direction of the construction of socialist social spiritual civilization. A fair and just society under the rule of law that conforms to modernization and meets people's expectations can be formed by actively cultivating and practicing core socialist values in rural areas can form. It should also be a society of equal and harmonious development between the sexes. If the society is dominated by only one gender, it will be an unequal society, a disharmonious and unsustainable society. Therefore, the practice and cultivation of socialist core values need to cultivate advanced gender culture to create a favorable social environment for rural women's political participation.

The advanced gender culture is relative to the backward gender culture whose core is gender inequality. Advanced gender culture refers to the culture that is compatible with social development and conducive to gender equality, justice, harmonious existence, and development (Wang J., 2003). Its principles are fairness and justice. In addition, the gender relationship created by the advanced gender culture is the equality of harmonious nature of cooperation and communication, rather than the equality of binary opposition that improves the value of women at the expense of male value. It is the gender culture that encourages the cooperation and communication of both sexes to promote the common development of both sexes. Only such gender culture has the inherent basis and eternal driving force for promoting gender equality and realizing human civilization and progress. Such gender culture is conducive to arouse people's reflection on the traditional gender culture, change the social stereotype, role expectation and value evaluation of men and women, and support women's political participation. Only with such a culture can woman be motivated to participate in politics and actively participate in politics to pursue political achievements without worries.

Therefore, in rural moral governance, advanced gender culture needs to be integrated into villagers' autonomy regulations, rural civilization conventions, village rules and household rules and household discipline, so that it can become the spiritual pursuit that people abide by and maintain, and become the daily norms of behavior, to create a fair and equal atmosphere for rural women's political participation.

CONCLUSION

The countryside is that of rural women who live and work in agriculture for a long time. Rural governance modernization cannot realize without the involvement of rural women in China. Since the implementation of villager autonomy in China, the level of political participation of Chinese women is very low, even though some positive measures have been taken. It is also emphasized that the law of development should be respected, and women's equal participation in politics needs a development process, cannot be achieved overnight. Nowadays, China is modernizing the country, and the countryside should also modernize. It is also the time for rural women

to realize modernization. If rural women do not equally participate in rural political life, rural political democracy cannot be realized, and without political democracy, rural modernization can hardly be realized.

Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the two major problems that have been troubling Chinese rural women's political participation for a long time and take corresponding active measures to solve them. First, rural women not only have a small proportion of participation in power participation, but also hold secondary positions and engage in feminine work, which makes the depth, breadth, and validity of their participation in politics limited. Second, rural women pay more attention to election than decision-making, management, consultation, and supervision in democratic participation, which simplifies political participation to election participation, fails to find the real meaning, needs and motivations of political participation, and thus fails to stimulate their potential for political participation. There are objective reasons for these problems, such as the unsound legal system and unfriendly political culture discussed in this paper. Thus, it is necessary to perfect the legal system of autonomy, run the villagers' autonomy according to law and integrate the ethics of moral governance to promote the further political participation of rural women in China. Of course, the reasons for the insufficient political participation of women in rural China also have their own subjective factors such as their lack of subjectivity, accountability and so on, which will be discussed in other papers in view of the length of this paper.

In a word, the political participation of women in rural China has ushered in a period of rapid development opportunities, but it needs the active promotion of the country, society and both genders to finally realize the equal participation of men and women in politics and realize the democratization of rural politics.

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