Women, protest and the appropriation of natural resources: a case study of ‘left-behind’ women’s collective action in China

Yanqiang Dua, Yan Wangb, Pingyang Liua[[1]](#footnote-1), Neil Ravenscroftc

a Department of Environmental Science and Engineering, Fudan University, 220 Handan Road, Shanghai, 200433, PR China

b Department of Sociology, Zhou Enlai School of Government, Nankai University, 38 Tongyan Road, Tianjin, 300353, China

c School of Real Estate and Land Management, Royal Agricultural University, UK

**Abstract:** China’s rapid urbanization has created opportunities for many people – predominantly men - to migrate from rural to urban areas in search of work, leaving their farms and families. This has resulted in many villages being dominated by a large population of ‘left-behind’ women. This situation has required these women not only to take responsibility for their own domestic and farming duties, but also increasingly to get involved in local governance, particularly in trying to prevent the appropriation of collective natural resources. Based on a case study in a typical village in central China, this paper explores an example of women getting involved in collective action to prevent the over-exploitation of collectively owned sand resources. As the case study illustrates, although previously denied the opportunity to participate in local politics and governance, the ‘left behind’ women have seized the initiative and have demonstrated the capacity to impose their will, through a mix of toughness, flexibility and endurance. As a consequence, the study demonstrates that, when empowered to act, the left-behind women are as capable as anyone of defending their community’s resources. This new, women-only, approach to collective action over natural resource management therefore suggests that rural-urban migration has not been a wholly negative phenomenon for those left behind. On the contrary, it has created a space in which those who were previously denied access to local politics can assert not only their right to govern, but also their aptitude for the types of action that are required to defend collectively-owned resources.

**Keywords:** Left-behind Women; Collective Action; Rural Natural Resource; Empowerment; China

# Introduction

Rapid urbanization has confronted rural society in China with the intertwined problems of hollowed-out villages and a vacuum in the governance of collectively owned natural resources. By 2015, nearly 300 million people – mainly men, although also increasingly also unmarried women (Ye, et al, 2016) - had migrated from rural to urban areas (National Bureau of Statistics of People’s Republic of China 2015), leaving behind as many as 50 million women, as well as elderly parents and children (Wu and Ye, 2016). As Ye, et al (2016) have observed, this has led to the creation of many ‘split families’ in which the man lives in the city and earns a wage while the ‘left behind’ woman does both the domestic and the farming chores at home (see also Lee, 2014). It has also meant that such rural communities have tended to have less control of common pool resources (because the men who once formed the village committees are no longer in the village), while the split families have increased non-agricultural income which has allowed them to reduce their dependence on public resources.

As a result of this situation, some of those men who remain have become powerful enough to forcibly occupy and control natural resources that belong to the village collectively, resulting in multiple social injustices and deprivations (Fischer and Qaim, 2012; Meinzen-Dick et al., 2004). Given the absence of many of the men who were previously part of the village committees and thus able to counter the forced appropriation of the natural resources, the left behind women have been faced with a stark choice: to remain silent and let the resources go, or to fight. While there are examples elsewhere of women taking collective action in pursuit of their rights (Baden and Pionetti, 2011; Oxfam, 2013; Baden, 2013; Morgan, 2017), little is known about what has happened in China:

Academic research on left-behind women has mainly concentrated on the impacts of labour migration. The tone of these studies is limited to harrowing descriptions of the lifestyles of left-behind people or simplistic descriptions of how rural migration has affected them …, and this literature is still little known outside China. … left-behind women are still seen as secondary … (Ye, et al, 2016: p. 911)

Of the studies that have moved beyond these simplistic descriptions, several have noted how many left-behind women have gained greater freedom and agency in the management of the family farm (Zhou, et al, 2002; Zheng and Xie 2004; Meng, 2014; Ye, et al, 2014). Recent work by Xiao and Hong (2017) also indicates that women display more concern for the environment than was traditionally the case, while other research demonstrates that many women have become involved in public affairs, giving them what Ye, et al (2016: p. 913) describe as ‘…a larger public space in which to perform.’ However, there is as yet little work that examines what happens when involvement in public affairs requires women to take action (against powerful men) in defence of their village’s collectively owned natural resources. This paper addresses this knowledge gap using a case study of women’s collective action in defence of the over-exploitation of sand in a village in central China.

**Women and protest in China**

It is widely understood that contestation over the impacts of climate change and the use of natural resources has created a serious governance crisis for those who remain in rural areas (Useche, 2013; Whyte, 2014). While not denying the agency of women (Ullah, 2017), nor the solidarity groups that they have formed (Croll, 1978), the patriarchy that dominates Chinese village committees provides the basic institutional form through which resources are controlled (Iossifies, 1986; Xie, 2016). In terms of traditional understandings about the division of labour in rural China, it is common in farming families for the man to be responsible for work and social interactions outside the home, supported by the woman who is responsible for housework and raising the children (Mu and Walle, 2011). This suggests that when the men leaves to work elsewhere, the women who remain are unfamiliar with community-related affairs and lack the knowledge and skills to replace the men (see Xiao and Hong, 2017, for a discussion of gender differences concerning environmental knowledge). Accordingly, the conventional wisdom is that they face high opportunity costs if they engage in rural public resource management (Nguyen and Locke, 2014). Yet, as Croll (1978) argues, the reality in many villages is that women have always been active outside their homes, particularly in forming ‘solidarity groups’ through which they can support each other:

Although the domestic and political spheres were highly differentiated in rural China and authority was hierarchical and largely in the hands of the male members of the domestic group, women might establish relationships outside their own family and in the women’s community. In village affairs, the women’s community of loose and overlapping groups of women was at its most visible when women of neighbouring peasant households gathered together to wash clothes, perform other domestic chores and talk and exchange information. (Croll, 1978: p.141).

As Croll (1978) goes on to argue, while these solidarity groups might have been primarily related to personal and domestic matters, their existence was recognition that women have the capacity to self-organize to protect themselves from oppression. This is reflected in a significant global body of literature about women and protest in rural development projects, agricultural practices, and natural resources (Baden and Pionetti, 2011; Fischer and Qaim, 2012; Jacka, 2014; Baden, 2013; Yan, 2014). Many of these studies reflect women’s roles in opposing conflict and securing civil rights for women (Noonan, 1995; Mora and Lara, 2015; Hincapié, 2017). Others concentrate more on the empowerment of women through protest, where the subject of the protest is often access to natural resources that are controlled by powerful others (Whyte, 2014). For example, Morgan (2017) notes that the experience of protest enabled women in Indonesia, who had at first opposed permits for the expansion of palm oil plantations, to expand their activities to more active forms of protest. Similarly, Komarudin, at al (2008) showed how rural women joined local men in protesting against developers who threatened the future of their community.

These and many other studies indicate that women take part in rural movements and gender-specific issues when their motivations and capacities correspond. These capacities may come from their own abilities and resources, outside support and opportunities, or collective action (Baden and Pionetti, 2011). Women’s activities improve women’s lives (Manzanera-Ruiz and Lizarraga, 2015), meet their immediate purposes (Pandolfelli et al., 2008), and improve their capacity to be effective actors, including through creating new spaces and roles for women (Baden and Pionetti, 2011). The situation regarding left-behind women is a little different, however, in that their actions are not against men per se, but rather against the oppressive regimes that subjugate them according to both class and gender – something that has been recognised by the Community Party in China for most of the last Century:

Since its founding in 1921 the Communist Party has encouraged the separate organisation of village women on the basis of their special experience of oppression and of the necessity to form an independent power base from which women could conduct their struggle to protect and expand their new rights and opportunities. The special oppression of women which was identified as different from the political, clan and religious oppression they shared with the men of their own social class, distinguished them as a separate social category. The common identity of women was based on the sexual division of labour and the inheritance of an ideology of male supremacy. (Croll, 1978: p.142).

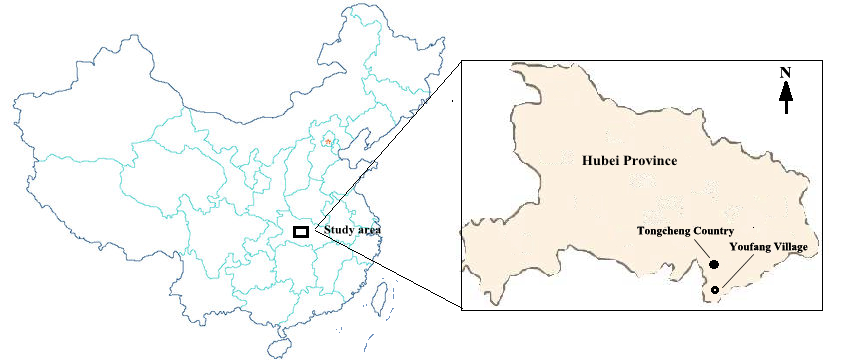
The case of left-behind women in China is thus something of an anomaly in terms of broader work on women’s collective action, because these women have rights to land in their villages (Zhan and Andreas, 2015), even if they themselves move away, and they have broadly equal political status with men. The out-migration of their husbands has also given them more authority as farmers, as well as additional income (Ullah, 2013). However, in common with women in many countries, they lack access to the local political forums in which collective decisions are made, and empowerment to enter these forums, join the debates and share in the decisions that are made about their communities (see Ullah, 2013). Thus, while women are more active in the public realm than many observers realise (Croll, 1978), their exclusion from local politics leaves them marginalised when major land use or other such decisions are made. This marginalization is exacerbated by the difficulty of organizing protest at the grassroots level in China, because de facto it involves challenging social stability and the very fabric of rural life. Thus, any form of collective action by women is both an action against men (the local leaders and decision-makers) and against their own community culture and values (see Du, et al, forthcoming).

In addressing these issues, we have sought to analyse one village community in China where a group of women chose to protest against the proposed exploitation of communally-owned sand resources. Three research questions were posed for the research: what difficulties do left behind women face in mobilizing collective action?; what specific conditions contributed to this particular protest?; and what impact did the protest have on those involved and on the future management of publicly-owned rural natural resources?

# Data generation and study area

Hubei Province is the largest province for labour outflows to the eastern coastal cities of China. According to the official Provincial statistical data, 11.79 million migrants left their hometown in 2013, accounting for 20% of the total provincial population. The site of the research, Youfang Village in the south of Hubei Province (see Figure 1), is a typical ‘hollowed-out’ village in central China (see Li, et al, 2014 for a discussion of the term ‘hollowed out’). There are 28 village groups in the village (each group has its own name which may derive from a pond, a mountain, or a bridge), and 4,122 villagers with an annual average income of 6700 *yuan* per capita (2014). About half of the population has migrated to find employment, leaving behind mainly women, the elderly, and children. Among the 28 village groups, Group One suffers from comparatively greater population migration than the others, with 77 of the 119 villagers now having migrate out to work. Of those 42 villagers left behind, there are 10 men and women above 65 years old, 16 women, five men, and 11 children. The left-behind women have limited education or migrant work experience. They are the main labour force for Group One and they bear the responsibility for agricultural production, the education of their children and parental support.

Figure 1. Location of Youfang village in Hubei Province, China



Group One is located near a river with rich communally-owned sand resources that have never been explored or used; the river is also the source of irrigation for Group One’s farm land. On December 1, 2008, the owner of a local mineral company signed an agreement with the villagers in Group One to obtain the rights to extract the sand for 4 years, at a total price of 11,900 yuan. It was regarded by the members of Group One as a good deal because it provided money for village road construction. However, it turned out that too much sand was extracted, which resulted in a lowering of the water table and serious damage to the farm land and houses adjacent to the river. Consequently, the farmers had to deepen their self-dug wells by approximately one metre per year, to prevent them from drying up, while more and more cracks appeared in the walls of houses located within 100 metres of the river. In addition, clear-cutting bamboo and other trees adjacent to the river, to aid the extraction of the sand, destroyed the flood defences. Since then, flood events have occurred more frequently and violently, damaging the villagers’ businesses and health. After suffering for a long time, many women from Group One decided to take action against the mineral company to prevent it from obtaining a new extraction licence in December 2012, when the original contract expired.

The data for this paper are drawn from a qualitative study that took place in July 2015, approximately 30 months after the licence should have been renewed. The researchers conducted three group discussions with left-behind women, elderly parents, and a few men who work in the country. In all three cases the researchers agreed to visit and talk with villagers when they were enjoying the cool of the evening. These discussions focussed on two open questions: *how did the protest happen?* and *what do you think of the conflict?* In addition to the discussions, we visited the sand extraction sites, the village wells and a number of houses, in order to better understand what had happened.

Fifteen in-depth semi-structured interviews of key persons were also conducted, in the period April to July 2015. Some interviewees were already known to us and the remainder were identified through ‘snowball’ sampling. The primary interviewees were village cadres (Z), sand mine owners (Owner L and Boss C), village group leaders (F and L), and some left behind women. The interview questions included the two group questions above, as well as questions on the interviewee’s attitude to the extraction of sand and to the behaviour and decisions of the left-behind women’s protest. Next, in order to understand the attitude of the village peasant workers towards the women’s protest, we conducted a supplementary interview survey in February 2016, when many of the migrant men returned home to celebrate the Spring Festival.

Finally, this study also draws on information from existing archived papers, including official documents, contract agreements, receipts, letters of appeal, civil litigation, and other similar texts that the researchers collected. The civil litigation book, in particular, contains much specific and accurate information, such as the exact time of events and the official view on rural natural resources.

# Case study of the left-behind women’s protest

## Collective silence on the conflict of overused river-sand resources

In reflecting on the original decision to grant the licence to the mineral extractor, many of those in Group One admit that, at the time, they saw it as an opportunity to raise capital. Indeed, it was described as a ‘win-win’ agreement:

*At that time, they (Group One members), had big problems with raising funds for village road construction, and welcomed my proposal greatly. That evening, they all voted for me unanimously, and praised me for providing timely support. (Owner L, male, 52 years old)*

With the benefit of hindsight, many people could see that the community had suffered a considerable loss, of both public and household interests. Yet there is not record of any villagers trying to stop the extraction, or protest against it, even when the agreement expired in December 2012. One year later, one of the former group leaders said that he found the situation deteriorating out of control and tried to bring the issue to the Village Committee Meeting, but without response. He also tried to organize household meetings to protest, but none supported him. The households comprised mainly women, who felt that they had to face the situation and remained silent. Some of them refused to attend the meeting. Others attended the meeting but kept silent and made no decisions.

*I deliberately chose several days during the Spring Festival for group meetings. Many migrant villagers (men) were aware of the suffering and agreed to take action… However, after the Spring Festival they all left, and the hostess (left-behind woman) gave the lame excuse that she did not care what her husband agreed to. Nothing was changed. (F, male, 59 years old, former group leader)*

## From silence to protest

On May 25, 2014, another (male) member of the village elite (Boss C), got involved. He heard that the extraction agreement had expired and consulted with F, the former group leader, to expressed his willingness to take over the sand resources at a much higher price. F tried to negotiate with the owner L, but was ignored. Shortly afterwards, Boss C drew up a sand extraction contract independently, and put forward the proposal that every villager would receive 800 *yuan*, and the person who signed the contract for his or her household would receive an additional subsidy of 100 *yuan*. Driven by the proposed financial rewards, the left-behind women running the households agreed and signed the agreement with Boss C. However, the original contractor—Owner L tried to obstruct Boss C, who then encouraged the women to take collective action to get him on site. This was the sign for the start of the sand resources protest. As he stated:

*In the process of contracting, he (the original contractor, Owner L) was very arbitrary, blocking me several times ….He threatened me with … gangs, and put me in prison by framing me and bribing the police, so I struck back …. About villagers, I also came up with many ideas and provided various resources. (Boss C, male, 48 years old)*

Having decided to take action in support of Boss C, the women started by voting to have a new group leader. They had found out that their former group leader had received bribes from Owner L, of the first mineral company. In deciding to vote, not only did they assert their right to be part of the political life of the village, but they also succeeded in electing a young and enterprising woman X. Under the leadership of X, they then urged the Village Committee to terminate the original agreement and, when this did not have an effect, they proceeded to damage the sand extraction ships to prevent extraction continuing. The women also sought support from higher levels of government, by protesting to the County Petition Office and the Water Conservancy Bureau. Various strategies were used, including bringing old people and very young children with them. They eventually succeeded in forcing the officials of the Water Conservancy Bureau to declare that the matter would be investigated and dealt with. Woman S reported some of their tactics:

*On the day of [the] petition, I took the lead in ‘flouncing about like a mad woman’, crying, and making trouble in front of so many officials, such as threatening to jump from the county committee building, pulling the clothes of officials …. one woman also brought her grandsons to the office. It was a real mess (for them), with a group of children crying and making trouble…. (I didn’t want to do this, but) Otherwise, I do not know how many times we would have had to petition to make them give [us] a response… ( S in Group One, female, 46 years old)*

However, the petition did not solve any problems. The response of the officers turned out to be a delaying strategy and Owner L continued sand mining as usual. However, through a casual chat with a village cadre’s wife (an example of Croll’s 1978 solidarity group), she was informed that both the Water Conservancy Bureau and the Village Committee were deeply involved with Owner L’s sand extraction business, as shareholders. This further united the women, who then decided to take legal action by suing Owner L in the County Court. At first, they received financial support from Boss C, which included paying for the lawyers. However, the County Court rejected the women’s claim on 31 July 2014. It asserted that the case was beyond civil law regulation as the sand resource belonged to the country and should be handled by administrative authorities in accordance with the law. This provoked Boss C to quit and withdraw his support for the women, while Owner L extended the extraction operation from day time to 24 hours per day after the lawsuit. Owner L also threatened to demand compensation for loss of earnings from the women.

This time, the women were no longer frightened by, or in awe of, the men. Indeed, the situation seemed to inspire them with more anger and courage to fight. Without much mobilization, each household donated 50 *yuan* to hire a lawyer for the Appeal Court. However, because of the complexity of the law and the inappropriate actions of the former group leader, the court finally rejected their appeal. While seemingly the end of the process, the women got a further chance to protest, in March 2015, when the Central Inspection Group (*zhong yang xun shi zu*) decided to review the case. The women were able to hand over all the materials and photos that they had prepared. It turned out to be an effective action, with Owner L forced to stop sand extraction by a higher Government authority.

# The motivations for women’s participation

## Why the left–behind women remained silent

According to the women themselves, many of them did not get involved initially because they regarded the sand resource conflict as a matter for the group leader and village cadres and not connected with themselves. Even if there was any relationship, they thought it was the business of the men and not something that women should be involved with. Three factors were cited to explain the silence and the difficulties of mobilizing the left-behind women.

*(1) Lack of social capital.* Constrained by the rapid migration of their husbands, many of the women fell into what they termed a ‘decision-making panic’ in which they felt unable to act or speak out. This was despite knowing that if they did not act, no-one would. Thus, when faced with the threat of self-dug wells and damage to their houses, they chose to be tolerant and silent. Compared to the male business people involved in the sand extraction, they lacked knowledge and information, social networks, and other resources to participate in the negotiations and eventual conflict. In addition, the women had little finance or time available to use for collective action, as explained by W:

*We are just women who have never been outside the village, compared to Owner L, who is well acquainted with village officials and has a wealth of business experience …. How can we fight with those people (Owner L)…. We chose to be ‘tolerant’ at that time mainly because of fear (W in Group One, female, 52 years old)*

*(2) Lack of respect for the group leader.* While not feeling that it was their place to take action, many of the women thought that their original group leader, F, was not capable of leading the fight against the mineral company. Indeed, they felt that he might undermine their position due to his weak economic position, limited relationship networks, and poor resources, in contrast to L. In her interview, Z talked about F with contempt:

*He (head of group, F) has lived by farming for many years and was incidentally selected to manage our group. He earns less money than my husband does. Why should I follow his words? (Z in Group One, female, 46 years old)*

*(3) High social cost of protecting natural resources.* Gender power imbalances and women’s vulnerabilities include dependence on, or subordination to, men. This may result in a husband’s refusal to allow his wife to engage in natural resource management or a male group’s refusal to allow women in the group to do so, and in women having less voice in agricultural production decisions or community affairs. Therefore, the left-behind women always lacked knowledge of common pool resources, did not realize the economic value of the sand, and thus did not take effective measures to protect it. As Bryceson (2010) explains, in some cases, women, particularly younger women, abandon their interests due to women’s awareness of their secondary claims on agricultural resources (Bryceson, 2010). Given the situation, most of the women thought that, although they would get relatively little money from the deal, it was a waste just to leave the sand where it was, so they might as well let owner L extract it. One villager shared this lack of motivation for protest in the following statement,

*Sand resources belong to the public. Those living near to the river (whose houses are suffering from cracks) have not complained yet, and I do not see the profit [in doing so]. I have no spare time or energy, as I have to take care of my sick parents….Even if I do not (participate), the others will do it. (L in Group One, female, 47 years old).*

## Why the protest started

The initial action to protest against the exploitation of the sand failed. It is important therefore to understand what changed and how the protest was catalysed. To some extent, the women felt that they had no choice but to protest. However, it is apparent that there were contextual factors that played a part in making the protest possible.

*(1) Acquiring social and cultural capital.* One of the key changes between the women’s initial response and their subsequent mobilisation was the interest of Boss C, who used what he termed ‘selective incentive’ resources to stimulate the women’s wish and power to fight. These included providing attractive contracts and high compensatory fees which met the women’s economic demands and interests. This reflects the key role of direct economic incentives in stimulating the women’s early motivation to engage in resistance, but on its own it does not explain how the action started. This was much more associated with the legitimation that the women experienced when Boss C wanted to work with them and encourage them to take action. To this extent it is apparent that the women’s action was catalysed by a powerful man who has been able to ‘gift’ some of his social capital to them, as explained by the new group leader, X:

*All the women in our group may be ‘snobbish’ (shi li yan). At first, we did not worry about this matter and thought it was none of other people’s business. However, if not for his (Boss C) support, including money, social capital and other important information…. I am afraid it [would have remained] a mess … (X, head of Group One, female, 38 years old)*

Although the women were initially organized and supported by Boss C, because they had no experience of protest, they began to devise a variety of strategies that played to their advantage. These included bringing their dependents with them to meetings, which often embarrassed Government officers and helped bring the meetings to a swift and successful conclusion. They also learned – using their skills at building solidarity groups - to acquire information from daily informal conversations with people who had access to useful information. These examples demonstrate that the women were capable of playing a unique role in the protest by acquiring help from external sources as their awareness of effective resistance increased.

*(2) Facing a threat that the women believed required action.* As Liu and Ravenscroft (2016) have argued, for collective action to be initiated there has to be a shared and legitimate understanding of what might happen if action is not taken. This was very much the case, with the women being wary of both the environmental hazards and the potential financial loss if the mineral company pulled out. The women used the words resentment *(yuan)* and anger (*qi*) to describe their emotions leading up to and during the protests. A group of at least ten women felt so strongly and desperately that they took direct action to damage the extraction equipment. This prompted Owner L to threaten that if it happened again he would kill them. This made the women feel that their lives were in danger and that his words trampled on their dignity well beyond what the local community considered acceptable. This legitimised the collective action, for these and other women. For example, one man gave the following reason for the women protesting against Owner L

*In the whole process, his (Owner L) words and behaviour made us very indignant..... My wife said ‘I am old [cannot manage but take more risks), and I’m familiar with him (Owner L)’ [so it’s awkward to show up). (Z, a villager did not participate, male, 53 years old)*

Despite the lack of external resources or support and the eventual withdrawal of Boss C, the accumulation and explosion of resentment and anger made the women realize that other people were unreliable: even their supposed supported, Boss C, sought to maximize his own interests and treated the women as tools to be used. Worse, the women felt Owner L was more insulting to them once they had no help from Boss C. According to X:

*His* *behaviour has become more rampant and sand resources will increasingly be light…. what [does] that mean? It means that our women are weaker than Owner L when there is no help from the outside world, and we should take more risks in the future—[it is] not just [that] the well [will be] dry[but the river may] even break the levees.*

In fact, aside from the behaviour of Owner L, the women worried about the risks and uncertainty about others’ actions. Several women expressed their fear of losing control and power of the sand resource forever, which placed them in an uncertain environment, including destruction to their houses and the levees. They felt they had no rights to decide what happened to their houses and their communities; they believed that this fear and the threat they faced required action and no further concessions, which might produce greater oppression.

*(3) Women's self-development.* The women were not beaten back by repeated failures; indeed, when they had to accept the failure of the lawsuit, they became more united and active. As Baden (2013) notes, women-only groups are an important forum for women to develop skills and confidence, and women’s ability can grow in the process of protest, especially in carrying out specific strategies. This was very much the case with these women, who decided to change their strategy after the failure of the lawsuit. In particular, they changed the focus of the protest, from the dispossession of collective natural resources, to official corruption. Natural resources are in national ownership in rural China and therefore the law could not deal with the issues that the women raised. Once the women understood that this was the case, they switched their focus to the officials and reported the illegal acts of the Water Conservancy Bureau and the village committee to the County Commission for Discipline Inspection. One women explained it in this way:

*Since the sand resources are state-owned, now we pay more attention to the issue of collusion between officials and businessmen rather than sand mining. So on 27 October 2014 we reported to the County Commission for Discipline Inspection and asked them to investigate the illegal sand mining that the Water Conservancy Bureau and the Village Committee had issued. (C in Group One, female, 45 years old)*

There is no doubt that collective action improved the women’s access to official and legal information and helped them to understand and deploy informal ways of gaining society’s attention. They started to use all kinds of traditional and new media, with a clear understanding that media and the internet play a vital role in promoting collective action, improving the chances of success and even leading to unexpectedly good results. The women denounced rural conflict and official corruption many times on City Ethos Hotline, a well-known TV station in the local area. The women also learned to seize political opportunities, such as the visit by the County Inspection Group:

*We were told by others working in the city that the Central Inspection Group* *was coming to our County and we decided to seize this opportunity. We prepared many materials, went to visit the Inspection Group individually, then got together, and handed over the complaint paper. Finally, we got a temporary victory. (X, head of Group One, female, 38 years old)*

# The characteristics of the left-behind women’s protest

Many studies have shown that women are often limited by multiple barriers, including gender roles and a lack of necessary skills (e.g. knowledge and information, social networks, and mobility) or confidence, all of which may affect their ability or willingness to engage in collective action (Pandolfelli et al., 2007). It is evident from this study that women can, in the right circumstances, overcome these constraints in order to develop a capacity for collective resistance that builds on the skills that they do have, particularly in terms of solidarity and communication. As the research indicates, the primary motivating force in this transformation was a realisation that their families and property were in danger and that if they did not act, no-one else would. Indeed, it was clear to them from quite early on that even their own husbands and other migrant men were no longer so willing to take action.

In taking action, the women recognised that they were challenging the cultural norms of rural China, in which women’s participation in collective affairs was limited compared with men’s. This status quo prompted the women to be more tolerant than men, and not to look for trouble (Jordan, 2005; Zhang, 2003) This created multiple difficulties for the women in the early stages of the protest, in having to challenge the cultural norms while at the same time working out how to organise collective action. This meant that many women remained silent until it was clear that the protest would, to some degree at least, be legitimated by others – principally the powerful men. However, once they had overcome the initial constraints, the women found that they could self-organize and that they had talents that were unique to them. In particular, they were more empowered with emotional factors regardless of winning or losing, and thus could form a powerful group with formidable internal bonds and a strong fighting spirit. They would never give up before achieving the goal, while on the opposite side, the much more powerful man, Boss C, accepted his failure easily when he rationally considered the future chance of winning. An older person in Group 1 shared what she saw and heard:

*Because of the unsuccessful lawsuit, Woman B complained that their long struggle* *finally resulted in nothing but a lawsuit failure. Group head X was so angry, and complaining with other women that she also made great efforts just for the purpose of protecting the embankment to avoid it bursting in the future … Later, being mollified by other women, woman B cleared up her complaints and the women’s group become more united. (H, Group 1, female. 63 years old)*

This reflection indicates the flexibility of the women in understanding the situation and making the bet of it. As Mudege, et al (2015) have argued, compared to men’s action strategies, which rely on physical strength, women tend to be more emotional and flexible. For example, they cried and yelled when they were ignored by County government officers, and adopted the strategy of the weak, such as playing the fool in front of rampant Owner L, and by taking the very old and very young children with them to the governmental offices. When they finally knew that the lawsuit was the wrong way, they were smart enough to shift the focus to official and village cadres’ corruption in the sand mining.

# The outcome of the women’s protest

## Promoting women’s abilities and empowerment

Even though many studies have explored the group motivation and gender relations that foster effective protest, the outcomes, such as how the protest changed individuals and rural society, are widely ignored. This research suggests that these broad outcomes were, quite possibly, more significant than whether or not the exploitation of the natural resources was brought under control. In particular, many women spoke of recognising that not only could they participate in the political life of the village, but also that they could be effective in their participation. As a result, their willingness to engage in the public sphere grew little by little, in areas such as empowerment, expressing their interests, and fighting for their rights. The suggests that a significant change took place, from indifference and non-participation at the beginning of the action, to the initial expression of their interests as the protest mounted, to more strategic tactics at the end. For some women at least this was not a surprise – they knew that they could challenge men in the public realm – but for the village community itself it was a new phenomenon that had previously been neglected or at least underestimated.

It was widely recognised that the start that, because of their absence from ‘resistance’ or public events, few of the women had the experience and ability to deal with natural resource conflicts; they therefore appeared weaker than men in the public sphere (Caulfield, 2011). However, once the resistance began, the women proved to be flexible, and learnt to improve themselves through daily events, strengthen their ability to engineer themselves into formerly male spaces that contain multiple risks for women participants, and finally become sufficiently strong to control matters by women alone. Through this process, the women learnt many action strategies and accumulated much resistance experience. As their strategies became increasingly professional and diversified, they become more confident and maintained a watch for another opportunity to fight, even after the initial failure of their action. When asked what had changed in their ability to participate in protest in her own village, one of the women explained:

*I was afraid of him (Owner L) for his power at the beginning and worried about my safety. Now, I am not so afraid after several encounters with him and the things I have experienced - cutting sand ropes; violent threats; getting in touch with the police, county officials, and lawyers … If I* *were injured, I would stay in his house to the end. (Woman Q, female, 43 years old)*

One of the key outcomes identified by the women was the establishment of broader horizons and greater gender equality in awareness about the world outside of their families and marriages. This took many forms, but included a heightened awareness of the economic and environmental values of collectively-owned natural resources. The women also gained a much clearer understanding of the problems of exploiting resources, as well as the ways in which regulations could be used to manage the resources in more sustainable ways. They gradually learned to connect the natural resources with rural development:

*The shoal bank shouldn’t have been sold. We have to bear great losses … for such little money. We are going to do it by ourselves if possible, so that we don’t need to work outside our village. (X, head of Group One, female, 38 years old)*

Thus, looking ahead, a women-only group as a form of collective action for natural resource conflict has the potential to be used as a tool to foster the fight against gender inequality in rural development. For instance, this approach to collective action has the potential to foster greater equity by engaging women in collective natural resource management. Consequently, it will become more difficult for the village elite (usually men) to capture the common opportunities and benefits that should be available to all. In a sense, the protest has greatly enhanced the women’s right to express their voice and have the opportunity to engage in public affairs. They have recognized their ability to make a difference to the men’s groups and the village, expressed their voice in public to the community, and reduced the likelihood of public resource conflicts in the future. Although the women’s collective action resistance cannot be regarded as leading to an equitable result, at least it drew public attention to issues that might increase the possibility of equality of participation.

# Conclusion: the influence of women’s collective action on natural resource management

Although tragedies have undoubtedly occurred, it is also obvious that for thousands of years people have self-organized to manage common-pool resources, and users often do devise long-term, sustainable institutions for governing these resources (Ostrom, et al, 1999: p.278)

This quote, from Elinor Ostrom and colleagues, sums up the position in Youfang Village: a tragedy of the commons (in Hardin’s 2009 terms) has occurred, but it has eventually been brought under control by a group of women self-organising to tackle the problem. As yet, this collective action has not fostered a suitable institution for the governance of the sand and other natural resources, but in many ways those involved presume that this will emerge from the current village institutions as long as they can now participate more fully in the cultural and political life of the village.

What the case of Youfang Village also demonstrates is that the collective action that was undertaken by the women was consistent many similar self-organised collective actions that have been undertaken in many parts of the world (van Zommeren, et al, 2008). In this case the women perceived there to be an injustice, in terms of the way in which the sand was extracted and the way in which the powerful men assumed that the women would not object. The subsequent actions of the men (Owner L, Boss C and many of the migrant men) confirmed to the women that their action was a legitimate response to the injustice. Through this combination of injustice and efficacy, the women began to develop a new collective social identity in their own right. This was as villagers who are active in the public and political life of the village and who are not afraid to stand up for their beliefs and rights, despite living in a culture in which they are expected to remain at home and defer to men (see Chant and Ernst, 2008, for a discussion of the epistemic conditions for collective action).

Before the urbanization of China, and in the absence of a formal governmental structure at the local level, rural public goods were often provided collectively. Management of these public goods was reliant on voluntary participation by local people (men) and a strong community-based control mechanism predicated on equality of access for all (see Fujiie, et al, 2005). This was most notably the case for agricultural lands, water, and forests (Liu et al., 2016; McCarthy and Kilic, 2015; Liu and Ravenscroft, 2016). As Knox noted, natural resource management is a natural fit for collective action because most natural resources have ‘spill-over’ effects that need action at scale (Knox McCulloch, et al, 1998). In the context of rapid urbanization, there have been many changes to traditional community mechanisms. The greater utilization – or exploitation - of collective natural resources is prominent among these changes in rural areas. The widespread rural migration to urban areas, mainly by young men, led to the dismantling of many traditional community mechanisms and, with them, many of the customary ways of managing natural resources. This vacuum in governance has been widely exploited, with natural resources variously brought under private control, overused, or abandoned, with little supervision from the government or the community (see Liu and Ravenscroft, 2016, for an example of the exploitation of forests).

What characterises all these situations is a lack of suitable institutional governance structures allied to unsuitable conditions for new collective action to emerge (see Ostrom, et al, 1999). However, as in other parts of the world, the emergence of the women’s protest has changed this, and may provide a new approach to community and natural resource governance in rural China. At the core of this new approach are women who self-identify as empowered, capable and resourceful community members who have a major stake in the future social, environmental and financial health of their community. By organizing around the allocation and control of natural resources in this way, the value of collective efforts to solve a common problem is maximized, which undoubtedly changes the perceptions of women’s roles within the community, as a local worker explained:

*Those women and my wife look very docile. I’ve never thought they could make ‘trouble’ (naoshi). Although finally we haven’t got any compensation or clear answer, at least we have saved the sand resources. (H, peasant worker in Group One, male, 47 years old)*

It also provides a new approach to rural community governance in the context of rapid urbanization. Our research into the recent hollowing-out of the rural population in China demonstrates that this process has prompted women to become involved in women-only collective action. Left-behind women had a significant influence on their husbands who work outside the village, forced local authorities to pay more attention to them, and challenged the gender perceptions that placed them at the margin of the benefits of village governance. This action may help to break down gender stereotypes and the historical perception that women’s status is at the margins of community management. The increasing absence of men from village community governance has created weak governance with a ‘vacuum*’* at its heart. Women are required urgently to take up the functions of decision-making and governance. This has created the opportunity for women to express their demands, break down gender roles, and take part in village governance as a remedial mechanism as well as a new path. One village officer shared his perception of community governance and women’s participation in the following way:

*This event is beyond our expectation, and women in this group are stubborn, which has really refreshed my understanding…. it seems that we should give [them] more chances to engage in our community in the future. (Z, the village secretary, male, 58 years old)*

Although women were traditionally excluded from public activities and marginalized, it does not mean that they have no motivation to protest nor that they cannot take collective action. As this research has shown, when empowered, the left behind women were able to mobilize, and played a key role in the collective action, which halted the exploitation of the sand. They showed strong gender characteristics in the protest. While initially adopting many standard approaches to governance, the women learned and adapted soft strategies that played to their strengths, thereby gaining attention while avoiding the risk of violent conflict. In addition, the left behind women showed incredible endurance and courage to continue their action regardless of the setbacks that they experienced. Their capabilities grew rapidly and managed to gain more and more support inside and outside the village.

The social standing of the left behind women is of great significance. The ongoing rapid urbanization continuously drives the young and, in particular, men to urban areas, leaving vacancies in the traditional management institutions in most rural areas, which has led to various social, economic and political problems. Until recently there was grave concern about who would fill the governance gap. As this study has shown, the left behind women - the largest population group living in many rural areas - have proved to be an option. However, it should not be ignored that most of these women, due to their historical marginalization in rural public affairs, lack suitable knowledge, skills and resources for collective action and the governance of natural resources. Addressing this, to ensure that more women can play a role in local resource and community governance, will require long term action by governments and civil society institutions.

# References

Knox McCulloch, A., Meinzen-Dick, R. and Hazell, P. 1998. *Property rights, collective action, and technologies for natural resource management: a conceptual framework*. SP-PRCA Working Paper No. 1. Washington, D.C. International Food Policy Research Institute.

Baden, S. 2013. Women's collective action in African agricultural markets: the limits of current development practice for rural women's empowerment: *Gender & Development* 21(2): 295-311.

Baden, S. and Pionetti, C. 2011. *Women’s collective action in agricultural markets. Synthesis of preliminary findings from Ethiopia, Mali, and Tanzania*. Oxford: Oxfam UK.

Bryceson D.F. 2010. The proletarianization of women in Tanzania. In: Turshen M. (ed) *African women*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York

Caulfield, T., 2011, Logics of empowerment: development, gender, and governance in neoliberal India. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 18: 431-437.

Chant, S.R. and Ernst, Z. 2008. The epistemic conditions for collective action. *Mind* 117(476): 549-573.

Croll, E.J. 1978. Female solidarity groups as a power base in rural China. *Sociologia Ruralis* 18(2-3): 140-157.

Du, Y., Liu, P., Ravenscroft, N. and Su, S. (forthcoming) Changing community relations in southeast China: the role of Guanxi in rural environmental governance. Submitted to *Agriculture & Human Values*

Fischer, E., and M. Qaim, 2012, Gender, agricultural commercialization, and collective action in Kenya. *Food Security* 4: 441-453.

Fujiie, M., Hayama, Y. and Kikuchi, M. 2005. The conditions of collective action for local commons management: the case of irrigation in the Philippines. *Agricultural Economics* 33: 179-189.

Hardin, G. 2009. The tragedy of the commons. *Journal of Natural Resources Policy Research* 1(3): 243-253.

Hincapié, S. 2017. Acción colectiva de las mujeres y derechos humanos en México: movilizando el dolor en medio del conflicto armado. *Estudios Socio-Jurídicos, 19*(2), 97-127.

Iossifies, A. M., 1986, Women in rural China - policy towards women before and after the cultural revolution. *Journal of Peasant Studies* 13: 292-294.

Jacka, T. 2014. Left-behind and vulnerable? Conceptualising development and older women's agency in rural China. *Asian Studies Review* 38: 186-204.

Jordan, L. P., 2005. Gender and governance. *Contemporary Sociology: A Journal of Reviews* 34: 535-536.

Komarudin, H., Siagian, Y. and Colfer, C. 2008. *Collective action to secure property rights for the poor: a case study in Jambi province, Indonesia*. CAPRi Working Paper No. 90. Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute.

Lee, H., 2014. Revolution forgotten: market reforms and left-behind women in rural China: *Journal of Korean Women's Studies* 30: 1-33.

Li, Y., Liu, Y., Long, H. and Cui, W. 2014. Community-based rural residential land consolidation and allocation can help to revitalize hollowed villages in traditional agricultural areas of China: evidence from Dancheng County, Henan Province. *Land Use Policy* 39: 188–198.

Liu, P. and Ravenscroft, N. 2016. Collective action in China’s recent collective forestry property rights reform. *Land Use Policy* 59: 402-411.

Liu, P., Ravenscroft, N., Harder, M.K. and Dai, X. 2016. The knowledge cultures of changing farming practices in a water town of the Southern Yangtze Valley, China. *Agriculture and Human Values* 33(2): 291-304

McCarthy, N., and T. Kilic, 2015. The nexus between gender, collective action for public goods and agriculture: evidence from Malawi. *Agricultural Economics* 46: 375-402.

Manzanera-Ruiz, R., and C. Lizarraga, 2015, Motivations and effectiveness of women's groups for tomato production in Soni, Tanzania. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 17(1): 1-17.

Meinzen-Dick, R., DiGregorio, M. and McCarthy, N. 2004. Methods for studying collective action in rural development. *Agricultural Systems* 82: 197-214.

Meng, X.D. 2014. *Feminization of agricultural production in rural China: a sociological analysis.* PhD diss., Wageningen University.

Mora, M.L.S. and Lara, Z.R. 2015. Acciones colectivas de las organizaciones de mujeres por la paz en Colombia. *Revista de Paz y Conflictos* 8(2): 149-177.

Morgan, M., 2017. Women, gender and protest: contesting oil palm plantation expansion in Indonesia: *Journal of Peasant Studies* 44(6): 1177-1196.

Mu, R. and Walle, D. 2011. Left behind to farm? Women's labor re-allocation in rural China. *Labour Economics* 18: S83-S97.

Mudege, N.N., Nyekanyeka, T., Kapalasa, E., Chevo, T. and Demo, P. 2015. Understanding collective action and women's empowerment in potato farmer groups in Ntcheu and Dedza in Malawi. *Journal of Rural Studies* 42: 91-101.

National Bureau of Statistics of People’s Republic of China 2015

Nguyen, M.T.N. and Locke, C. 2014 Rural-urban migration in Vietnam and China: gendered householding, production of space and the state. *Journal of Peasant Studies* 41: 855 - 876.

Noonan, R.K. 1995. Women against the State: political opportunities and collective action frames in Chile's transition to democracy. *Sociological Forum* 10(1): 81-111.

Ostrom, E., Burger, J., Field, C.B., Norgaard, R.B., Policansky, D., 1999. Revisiting the commons: local lessons, global challenges. *Science* 284 (5412), 278–282.

Oxfam (2013) *Women’s collective action: unlocking the potential of agricultural markets*. An Oxfam International Research Report. Oxford. Oxfam UK.

Pandolfelli, L., Meinzen-Dick, R. and Dohrn, S. 2007. *Gender and collective action: a conceptual framework*. CAPRi Working Paper No.64, Washington, D.C., International Food Policy Research Institute.

Pandolfelli, L., Meinzen-Dick, R. and Dohrn, S. 2008. Gender and collective action: motivations, effectiveness and impact: *Journal of International Development* 20: 1-11.

Ullah, A.K.M.A. 2013. Male migration and ‘left-behind’ women: bane or boon? *Environment and Urbanization ASIA* 8(1): 59-73.

Useche, P. 2013. Collective action in common pool resource management, including heterogeneity of opportunities and exit options. *Natural Resources* 4: 483-489.

van Zomeren, M., Postmes, T. and Spears, R. 2008. Toward an integrative social identity model of collective action: A quantitative research synthesis of three socio-psychological perspectives. *Psychological Bulletin* 134 (4): 504–535.

Whyte, K.P. 2014. Indigenous women, climate change impacts, and collective action. *Hypatia* 29(3): 599-616.

Wu, H. and J. Ye. 2016. Hollow lives: women left behind in rural China. *Journal of Agrarian Change* 16: 50-69.

Xiao, C. and Hong, D. 2017. Gender differences in concerns for the environment among the Chinese public: an update. *Society and Natural Resources* 30(6): 782-788.

Xie, L. 2016. Environmental governance and public participation in rural China. *China Information* 30: 188-208.

Yan, C. 2014. Study on status and influencing factors of rural left behind women's physical exercise. *Advances in Social Science Education and Humanities Research* 6: 100-102.

Ye, J.Z., He, C.Z. and Pan, L. 2014. *Double coercion: gender exclusion and inequality in rural left behind population.* Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press.

Ye, J., Wu, H., Rao, J., Ding, B. and Zhang, K. 2016. Left-behind women: gender exclusion and inequality in rural-urban migration in China. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 43(4): 910-941.

Zhan, S. and Andreas, J. 2015. *Beyond the countryside: Hukou reform and agrarian capitalism in China*. Conference Paper No. 7. Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development, Chiang Mai University, 5-6 June, 2015.

Zhang, H. X. 2003. Gender difference in inheritance rights: observations from a Chinese village. *Journal of Peasant Studies* 30(3-4): 252 - 277.

Zheng, Z. and Xie, Z. 2004. *Migration and rural women’s development*. Beijing: Social Sciences Press.

Zhou, W., Yan, X. and Liu, Z. 2002. *Living at the margin: migrant families.* Shijiazhuang: People’s Press of Hebei Province.

1. Corresponding author. Contact: Pyliu@fudan.edu.cn [↑](#footnote-ref-1)