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Gender and Power in China's Environmental Turn: A Case Study of Three Women-Led Initiatives

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Abstract: The Chinese authorities have formulated a vision for the global future that it terms 'ecological civilization' (*shengtai wenming* 生态文明). It was introduced into Communist Party ideology in 2007 and endorsed by Xi Jinping in 2013 as a major framework for the country's environmental policies. During the 2000s, the government set in motion many stricter environmental regulations and targets in line with this vision, including opening up some new room for bottom-up, volunteer-driven initiatives mostly on waste collection, recycling, education, and sustainable agriculture. At the same time, it calls for more participation of women in environmental governance at grassroots levels. Surveys in different parts of the world, including China, have suggested that women tend to be more concerned with environmental issues than men, but we have few qualitative studies in China of this topic. This article details three case studies in which women have initiated environmental projects in their local communities. They have mobilized other women (and some men) to engage in collective action, and they have generated financial and symbolic resources for their projects. We analyse these cases and argue that by raising the status of environmental issues such as waste collection and recycling, previously often downplayed as "women's affairs", China's environmental turn has helped expand the space available for female subjectivities and participation in public activities. However, this expanding role has not translated into better representation or participation of women at higher levels of political authority beyond the village level, and the emerging female environmental subjectivities remain firmly based in existing political hierarchies and male-dominated structures.

Keywords: environmental agency; China; ecological civilization; gender and power; environmentalism



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1. Introduction

In the fall of 2019, one of China's few elected female village heads (*cunzhang* 村长) took us on a victory lap through a village that had been transformed into a model "pollution-free village" (*ling wuran cun* 零污染村). The trip was co-organized with the county's Ecology and Environment Bureau (EEB), and we were not the first, nor the last, group of Chinese and foreign scholars to be presented with the village head's enthusiastic display of what amounted to a combination of local environmental work, skilful political adaptation, mediation between local residents, and organized propaganda. The village had, in recent years, been cleaned up to look neat and tidy, and it appeared both modern and well-preserved at the same time. Recycling systems had been automatized, and the pride of the village was a new concrete building that housed a museum and a large communal heater meant to speed up the process of composting the villagers' waste. Selected houses were decorated with plaques engraved with the words "pollution-free family", a designation given to households that had excelled at recycling waste or keeping the village clean. It was a model village in the true Communist Party sense of the word (Thøgersen 2011; Ahlers and Schubert 2013).

Hundreds of kilometres away, a retired female official had returned to her native village to try and engage her fellow villagers—most of whom were of the same age group

as herself—to recycle, compost, and forgo the use of chemical fertilizers when farming. A much-publicized model village in Beijing had inspired her to set up her own project, which involved encouraging villagers to recycle their waste and use their kitchen waste to produce enzymes that could replace chemical fertilizers. The aim was to sustain the environment while encouraging more physically active and mentally healthy lifestyles among rural residents.

These female leaders belong to an undefined group of women in China who have seized opportunities to initiate or lead local environmental activities, often drawing on existing government structures, and personal resources and contacts. Research from other parts of the world has shown that women and younger people with post-materialist values tend to be more concerned than men with environmental degradation and the consequences of climate change (e.g., McCright et al. 2016; Sundström and McCright 2014; Sovacool et al. 2019; del Mar Alonso-Almeida 2013). Eco-feminism has emerged as an ethics pointing to linked structural oppression of women and other marginalized groups, including animals and plants (e.g., Warren 1994; Gaard 2001). Also in China, we observe a tendency for women to be more concerned about climate change and environmental destruction than men (Liu et al. 2020; Liu and Mu 2016; Lou 2017; Lee and Han 2015). A 2019 research report from the Ministry of Ecology and Environment highlighted a survey which even suggested that women also performed better than men when protecting their immediate environment. They were more likely to collect waste, recycle, and repair, and not to waste food or throw plastic into nature (Meijing Net 2019).

In this article, we use three ethnographic case studies to show examples of what motivates women in China today to take leadership of local environmental projects. We ask if China's strengthened environmental policies and ideology may help empower women who have long been concerned with environmental destruction, and, not least, what the limits are to such empowerment. In general, China has seen a well-documented upsurge in popular engagement with environmental issues (Xu 2014; Hansen and Liu 2018; Liu and Goodnight 2016; Johnson and Fürst 2022; Wong 2016; van Rooij 2010; Li and Shapiro 2020; Steinhardt and Wu 2016). It is perhaps then not surprising that we also find an increasing number of cases where women have initiated and taken charge of local collective environmental activities. In addition to the two cases of female environmental leadership introduced above, we present as a third case the Buddhist organization Tzu Chi, which originated in Taiwan in 1966 (Weller et al. 2018; Huang 2009; Madsen 2008; Tzu Chi 2018). Tzu Chi began its relief projects in China already in 1991. Following the Sichuan earthquake in 2008, it was formally registered as an international NGO with the name of The Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation. Its Chinese headquarters are located in the city of Suzhou with an increasing number of branches in other parts of the country. In the Tzu Chi Foundation in China, most volunteers are women, many of whom supplement the organization's traditional work of charity and disaster relief with new environmental and climate change related activities and education.

For the last decade, the Chinese government has taken a remarkable ideological turn from an almost exclusive privileging of economic development to embracing the ideology and vision of environmental sustainability. In Chinese terminology, this vision was already in the 1980s introduced as 'ecological civilization' (*shengtai wenming* 生态文明). As a civilization narrative, it seeks to uphold the moral legitimacy of the party, shaping a unified national identity and guiding an imagination of the future (Dynon 2008; Schmitt 2018; Geall and Ely 2018; Hansen et al. 2018; Marinelli 2018). Today, ecological civilization serves as an umbrella for strengthened environmental policies and regulations, the promotion of more public participation in environmental management, and the raising of environmental consciousness (Delman 2018; Ahlers and Shen 2018; Li and Shapiro 2020; Zeng 2019).

Official Chinese documents have explicitly expressed the ambition to include more women in this work. For instance, the official guidelines on "Modern Environmental Governance" issued from the central authorities in 2020, first emphasize the need for everyone to ideologically adhere to "Xi Jinping's thoughts on ecological civilization", and

then, in further concrete calls to local authorities, highlight the need to engage social organizations such as the Women's Federation to "vigorously mobilize *all workers and employees, young people and women*" to participate in local environmental governance (our italics). Unlike women, men as a category is not mentioned—they are simply part of "all workers and employees" ([Chinese Government's Official Web Portal 2020](#)). Furthermore, in the "Chinese Women's Development Guideline (2021–2030)" published by the State Council in 2021, it is emphasized that women should play a leading role as promoters and practitioners of a "green, low-carbon, recycling and sustainable lifestyle" (*lüse, ditan, xunhuan, kechixu de shenghuo fangshi* 绿色, 低碳, 循环, 可持续的生活方式) and that they should take part in environmental governance ([The State Council of People's Republic of China 2021](#)). The party-state is consciously trying to integrate the aim of improving environmental governance with its stated goal of gender equity.

However, it is very challenging for women to navigate a hierarchical and authoritarian political system that remains firmly dominated by patriarchal structures, is actively shrinking the room for feminist voices, and after decades of strict birth control policies is now calling on women to give birth to more children as a duty to the nation ([Fincher 2018](#); [Griffiths and Wang 2018](#)). The processes of carving out space for women's initiatives and leadership of environmental projects under these demanding political and social circumstances deserve more attention. The cases discussed in the following constitute examples of how women initiate new and creative bottom-up environmental projects that are able to generate symbolic, financial, and political support. They also show that when projects become so successful that higher levels of government wish to scale them up, the women in charge come to serve, first of all, as valuable political symbols of successful rural model female citizens. This form of female "participation" in governance has an impact in the local community, but does not necessarily result in inclusion in political decision making above the local level in which these women operate.

In an article from 2008, Jude Howell discussed the quantity and quality of women's political participation in China. She concluded with some interesting reflections regarding the future possibilities of increased gender equality and female political participation. [Howell \(2008, p. 73\)](#) emphasized the importance of the official ideology of gender equality, which has roots dating back to the earliest years of the Communist Party, as a pillar of support and justification for female political participation. Writing 12 years later, the institutionalized ideological support for gender equality remains a resource that women can draw on to justify their actions to carve out space for more social and political influence. However, this has not translated into more actual equal female participation in political leadership. In 2019, only 24 percent of the National People's Congress were women; furthermore, there was only one woman among the ten members of the state council, and there were no women at all in the Politburo. China has a very long way to go to reach gender equality in political representation at higher levels of authority ([Department of Social, Science, Technology and Cultural Statistics, National Bureau of Statistics 2020](#)). The figures are not much better at the grassroots level. In 2011, only 11 percent of elected village heads were women, and by 2018 the proportion had remained unchanged. Female representation in village committees was 23 percent in 2011 ([Department of Social, Science and Technology and Cultural Statistics, National Bureau of Statistics 2014, p. 111](#)) and had only risen to 24 percent by 2018 ([Department of Social, Science, Technology and Cultural Statistics, National Bureau of Statistics 2020, p. 127](#)).

At the grassroots level, the assignment of specific tasks to elected village committee members has also long been gendered, with men in charge of village resource and financial management, and women tasked with enforcing family planning, mediating domestic conflicts, organizing cultural events, and taking charge of waste collection ([He and Lang 2001](#); [Howell 2008](#); [Lu 2020](#)). Research has also shown how female cadres, for instance in the Women's Federation and in village committees, struggle with gendered constraints in both the private and political spheres ([Zhou 2019](#); [Song 2017, 2018](#)). Nevertheless, in recent decades, many women have manifested themselves as citizens working actively to defend

their rights to, for instance, village wealth and land use (He 2005; Sargeson 2012, p. 41). Relating to debates about political participation and female agency (Pham 2013; Burke 2012), we show in this article how the official gender ideology of the Communist Party, in combination with the much more recent emphasis on the implementation of environmental policies, may help to create room for women to initiate and engage in—sometimes also take leadership of—local environmental projects. We explore the possibilities women have for initiating and leading environmental activities and projects, and we discuss the limitations they encounter.

2. Fieldwork

Our analysis draws on combined experiences conducting long-term ethnographic fieldwork in rural China since the late 1980s, and more recent fieldwork since 2013 on environmental issues. Over our past recent years of joint research (2018–2021), we have, individually and together, interviewed and talked informally with more than one hundred women in rural and urban areas, mostly in the province of Zhejiang, about their views and experiences of pollution and environmental degradation. The three case studies discussed below centre around two villages in Zhejiang and the faith-based foundation Tzu Chi's activities in China, also mainly in Zhejiang. Qualitative research at these sites and in the organization was conducted between 2019 and 2021 during several visits, and was followed up with online communication and interviews. In Riverbend Village¹ of case 1, we had four longer formal interviews and a larger number of informal talks with the female village head, Ms. Xi. We conducted longer interviews with two township and county officials, joined three focus group meetings, two with county and township officials, government-affiliated institutes, and NGOs, the other with female villagers and the village head. We have carried out participant observation, including many informal conversations, during four shorter visits to Riverbend, and we have continued online communication with the village head and other locals since then.

In Mountainside Village of case 2, one of us undertook participant observation for more than three months, including interviews and informal conversations with the female leaders, village committee cadres, higher municipal levels of governmental officials and, of course, villagers. For case 3 on the Tzu Chi Foundation, we visited the headquarters and three other branches. We interviewed and had informal conversations with 13 of its members, participated in one of their garbage recycling activities in an urban neighbourhood, and joined several reading seminars.

Additional data relevant for all case studies come from governmental portals and homepages of relevant organizations, from written documents, pamphlets, reports, and prepared presentations from project leaders. In addition to onsite fieldwork, we have, since 2018, talked to environmental bureau staff at the county and provincial levels, with staff and directors of two Environmental NGOs (ENGO) involved in projects in one of the fieldsite areas, and with many villagers and ENGO volunteers not directly involved in any of these projects but engaged in the issues and with in-depth knowledge of the social, environmental, and political local conditions in China.

3. Case 1: Breaking the Glass Ceiling

Although China has more than 600,000 administrative villages, only 11 percent of village heads in 2018 were female. Ms. Xi stood out as one of the few. After marrying into an influential family of party secretaries and civil servants from Riverbend Village, she settled with her husband in the nearby county capital. However, after their urban house was appropriated in 2016, Ms. Xi decided to become more engaged in the Riverbend community. She had studied hotel management and now planned to turn the family's house in the village into a hostel: "I did not belong to the rural area. I did not study [hotel management] to become a village cadre, and I had never dreamed of running for [election as] village cadre. Who would ever think of being a village cadre?!" Like so many Chinese women who lack the opportunity or self-confidence to try to participate in governance

(Guo et al. 2009, p. 161; Wang and Dai 2013, p. 104), Ms. Xi had no political ambitions when she first returned to the village.

However, with her entrepreneurial spirit, private wealth, and, not least, the backing of a large politically influential family with members who had served as local civil servants and township Party secretaries, she started to see the potential in promoting the village as a social model and as a tourist attraction, based in the government's much-publicized call for rural revitalization and better environmental management. Ms. Xi was explicit in conversations with us about the advantages she saw being "a female cadre. She argued that the combination of her gender and personal concern for pollution and the environment would help secure support and funding for her project from various levels of government that needed to prove that they were working hard to solve China's environmental problems, while also engaging more women in this work.

Ms. Xi contacted different departments in the township government to raise funds for a larger village project. First, however, she and her family lent around 350,000 Yuan (52,000 USD) of their own money to the village committee to immediately start building parking lots and renovating the village. Ms. Xi coordinated visits from village leaders and party officials who were studying examples of "model villages" of environmental management in the province. To ready her own village for the next step of her plan, she established a working group of volunteers consisting mainly of party members and previous committee members from her village. These volunteers started picking garbage from the streets and persuading other villagers to use pens rather than raising their poultry free-range. This, the argument went, would create a cleaner and more environmentally friendly village. A county-level ENGO, initiated by a senior cadre in the county's Ecology and Environment Bureau (EEB), came to the village to teach about best practices for carrying out garbage sorting. Ms. Xi, along with a group of mainly female villagers, joined one of the courses and agreed to expand Riverbend Village's efforts.

The ball was rolling, but there were bumps in the road. By 2018, the village had become an official pilot project for improving "rural environmental management," and the government had invested more than 10 million Yuan in the village. However, some villagers strongly resisted Ms. Xi's plans for change. They voiced fierce complaints about the fast-moving campaign to tear down old buildings and toilets, pave old roads, and alter their familiar sewage system. When recollecting this challenging period, Ms. Xi presented us with a series of slides aimed to visually demonstrate what she experienced as a dramatic alteration: The "before" pictures showed villagers' faces with very angry expressions, while the "after" pictures suggested a full transformation towards joyful, cooperative, and gratefully smiling participants in the village project. According to Ms. Xi, the general mood changed due to continuous dialogue with the villagers, and the gradually more visible results of the project. From being described by Ms. Xi and other representatives of government and ENGOs as a "dirty, chaotic, and miserable" (*zang, luan, cha* 脏, 乱, 差) village, Riverbend was now modernized in the idealized image of the Communist Party's civilizing state. In our conversations with villagers, the same change of mood was described, but due to the increasingly high political profile of the village's anti-pollution project it is not very likely that villagers who would still be critical to the project would dare to voice their protest to us, or even find it relevant to do so.

The jewel in the crown of Ms. Xi's initiatives was the official launching in 2019 of Riverbend as a so-called "pollution-free village", a term that was inspired by a report from the United Nations Environment Program in 2017 on the idea of "a pollution-free planet" (UNEP 2017). Riverbend was now a pilot project under the wings of the government's rural revitalization strategy to promote better environmental governance and rural development. It was also a designated model pollution-free village administered by the county-level EEB, co-sponsored by several public and private funds and institutions, and promoted by a "private non-enterprise unit" (*minban feiqiye danwei* 民办非企业单位) which was initiated and led by an official at the provincial level. The village had become a government showcase for rural development and environmental protection, from the county level up to

the central one. This is an illustrative example of how intertwined networks, overlapping economic and political positions, and family connections are essential to such initiatives.

This kind of political-socio-economic networking is very familiar in China, but one easily overlooked dimension is the role of gender. In the case of Riverbend Village, the environmental initiatives were facilitated by a female village head who were able to draw upon resources made available partly due to her gender. Ms. Xi argued herself that she was able to mobilize especially many of the village's elderly women in the new projects due to her own engagement as a woman, and the fact that "being a woman" she was not afraid "to grab a broom and help clean up the streets". This, she argued, would be unthinkable for the typical male village head or official. Ms. Xi put a lot of individual effort into her work, but she was also able to draw on a combination of the official gender ideology and the policies of ecological civilization to secure necessary financial support and political backing from higher levels of authority. In line with the dominant discourse and media image of women and female cadres in China, Ms. Xi herself insisted that women "were better than men at resolving disputes and problems", that they were "more patient", "better at communicating with villagers", and "more meticulous" when, for instance, engaging in cleaning and recycling (also [Lu 2020](#); [Song 2017](#)).

Ms. Xi had initiated her village project by focusing on the previously not so prestigious areas of waste collection and management—areas where women were already doing the major bulk of the work in the village. She skilfully connected these efforts to the larger national goals of rural reconstruction and revitalization to achieve financial and political capital from higher levels of authority. This was possible, first of all because policies under the umbrella of the state vision of ecological civilization had moved higher up on the central government's agenda, making the local responsibility for handling waste collection, recycling, pesticides control, and improving water and air quality much more urgent for the local state. In February 2018, a "Three-Year Action Plan for Improving Rural Living Environments" was issued, and new local environmental criteria for the performance evaluation of county head and party secretary were introduced.² Local officials now risked coming under severe criticism or miss out on a promotion if they did not fulfil their targets. This, in turn, opened possibilities for politically apt entrepreneurs such as Ms. Xi. Considering that she was a woman, an elected village head, and an energetic person with influential family connections, the selection of Riverbend Village as a new site for a government sponsored rural revitalization project was an obvious one.

Politically, the culmination of Ms. Xi's success was reached in 2020 when she was elected as the village party secretary (*shuji* 书记). In 2020, in a move to strengthen party control in villages, the government had changed the village election system. The position as elected village head (*cunzhang* 村长) was now replaced with a party secretary who also, ex officio, became the chair of the village committee (*cunweihui zhuren* 村委会主任). Instead of a parallel system with a popularly elected village head and a party secretary at the top of the village government, the party secretary now holds both positions ([Guo 2020](#); [Li and Qin 2019](#)). Power has become more concentrated and the Communist Party has gained stronger control of villages. For Ms. Xi, this meant that she now held the single highest position in the village.

Two years after she had first taken up the office as village head, Ms. Xi was now praised in typical Communist Party-style discourse as a model female leader: An "iron lady" who had managed to fight "illegal buildings" and "old-fashioned toilets" while handing out civilizing awards for "model mother-in-law", "model daughter-in-law", and "model filial son".³ In March 2021, she earned one of All-China Women's Federation's 993 awards for national "Female models of achievement" (*Jinguo jiangong biaobing* 巾帼建功标兵) ([All-China Women's Federation: Beijing Fulian 2021](#)).

There is no doubt that the state's requirement that local governments and individual cadres implement strengthened environmental policies and deliver results was crucial for Ms. Xi's success in making her village a model of environmental practice. Likewise, the fact that she was one of few women in leadership positions, and a member of a politically

resourceful local family, helped generate both financial and political capital to her projects. Still, due to the dominant gender structures her political influence largely remained within village walls. When more powerful county officials decided to scale up the success of Riverbend Village by investing in expanded and new projects in other nearby villages, they drafted their plans in close cooperation, not with Ms. Xi, but with the male leaders of the township government, and the involved male-led provincial ENGO. Officials above the village level did not see it fit, or necessary, to engage Ms. Xi in political projects beyond her own village.

4. Case 2: Collecting Waste—The Older Women’s Movement

Ms. Yu, like Party Secretary Xi, came from a rural family with politically well-connected men. Her husband was a county official, and before retirement she herself had been a civil servant in a tax office, and a rural teacher. Approaching the age of 70, she told us, she wanted to give something back to the village to which she felt deeply attached. Ms. Yu already had a personal history of community engagement. She recalled how back in the 1970s during the Cultural Revolution she had grown vegetables to provide necessary sustenance for children in the school where she taught. After retiring from the tax office, she had volunteered to work at a help-desk in a citizen centre supporting fellow citizens in need. She also joined a local charity team that provided services in local urban neighbourhoods, for instance promoting the production of enzyme which was a fermented mix of brown sugar, water, and uncooked kitchen waste, and could be used as an ecological form of fertilizer. Ms. Yu had been interested in enzyme making for some time when she learned about an ENGO with the curious name of “Garbage Enzymes and Filial Piety” (*Jiaodao Xiaodao* 酵道孝道).

This organization was started in 2015 by a man in his 40s, Tan Yiyong, who, on a farm in Thailand led by a female doctor, Dr. Rosukon, had studied how to make enzymes from kitchen waste in order to promote organic agriculture (*Jiaodao Xiaodao* 2016). There is no end to the benefits of this method, claims the organization’s Chinese website. It insists that environmental fermentation and enzymes have the potential to “reduce garbage, purify the air, clean water sources, improve the soil, dissolve heavy metals, purify chemical contaminations, reduce electromagnetism, break down pesticide residue on agricultural products, promote agricultural production, restore nervous systems, etc.” (*Jiaodao Xiaodao* 2016). Tan’s invention was to link this ambitious environmental goal to the Confucian moral code of filial piety, arguing that “mother earth” be approached by human beings with the basic morality of filial piety: “Fermentation will purify our environment; filial piety will purify our souls” (*Jiaodao Xiaodao* 2016). In practice, the organization teaches Chinese villagers how to ferment kitchen waste to produce enzymes that can be used as, for instance, organic pesticides, fertilizers, and detergents. According to the website, the organization operates, or plan to operate, in more than 80 villages and communities nationwide (*Tan* 2019).

Ms. Yu was inspired by this organization, and in 2017 she received some technical guidance on how to start such a project in the village she grew up in, here called Mountainside. This project was smaller and more bottom-up than the largely government-driven project in Riverbend, and Ms. Yu clearly did not share Ms. Xi’s political ambitions. Nonetheless, the Mountainside case illustrates again how crucial the integration of individual agency, local government, media attention, and financing institutions was for the project to take off. Ms. Yu knew how to build necessary connections with the village head and party secretary and, crucially, she worked closely with the village director of women’s affairs (*funü zhuren* 妇女主任) who was, as is mostly the case in China, a woman. This director had first been elected to the village committee and was then typically assigned to this gendered position.

Here were two female leaders acting together, and Ms. Yu, like Ms. Xi in Riverbend, found that it was especially easy to gain the support of women in the village because they were already in charge of household affairs and the managing of kitchen waste (as also shown by *Wang and Dai* 2013, p. 104; *Guo et al.* 2009, p. 160; *Howell* 2008, p. 61). Furthermore, the director of women’s affairs, according to Ms. Yu, was already known

as a person who was willing to help other families in the village, for instance to sell their agricultural products at the local market. She was good at negotiating disputes, and with the party secretary and village head living elsewhere, the woman director was key to mobilizing support for Ms. Yu's garbage enzyme project and getting other women involved. In 2018, Ms. Yu registered a volunteer association (*zhiyuanzhe xiehui* 志愿者协会) to work with her enzyme and pollution-free project, and to engage in social activities and promotion trips. By the time of our fieldwork, the association had around 40 active members, most of them women. Each month, the volunteer association would hold a market where villagers could deliver collected waste and recyclables such as plastic bottles, cigarette butts, and cans, and receive necessities such as toothbrushes, paper, and gloves in exchange. The government would also pay villagers to deliver toxic waste, such as containers used for chemical fertilizers or pesticides. The market was initially run by Ms. Yu herself, but it was eventually taken over by the township government who also spread the news about it to other places as a form of best practice.

During the first two years of the village enzyme project, Ms. Yu and the director of women's affairs relied on their own and other small private investments. However, local media gradually began to broadcast news about the village, and this, in turn, generated political attention from officials who, as discussed above, were increasingly under pressure to reach new local environmental targets and include women in their work (Ningbo People's Government Office 2019; The People's Government of Zhejiang Province 2018). By 2019, Ms. Yu and her collaborators on the village committee had managed to raise close to a million Yuan from public funds to renovate a building for enzyme making, build a warehouse for waste collection, and for an electric compost machine (which fell into disuse after just a few months). The second anniversary of the project in 2019 was celebrated in the village with more media attention and a speech given by the female chair of the township-level People's Congress.

By this time, local officials above the village level had realized that this enzyme-making self-declared zero-pollution village offered them a golden opportunity to fulfil the higher authorities' requirements for rural revitalization. An added advantage was that women ran the waste project, one of them even holding a formal position in the village committee. She enjoyed support from female villagers in particular, and she could help improve the government's record of involving more women in the rural revitalization project. By 2021, Mountainside, just like Riverbend, was supported financially and promoted politically as a model for others to emulate, thus playing a part in the long-established Communist Party strategy of using models as a means of rural governance.

Ms. Yu and the director of women's affairs were certainly not able to bring about a complete shift from chemical to organic fertilizers in the village, but that was also not really their goal. By summer 2020, around four percent of the village's agricultural land was fertilized with homemade enzymes, and the enzyme project had generated over 30 tons of enzyme-based fertilizers, bringing in about 150,000 Yuan to the village community.⁴ Ms. Yu herself was humble about her contribution and emphasized the collective efforts of all the village's elders. She expressed satisfaction that they had managed to bring about some modest environmental changes in the village. Eventually, the project was co-opted by the township government which asked the initial volunteer team from Mountainside Village to help spread their practices to other nearby villages. Ironically, in 2020 the government gave an award to the village's male party secretary for being a most "excellent protector of the environment" (*zui mei huanbaoren* 最美环保人). Symptomatic of the gendered political culture in China, only 25 percent of the people who received this award in the province were women, and Ms. Yu and her female collaborator were not among them.

5. Case 3: Faith and Environmental Agency

Our final case is an example of how middle-class women in an urban setting have responded with enthusiasm to a global Buddhist organization's call for environmental engagement. Working as volunteers for the organization of Tzu Chi, these women find space

to develop their own subjectivity and contribute to “the common good” while consciously avoiding any direct confrontation with existing political and gendered structures.

Tzu Chi is one of Taiwan’s most well-known Buddhist organizations (Weller et al. 2018; Huang 2009; Madsen 2008; Laliberté 2013). It stands out due to its charismatic female leader, Dharma Master Cheng Yen, and her many (mostly female) followers, its tireless efforts in disaster relief and medical care, and its early engagement with environmental activities of waste collection, recycling, and calls to limit consumption. Tzu Chi was formed in 1966 by the young nun Cheng Yen, and it has since grown to become a global organization with branches in many parts of the world. It has contributed to charity work in Mainland China since the early 1990s, and has received official charity awards from the Chinese government. In 2008, it was formally registered as a charity foundation in China, with headquarters in Suzhou modelled on the form and style of the Tzu Chi compound in Hualien, Taiwan (Tzu Chi 2018).

In China, the organization has mainly attracted urban middle-class women as volunteers, most of them in their 40s or above and many of them unemployed, in part-time jobs, or retired. The proportion of female certified volunteers (*shouzheng zhigong* 受证志工) is estimated to be about 70 percent for all branches, whether in Taiwan, China, or other countries (Weller et al. 2018, p. 154; our interviews). Tzu Chi is grounded in a vision of Buddhism in which practices of self-cultivation are inseparable from the individual’s practical work for the common good. Confucian family and kinship ideology strongly inspires it, and adherence to the Confucian ideal of filial piety (*xiaoshun* 孝顺) is even mentioned as one of Tzu Chi’s “ten commandments” (*shijie* 十戒) (Tzu Chi 2009). Tzu Chi is, in the words of Dharma Master Cheng Yen, like an extended family (Madsen 2008, p. 25; Ho 2016). In one of our interviews from 2021, Teacher-Sister⁵ Rusu described Tzu Chi as “a home”.

According to Robert Weller et al., Tzu Chi repackages family values as cosmopolitan ones (Weller et al. 2018, p. 154). Acknowledging the global climate and environmental crisis, the leadership of Tzu Chi includes in its cosmopolitan vision not only human beings and other living species but “the mother of all”, the Earth (Greene 2020; Lee and Han 2015). Women, traditionally in charge of household affairs, are seen by Tzu Chi as being particularly important agents of change with regard to family matters including consumption and waste management, but also with regard to the global and planetary environmental and climate issues. The volunteers we talked to during fieldwork emphasized that they felt a strong need for the experience of being part of a meaningful community, and this was one of the main things that Tzu Chi offered to them. Some of them even argued that “as women” they were more likely than men to understand the urgent need for human beings to engage in environmental activities. Tzu Chi, along with their members, argue that their moral, ethic, and also environmental activities are capable of transcending borders, be those political, national, or ethnic ones. With the growing global acknowledgment of the crises of climate change and environmental destruction, Tzu Chi Taiwan has continued to expand its activities, and this was very well-received among Tzu Chi volunteers in China. Teacher-Sister Jieding even claimed that working with a project aimed at improving the environment had a “healing effect” on women who had joined Tzu Chi due to all kinds of personal troubles, such as financial difficulties or problems in their personal relationships. Adding to their traditional practices of waste collection and recycling (in addition to the charity work that remains at the core of Tzu Chi’s work), the organization in Suzhou has now opened a museum for science-based communication about climate change, and it has organized an increasing amount of teaching for school classes about both climate change and more practical ways of dealing with waste collection, sorting, and recycling. In one of the branches we visited in 2020, volunteers had given 40 training classes to a total of around 2500 students from primary to secondary high school, just within the year of 2019.

Important for this article’s exploration of the possible empowerment of women is the way Tzu Chi seeks to add to, rather than challenge or replace, existing official forms of environmental urban governance and education. Volunteers in China often emphasized that

their activities were meant to “complement and support” those of the government. Some referred to the fact that the tenth of the ten commandments of the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation explicitly states that Tzu Chi volunteers should not participate in political activities or demonstrations (Tzu Chi 2009). They did not, however, shun away from government initiatives. Instead, they actively sought to connect to the government’s own projects, whether in charity or related to education and health, and they sometimes even managed to bring new life into these. One example was Tzu Chi’s expansion of environmental education. Already in 2004, Zhejiang Province launched a campaign to establish sites for promoting environmental education (Zhejiang Environmental Protection Bureau 2009). In 2020, 28 such sites were accredited, one of them fully run by Tzu Chi volunteers who were focusing on the management of waste and how to raise environmental awareness in the population (Ministry of Ecology and Environment of the People’s Republic of China 2020). Operating as a government accredited site for environmental education, Tzu Chi was required to follow guidance and regulations from the local EBB, and they were expected to promote official policies through their exhibitions. Tzu Chi volunteers we talked to argued that this was not a problem, and that they saw it as opening for contributing to government efforts while, at the same time, expanding the room for their own preferred environmental activities. These volunteers’ views were entirely consistent with Tzu Chi’s official statement in the tenth of their ten Buddhist commandments. One of the most active volunteers explained to us how this was a win–win situation: Volunteers would set up their own courses encouraging people to change their attitudes and behaviour, and the officials benefitted from a growing number of visitors and better publicity about their activities.

The topic of China’s persistent gender inequality and patriarchal repression was, to our knowledge, never on the agenda in Tzu Chi’s many reading seminars or in meetings organized by the women volunteers. However, the organization did serve as a space where urban middle-class women felt that they could play a more assertive and self-fulfilling role as publicly engaged citizens. Volunteers often talked about Tzu Chi as a life-changing experience, something that helped them find meaning and purpose in life. The government needed to improve its environmental education in society, and this opened up a space for agency. In addition to working together with the government in its educational sites, several volunteers were integrating their environmental activities into their everyday life in families and with neighbours and colleagues. Teacher-Sister Jieding, for example, had been working in kindergartens for over two decades after graduating from university. She initiated projects of garbage sorting in the kindergartens together with some colleagues, and secured space in her apartment compound where volunteers could educate, train, and mobilize fellow residents to sort and recycle garbage.

6. Conclusions

In this article, we have provided examples of how women at the grassroots level in rural and urban areas of China have taken steps to initiate or engage in environmental activities. These are best interpreted as responses to an acknowledgment or felt experience of the crisis of environmental degradation, inseparable from a personal desire for self-development and a meaningful life. While garbage collection, waste sorting, and village hygiene, just like domestic affairs used to be areas of low political prestige and were typically assigned to female representatives in village committees, the topic of environmental protection has moved much higher up on the official agenda in recent years. Strengthened environmental policies and new demands for environmental consciousness and participation have arguably provided some new room for agency among women who wish to take a more active role as environmental citizens.

The three case studies discussed in this article do not focus on women who fight for their rights through organized and explicit protests against pollution or the social injustice that so often comes hand in glove with it. The women we present can hardly be called ‘activists’ at all, and they are not engaging in feminist criticism of the persistent dominant

patriarchal structures in Chinese society and politics. The women in our three case studies constitute instead examples of how individual women in different social and economic positions in China, of different ages and with different personal histories and aspirations, are exploring new ways of being environmental citizens. They do so in the context of a state ideology that, in theory rather than practice, remains committed to gender equality, and simultaneously promotes a blurry imaginary of an ‘ecological civilization’, presented as a greener and more sustainable future based on continued economic growth.

Through their personal engagements, the women introduced above explore the possibilities for new subjectivities, expanding their activities into the public and political spheres which remain largely dominated by men. In our analysis, we have focused on how space for agency is not merely offered by the state and its new environmental policies but is actively taken and negotiated by women through their local societal engagements. Our analysis identified some crucial limits to the expansion of women’s environmental subjectivities. The female village head in Riverbend Village was one of a very small number of female village heads/party secretaries in China. As Ms. Xi recalled, she was strongly encouraged by fellow villagers to run for election and, as shown in our first case study, after her election she proved to be very successful in her attempts to attract interest from higher levels of authority and secure the necessary political and financial resources to establish her local pollution-free village project. Likewise, Ms. Yu and her close female collaborator were highly competent in organizing villagers to join their initiatives for greener agriculture. They were also able to generate praise and support from higher levels of government. Finally, the women volunteers in Tzu Chi actively lead some of the government sponsored environmental education projects towards success and used this opportunity to strengthen other environmental activities of their own.

All these women seized the opportunities presented by the green turn in China’s political ideology to work for their own goals and ideals without explicitly challenging existing political and patriarchal structures. When these projects became sufficiently known outside the confines of their respective localities and were turned into officially acknowledged models for others to imitate, the female initiators and the other women involved in the local work did not pursue any means to exert their influence further, or to argue for power at higher levels of office or authority. When political authorities decided to scale up some of these women-led environmental projects, the women in charge were not directly involved in further official plans for expansion. They were welcomed as teachers, trainers, and informants, but they were not invited into formal discussions or further decision making processes with financial and political consequences.

With the government’s increased prioritization of local environmental governance and the encouragement of grassroots environmental projects, there is a chance that room for women to participate as environmental citizens may expand. We will, most likely, continue to see new examples of how women skilfully employ possibilities for developing subjectivities and actively initiate environmental activities at the local levels—activities that used to be considered less prestigious and less important than financial management and economic development. However, it remains to be seen if and how such bottom-up initiatives and the exploration of new female subjectivities will also help expand the possibilities for women’s participation in political decision making in the fields of environment and climate change at higher levels of authority in China. As Howell noted in an interview in 2020, “There were always far more women at the lower levels [. . .]. The problem is less that and more getting women to go up the ladder” (Lu 2020). The opening of more space for female environmental agency is obviously not in itself sufficient to propel such change. It is nevertheless an interesting starting point to better understand the many social consequences of China’s increased focus on environmental policies and citizen agency, not least for women.

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Notes

- 1 All names of villages and individuals in this article are pseudonyms.
- 2 Local media report—no reference due to the need for anonymization.
- 3 No references due to the need for anonymization.
- 4 Local media report—no reference due to the need for anonymization.
- 5 Tzu Chi volunteers are taught to address each other as Teacher-Brother (*shixiong* 师兄) or Teacher-Sister (*shijie* 师姐) followed by given name.

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