
Overseas-funded development projects are just one of a range of different approaches aimed at addressing gender issues in community development in China. Debates about these approaches and discourses can be found in the literature on gender and development. This book joins the discussion with a sophisticated examination of the framing and implementation of one development intervention project in north-western China with a special focus on gender.

The Pingxi project was an overseas-funded project carried out in three villages in Pingxi county, Shaanxi province from 2004 to 2008. Initially a disaster relief project, it evolved into a complex rural development intervention project whose main objective was to “improve local rural women’s capacity for participation and decision-making” (p. 86). Its commitment to gender mainstreaming and female participation was embodied in two main approaches: microcredit schemes and the funü gugan (mainstay women) approach. The former method seeks to encourage women’s participation in income-generating activities by lending small loans to local women while the latter aims to encourage women’s political participation in the public decision-making process. This book provides a critical examination of what the project achieved by following these two approaches.

After a general introduction in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 explores how the Pingxi project was framed and implemented by the interplay of a donor agency, Oxfam Hong Kong (OHK), the All China Women’s Federation, and a domestic NGO, West Women (xibu nüxing). The author draws on her own experiences of working in OHK for one year, during which time she conducted an ethnographic research within the organization, and collected interview data from more than 50 members of staff. Chapter 3 focuses on the project’s outcomes in Badun village mainly from the villagers’ perspectives, which are drawn from interviews and ethnographic data collected there. This is followed by a comparative study of the three adjacent villages, showing the different ways in which the project was affected by local socio-economic circumstances (Chapter 4). In the final chapter (Chapter 5), the author offers her research findings, discusses why the Pingxi project failed to reach its objectives, and presents suggestions and implications for future projects.

One of this book’s strengths lies in its critical evaluation of participatory approaches used in gender and development projects worldwide. Such approaches remain controversial despite their

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This book offers support for the argument that participation does not automatically empower local women, particularly when women’s participation is profoundly constrained by local power relations and traditional views of gender roles. It demonstrates that where no challenge is made to the deeply embedded patriarchy, women’s participation may even end up deepening their disadvantages and reinforcing the existing inequality in gender relations. For example, one of the reasons why the microcredit scheme failed to enhance women’s access to money was because patriarchal beliefs within households were left unchallenged. Consequently, this scheme then became a way for male villagers to “receive money from women’s hands” (p. 152), thus reinforcing their dominant roles in household decision-making.

Another strength of the book is its examination of the impact the project had on gender at different levels: household, township, and national. Local socioeconomic circumstances are closely intertwined with national policies and broader social change, which, therefore, profoundly influence gender relations in households as well. For example, the implementation of a national infrastructural project – the Xiahan expressway road construction – caused serious land loss in Xishahe village. With more and more men having to migrate to find jobs elsewhere, gender relations changed in the households where women stayed behind. Their participation outside the home was discouraged even more strongly since it was feared that it could bring further tension to family relations during their husbands’ absence. Thus, power relations at different levels influenced the impact of the project. However, one cannot help but wonder whether the author’s case would have been strengthened if the global level had been incorporated as well. After all, it was a project initiated and funded by an overseas donor agency, and, therefore, largely shaped by Western concepts of gender and development. Did Western understandings of development and empowerment run against local knowledge and interactions? How did power relations on the global level shape the project? These are questions that require further exploration.

Overall, this book makes a valuable contribution by linking development theories with the actual practices of gender and development projects. It is invaluable for readers who are interested in gender and development studies, as well as for those whose research topics relate to participation, empowerment, community development, and social change in China.

(Jingyu Mao, The University of Edinburgh)