
Article

Views from the Village: Photonovella with Women in Rural China

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Abstract

In this article the authors provide an overview of the situation of women in rural China as a backdrop for the photonovella process and inquiry activities conducted by the first author in three rural sites in China. They describe the key themes identified through analysis of the narrative accounts and photographs presented by groups of rural women. The photonovella enabled rural women to select from their pictures several photos of significance to them to show and describe these to women from other villages and to the researcher. Concerns, interests, hardships, and achievements of the women related to their work, families, and communities were voiced as they showed their photos. This method, used in conjunction with other qualitative methods—including focus group interviews, village visits, and survey data—provided information that complemented and enriched our understanding of rural women’s lives in China.

Keywords: photonovella, Chinese women, village life, rural women’s work

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Photographs appear to capture the impossible: a person gone; an event past. That extraordinary sense of seeming to retrieve something that has disappeared belongs alone to the photograph, and it leads to deep and interesting talk.

—D. Harper, 2002, p. 23

The purpose of this article is to highlight the situation of rural women in China as they saw and depicted it through their photographs and descriptions of them. The everyday life of rural women is in focus and at the center of interest in this work. Although the findings are important, so, too, is the method of inquiry, in this case photonovella, which combines photos taken by research participants and stories they tell about them. Not only everyday realities but also less well-known hopes, dreams, and fears of rural Chinese women are revealed in the process.

In recent research, conducted as part of a baseline study for our 6-year project entitled, *Building Human Capacity: Social Work with Rural Women in China*, we made use of photonovella using still photography to highlight the daily work and lives of rural women. The sites included two counties in Inner Mongolia, one county in Shandong, and two counties in Sichuan, where qualitative research was conducted in 2004 and 2005. In this paper we draw from themes that are based on the spoken words and selected photos of the village women who participated in the photonovella activity.

The issues and conditions of life for rural women in rural China are discussed to situate the research and to provide a backdrop to the women's photos and stories. The photonovella method, its role and potential in generating and disseminating knowledge, and its practical application in the research are described next. We then present the major themes with selected photos to illustrate them and conclude with a discussion of our main findings. Finally, we summarize the lessons we learned in using photonovella, some of which are specific to rural Asian contexts, and offer recommendations for other researchers who wish to consider photonovella in their own research.

The Context of Rural China

China is currently experiencing a palpable surge in economic activity and urban growth, so much so that visible change in new buildings, more cars, and expansion of enterprise are seen from one year to the next. Less likely to benefit from this primarily urban-based prosperity are rural areas, where the majority of China's population live. Statistics from the World Bank (2001) indicate that although the rural poverty rate declined from 31.3% to 11.5% in the 1990s, China remains a developing country with a large rural poor population. Its unequal growth has led to today's enormous urban-rural discrepancy (Chang, 2000; United Nations Development Program, 2005). Current rural poverty in China is characterized by more than a lack of wealth and income; it also encompasses poor access to or limited education, land, health care, legal rights, agricultural technology, roads, communication systems, and natural resources (e.g., water and fuel wood). These factors are all relevant in rural women's lives. Since the 1980s, when rural reforms, which contributed to economic competition and less state provision of such services such as health care, were implemented in the countryside, some women have been adversely affected by economic

and social change. However, others have benefited, particularly where it was possible to begin small enterprises and where other conditions, such as adequate roads and transportation, provided access to markets.

Traditional Culture, Rural Change, and Impact on Women

In rural China relationships between men and women and rural family structures are shaped predominantly by Confucian values and by patrilineal kinship characterized by the subordination of women to men. Social and economic leadership and benefits are passed down through the male line from fathers to sons. Women in this society cannot lay claim to key productive assets because they are daughters in their natal homes and wives in their husbands' homes and subordinated both to men and to elders. Effectively, only men can constitute and reproduce the social order (Gupta et al., 2000) in traditional Chinese society. Daughters and wives are regarded as dependents and sometimes as property of the family (Liu, 2002).

For major decisions men have final decision-making authority, although women dominate day-to-day household decision making (Jacka, 1997). Because of the migration of men from villages for employment in urban centers, women's work has expanded from the traditional work in the household to include a greater share of agricultural work as well (Jacka, 1997). Although some women do migrate to cities, men receive better wages for urban work than do women (Jacka, 1997; Judd, 1994; World Bank, 2001). In households where husbands have migrated to work elsewhere, wives generally have more control over household decision making, including how to use the income remitted by their husbands. Wives also tend to have more control over the household land (Mathews & Nee, 2000).

Rural women in areas from which men emigrate experience an exhausting triple burden: carrying out agricultural work, caring for their children and aging in-laws, and performing chores in the home, including animal care and backyard gardening (Chang, 2003; Judd, 1994). Women in poorer rural areas are most burdened because their workloads are heavy and workdays long, often affecting their health and well-being.

Rural Chinese women experience more limited access to education than those in the cities, mainly because the education of girls is still seen as having a lower priority in rural areas than that of boys (Chang, 2000). The World Bank (1999) found a concentration of illiterate or poorly educated Chinese women in areas where poverty is highest, and in some of the poorest villages nearly all girls and about 50% of the boys do not attend school. Girls are more often taken out of school when extra labor is needed by the family or to help support a male sibling to obtain a higher education or to migrate to work (Murphy, 2004). In cases where a rural family is poor and must decide which child can continue in school, the tendency is for the girl's education to be stopped. A lack of education contributes to women's inability to break free from continuing poverty.

Informal rural education to disseminate information about market opportunities and new crops or to develop agricultural or animal husbandry skills could be of help to women; however, these activities tend to be targeted to men, who are seen as full-time farmers. Furthermore, training activities usually occur at times and in places that do not accommodate rural women's work schedules and household responsibilities. The lack of specialized support for female income generation activities and current technical knowledge makes it difficult for rural women to break the poverty cycle.

Despite many challenges, rural women have survived difficult conditions and problems in their lives through their own initiative and from help given by other women who voluntarily provide

mutual aid when needed (Judd, 1994; Murphy, 2004). There are active social and economic networks, both formal and informal, operating in rural areas (Zhang & Richard, 2004). Women in some of our project sites stated that they participated in groups with other women to share information and other resources so that they can improve their economic potential.

Family relationships in rural China are important, and harmony is the ideal; however, conflicts with husbands and in-laws can create stress or mental health problems and even lead to suicide attempts (Liu, 2002). Traditional Chinese culture does not regard domestic violence in a conjugal relationship as unnatural unless it is extreme. Many rural women do not know about laws; nor do they have much recourse for help. Most prefer to endure abuse in the household rather than seek a divorce, which is difficult to obtain and often involves loss of rights to land and property (Liu & Chan, 1999; Ping Li, 2003).

Economic and social change in urban areas has created new opportunities for rural migration and enterprise. Because of slow and uneven development in many rural areas, large gaps remain in social welfare benefits and economic enterprise between cities and towns. Rural women's lives are perched between the traditional past and the emerging present, and their fortunes depend on the multiple factors and conditions that now face them in their villages.

Still Photography in Research

Research in anthropology, sociology, and other fields has made use of visual information for many decades. Photographic methods are often combined with other research methodologies and methods, such as biography, case study, field observation, or interviews. Bateson and Mead (1942), researching Balinese culture in the early 1940s, made use of photography, film, and artwork both to elicit information and to document it. Some photos were analyzed and categorized according to theme and sequence in time and were accompanied by text. The rise of visual methods to record human activity, explore daily life, and explore meaning has been useful to researchers from many disciplines. Digital video cameras, cell phone cameras, laptop computer cameras, and other forms of image creation have added more technology options for researchers and more rapid methods of image dissemination. In fact, the technology, hardware, and software for production of digital images accessible to researchers has grown so quickly that researchers can barely keep pace with the opportunities created by the new methods and formats before even newer technological developments emerge to replace them. Because of limitations of space, we will focus in this paper only on the use of still photography in research.

Both the act of taking pictures with a camera and the resulting photos offer information to researchers, those researched, and their various audiences. Banks (2001) distinguished between internal narratives; that is, what the photo communicates to the viewer, and external narratives, the context of and about the photo. The external narrative includes "the social context that produced the image, and the social relations within which the image is embedded at any moment of viewing" (p. 11). The internal and external narratives combine together when a photograph is viewed because we tend to reflect or ask questions about the context, subject, time, place, and other details to help us know the image. When photos are described by their photographer and/or the subjects in the photos, both internal and external narratives can be enhanced. These insider perspectives can be very different from the views of others who do not have access to such information. Furthermore, as Banks pointed out, viewers have their own perspectives and backgrounds, or lenses, that they use to interpret an image.

Photographers wish to communicate something through their photos, and they do this through selecting their chosen subjects and excluding other subjects. What is photographed depends on what the photographer thinks is important, interesting or informative, beautiful, suitable or

desirable to record, and perhaps even what the photographer thinks will impress, raise awareness, and/or lead to some action.

In research involving human subjects, photographic methods allow the development of different kinds of relationships between those carrying out the research and those who are its focus (cf. Barthes, cited in Flick, 1998; Banks, 1995, 2001). The researcher can gather visual information by taking photos, asking others to take photos, collecting existing photos, or a combination of these. In the following list, different ways of using photography in research are described.

1. A photographer/researcher can take pictures of research subjects as a record. In social anthropology or biography this might be done to illustrate a text or to represent a model or member of a particular group, life stage, or some other category. Generally, the researcher/photographer actively chooses the subject of the photo. Those who are photographed are passive. In this use of photography, it is possible for the content in the photograph to take priority over the context in which the photograph was taken (Banks, 1995).
2. Responses are elicited from research participants, who view photos taken by others. The photos shown to the participants are selected in advance by the researcher, often on a research theme of interest. The research participants talk about the photographs in response to established questions asked by the researcher or research assistants. In this activity the researcher controls the viewing and questioning and the participant/viewer controls her or his response to questions asked about the photos. The responses from the research participant about the photos constitute research data.
3. A research participant is asked to show her or his own photos on a certain theme to the researcher, who notes the kinds of photos selected and shown and what is said about them. In this activity the research subject controls the selection of photos to be shown and what she or he says about them. Both the photos shown and what is said about them by the research participant can be considered data. For example, in research about gender relations during a past decade, selection and description of pictures in family photo albums can provide useful information.
4. A researcher, interested in how and what a research participant selects to photograph on a given topic or theme, interprets or analyzes the resulting photos. The research subject actively selects the material to be photographed that fits the given theme as she or he understands it and provides photos for analysis to the researcher. It is also possible for researchers and the research subjects to take part in joint discussion and analysis of the photographs.

Photographic methods have been found to be effective in social research when the meanings attributed or priorities given to phenomena are of interest (Bjelland & Jones, 2001; Stewart, Liebert, & Larkin, 2004). For example, photos taken by Chinese villagers about their concerns were used to determine the order of priority in village planning issues (Bjelland & Jones, 2001). The use of cameras helped the researchers and their Chinese students to gain access to the village and to generate ideas.

Banks (1995) noted that in recent years the division between researchers and human research subjects (observer and observed) has diminished in that both are engaged in the process of producing pictures and representing them. Research that involves reflexivity and sensitivity in the process of taking photos and the interpretation and analysis of photographs has been described by some authors, in which a combination of text and images are used in representations of the

research findings (e.g., Prosser, 2004; Radley & Taylor, 2003; Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997; Wang, Burris, & Xiang, 1996; Wang, Yi, Tao, & Caravano, 1998).

Photonovella has been described by Wang and Burris (1994) as allowing people “to document and discuss their life conditions as they see them.” It has been seen as a method that can inform local policy and/or complement social change efforts. As Wang and Burris have found, the process of photonovella can contribute to changes in consciousness of those who take part. It involves people documenting their own lives through the process of photography and the stories they tell about their photos to others. The cameras are given to the participants so they can select what they wish to photograph. Photonovella is ideally a participatory process that is stimulating and enjoyable. The opportunity to voice ideas and to hear those of others in a group setting can be empowering. Wang and Burris found that “no matter how poor a person is, the opportunity to be creative and expressive is valuable” (p. 184). The photonovella activities highlighted common themes among the women, validating their roles as village women, mothers, wives, and workers. The process was enjoyable for most; for some women it opened new possibilities for voicing their ideas and experiences to others. It was empowering to the rural women participants to learn a new skill, be acknowledged by others, and create a tangible record to keep for the future.

Photonovella with rural women in China

In our research on rural women’s perception of their lives, a combination of focus group interviews, community meetings, and site visits provided qualitative information about rural women’s life situations and concerns. Other qualitative and quantitative research was also conducted with rural women and with women social service workers’ (Women’s Federation [WF] cadres’) training needs and interests. In this article only the photonovella with rural women is discussed.

Photography was used as a means for research participants to describe their daily lives, hopes, and concerns and the importance of these to them. The information offered by the rural women will inform planning and local activities during the course of the project. Photonovella, we thought, would shed light on rural women’s lives from their own perspective in ways that other research methods could not.

As is the practice in China, researchers must work with governments at different levels to gain permission and access for their research to proceed. In our case, we worked closely with the WF, a semiautonomous, multilevel network connected to the Chinese government at national, provincial, county, township, and village levels. The WF assisted us in arranging space and other resources so that the photonovella and other research activities could move forward. We were required to use the WF’s help to recruit research participants; however we were able to suggest selection criteria. Later, when we met the women who had been recruited, we reviewed the research procedures and consent information to ensure that any women who did not wish to participate could leave. Of the 75 women who were selected, only 4 did not participate in the photonovella. The women ranged in age from of 25 to 55 and lived in poor farming areas of Inner Mongolia, slightly more economically developed areas of Sichuan, and in a more prosperous county in Shandong. More than 90% of the rural women had no high school education. In this research there was a mixture of ethnocultural backgrounds represented. In Inner Mongolia the sample included Mongolian and Han women; in Sichuan Han, Hui, and Yi women participated; and in Shandong Han Chinese women made up the study sample.

Verbal consent for each participant was recorded on tape. The research study was given approval by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba. The women who participated were reimbursed for their travel costs and for any accommodation or meals they required. This was

necessary as many of the women traveled a long distance from their villages to reach the county venues where we were to meet them. Some, in fact, came by donkey cart, by bus, and then on foot to get to the meeting place.

The photonovella activities were conducted in conjunction with focus group interviews to economize on time and costs. In the five research counties (two in Inner Mongolia, two in Sichuan, and one in Shandong), 15 rural women, split into two groups, participated in photonovella training sessions, where they learned how to use the single-use cameras, keep track of the photos they took using a numbered list, explain the purpose of taking photographs, and ask for permission when they took photos. The photographers were also given information about the research and use of the findings and photos. They were given use of the cameras for up to 5 days, although many completed taking their photos in 1 or 2 days. Research participants were provided with opportunities to withdraw their participation or use of their photos. Even after the photonovella activities were completed, participants could contact the researchers to withdraw from the study if they wished. Some participants limited the use of their photos or requested that photos of local officials not be used. Later, a few requests were received to limit the use of their family members' photos. Despite care and attention to potential ethical issues in research that uses people's photographs, there are questions that remain; for example, what if the people depicted form different opinions of these images later in life and do not want the images shown the way they have been?

The photonovella participants were asked to photograph their daily work and lives, essentially whatever was important to them. After 4 days the spent cameras were picked up by a Women's Federation staff member and taken for developing. Two sets of photos were developed: one for the researchers and the other for the participants. When the photos had been developed, the participants met in two groups per site to view their photos, select several of significance to them, and describe them. The discussions were audiotaped, and some photos were taken by the researchers, with participants' permission. Notes were also taken by research assistants during most of the sessions. The audiotapes were later transcribed and translated and photos scanned into a document that contained the women's verbal accounts of selected photos. When the photonovella participants gathered to discuss their selected photos, they were asked a number of questions:

1. Please describe the pictures.
2. Where did you take the pictures?
3. Why did you choose to take these pictures?
4. What makes this person, place or event important to you?
5. How did you find this photography exercise?

Most of the village women had never used a camera. They were eager to try them out and to see the results. Although the women learned how to use the cameras, some technical problems occurred that affected the number and quality of photos developed. In addition, many women lent the cameras to others who did not know how to use them. There were some disappointments when the women saw their photos with headless family members dressed in their finery or interior scenes that were very dark. Furthermore, despite our best attempts, some lists of photos taken could not be matched with the developed photos received. Unfortunately, these were likely the photographs that did not turn out. We also found that a few of the single-use cameras malfunctioned (e.g., the flash did not work or the winding mechanism became stuck).

Despite technical or other problems experienced, the participants were generally very pleased to use the cameras and to receive their photographs:

We have a kind of proud feeling when we were using the camera. When people knew what I was going to do with the camera, they were all happy and took it seriously. We also were happy to have such an opportunity.

Some of the women were worried that they would not be able to take pictures well. One related to us,

For all of us, it's the first time we [village women] took photos. Our feelings were quite complex. I feared that I would not do a good job of it so I could not reflect on what I was doing very well. I was curious about what it would be like. But most of all, I felt responsible.

One of the women photographers poignantly described her experience of personal empowerment:

My son saw me with the camera and he looked at me differently with pride in his eyes. He said, "I did not know my mother could do this. She knows how to use a camera and take pictures." It made me feel very happy and strong.

Selected photos and descriptions

The photographs taken and descriptions provided by the village women showed many common themes. The photos and narratives presented by the women in the group sessions centered on life in the household and in the rural village. Themes in the photos and the women's descriptions included family harmony and relations, agricultural activities and initiatives of women, rural conditions, and children's education. Permission was received from the participants to make use of the photographs and comments in our conference presentations and articles.

Family harmony and relations

Family life in rural areas centers on agriculture and the seasonal cycles of work that have been performed for centuries to grow corn, vegetables, fruit, and other crops. The work requires all physically able family members to participate in planting and harvesting crops and tending animals that perform work or those raised for food or sale. At the same time, family life cycles of birth, childrearing, launching of children for marriage, old age, and death continue in every household.

Some rural women who participated in the photonovella activities discussed photographs of their family members' contributions to the household and, for some, the conditions of poverty that limited them. Photographs of older people were accompanied by comments referring to a high regard for their ability to continue working in the household and the importance of respect for older persons in the family. The photo depicted below was not discussed in much detail by the woman participant during the group session, but she talked about it with the researchers as we were about to leave. She told us that even at 87, the old man was still working and contributed as much as he could to the household economy: "This is the 87 year old father of one village woman" (Figure 1).

However, we also heard from some women that they were afraid of being neglected and left without their children's support as they grew old.

Figure 1



In Sichuan province the Yi village women's photos stressed the participation of all family members in rural livelihood activities. The seasonal agricultural cycle needed the labor of all those who could provide it. Family labor is used in the photo below to produce a canola crop.

Three people, the father, daughter and son are working on the canola at the front. . . . He says he has to raise the whole family. He makes oil from the canola for their own cooking. They are happy working together. (Figure 2)

Figure 2



Yi cultural attire for women and girls was particularly important to the women, and a small industry of garment making ensured a continuing supply of Yi clothing. One of the submitted photos was of a family group, showing the older and younger women wearing Yi traditional garments. The woman who appears with her family in the picture, said "I felt very glad and excited here. This was the first time for my family to take a picture together, including my daughter. I am very glad. I have never taken photos with my parents and my daughter. I cannot

express my feeling. I am very touched.” This woman also asked someone else to photograph her in traditional Yi clothing (reproduced in Figure 3). These comments speak to the importance of keeping culture in their families.

Figure 3



Women’s work in agriculture and enterprise

Many of the women participants in the photonovella groups described the work of women in producing crops, raising animals, developing and maintaining enterprises and their desire to set good examples for other rural women. In a Shandong county, where agricultural and other economic production was booming, some women found opportunities to earn large incomes. They wanted to share their ideas and experiences with others who would follow their example.

This picture was taken when I loaded the baskets on the truck. This one shows the baskets that have been cleaned, soaked and whitened by sulphur. . . . Nearly all the baskets used in the flower shop in Jinan are the baskets we made. They are generally used when people get married, on birthdays, or when they start a business. Now I can earn 100 to 200 thousand a year. Over one hundred women are working for me. (Figure 4)

Most of the women participants were not as fortunate as the basket maker quoted above. In fact, many had long and arduous workdays with grinding physical labor to contend with. This situation is most common among women whose husbands or adult children had migrated to work outside the village (common in Inner Mongolia), as was necessary when a family’s land could not sustain them. In such situations, women were responsible for farm work, animal raising, household chores, and child care, sometimes with some help from elderly in-laws. This issue is now of interest to researchers and the Women’s Federation in China, who provide support to women “left behind” in rural areas.

Figure 4



This is a typical rural family yard. A lot of people in our town, just like me, have their dreams and hopes for a career. But they have limited knowledge and education. Secondly, they have no financial support. So many of them can only depend on pieces of barren land. A whole year's income can only cover their bottom line expenses. Generally, their children have to discontinue their studies after they turn eleven or twelve years old. So I hope there could be some method to support these women. They are also able. They can do something to improve their lives even if they have low education levels. (Figure 5)

Figure 5



Figure 6



Women were proud of their efforts and, despite difficulties, were happy when they realized a good harvest from their labor. Some women had joined groups so they could learn from one another's experience in income earning and agricultural initiatives and give and receive help when faced with individual difficulties.

The women were arranging corn in piles. "Why did I choose this picture?" There is some background. Our county Women's Federation organizes a women help-net activity. It's based on the reality in the rural area that most male labor, especially young males, are migrating outside for work. So nearly all the farm work and housework falls on women's shoulders. If all this work is done by women, it's very hard. They need more hands. Secondly, to develop the rural economy, lots of areas encourage employment initiatives [agricultural sidelines]. So the women who engage in similar sideline programs need to be organized as a group to learn and help each other. For example, in flower-growing, if women work on an individual household basis, their income is lower. If households can combine together, they can sell more, with higher prices and lower costs. Additionally this activity shows the women's spirit of helping one another. This woman in the picture [became ill] this spring and had to stay in the hospital. Her husband was not at home then. The women in the help-net group helped her with all the work, field work and flower growing. They also took turns in taking care of her. Now, she has almost recovered and has a good harvest of crops this year. She is grateful that this kind of help is totally free, that it does not involve any money payment. (Figure 6)

Children's education: Hope for the future

In all the photonovella sessions women mentioned children as their hope for the future. The education of children beyond primary grades was especially significant. Women spoke of the pain they felt when their children needed to be withdrawn from school because there was not enough money to pay for related costs of children's schooling, including various fees, transportation, and clothing (Figure 7).

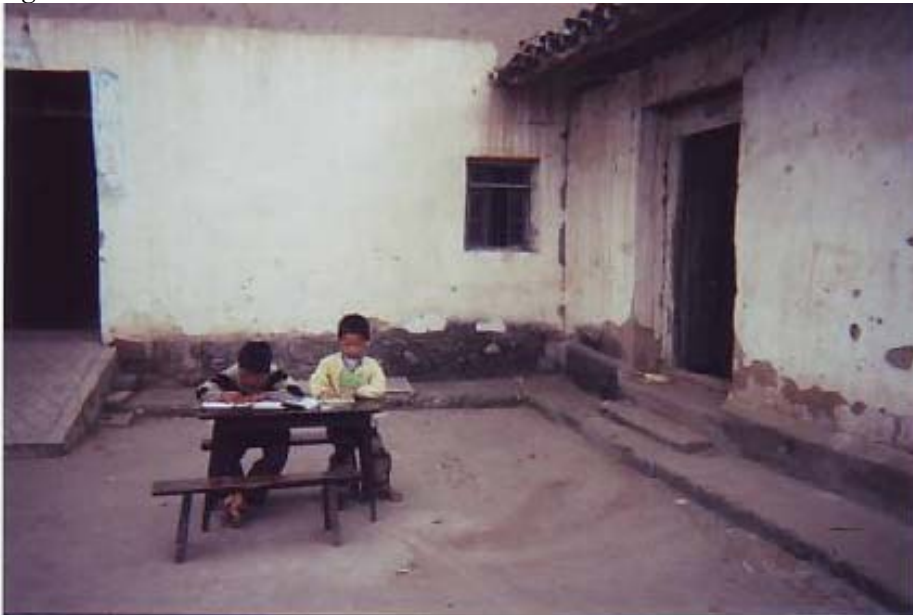
Figure 7



When a rural family with more than one child in school had financial difficulty, usually an older child or girl needed to leave school. The tradition of sons supporting their parents in old age shapes attitudes toward the importance of boys' education over that of girls (Cheung, Heinonen, & Liu, in press). Government initiatives are currently being developed to provide poor rural girls with a better chance to stay in school longer.

One of these boys is my child. Because they are boys, I like them very much. These two children told me, "Our fathers must earn money to afford to send us to school." Because these two children do not have older sisters, we told them that their parents must work hard to make money which is not easy to earn. (Figure 8)

Figure 8



Rural environmental conditions

In some parts of China, such as Inner Mongolia, farm and grazing lands are affected by environmental challenges. The loss of trees and foliage in northern China exacerbates seasonal sandstorms and encroachment of sand into farming areas. Because of this, combined with limited water sources available in rural areas, farmers have less land to plant and difficulty in growing crops without sufficient water. However, local measures have been carried out in some areas in an attempt to stem the influx of sand.

This picture is about sand control. We are in pastoral area. What does this pastoral area depend on? In our area, there are thousands of acres of land. Only when the sand is controlled, can we have better lives. This kind of sandy landscape will not support any vegetation. We put in some plants that can grow easily in the sand. Some of them were planted last year, some the year before last. Nobody organized us to do this. Twenty four village households united and circled over ten thousand acres of the sandy land that we had targeted. We used our own money for this and for building fences. . . . When there is no more sand, we will be able to herd our cows and sheep. (Figure 9)

Figure 9



Figure 10



Water supply was also discussed by many women participants from Inner Mongolia, where arid conditions prevail and limit the availability of water for agriculture, washing, and drinking purposes. Many of the women explained that a lack of water for washing adversely affected their personal hygiene and health.

This [picture] is of the well we use everyday for water. Because there is no running tap water in our rural area, we have to use this kind of well. We turn the handle and carry the water back home. There is a lot of sand in the water. Because the water level gets lower these years, we have to dig deeper for water. And we get tired from turning and carrying the water home. (Figure 10)

In Inner Mongolia, where environmental conditions pose significant barriers for economic development, road transportation is affected by seasonal freezing and melting, so that some rural roads become impassable by car during spring, creating difficulty in getting to town, hospitals, and secondary schools. Such conditions tend to exacerbate poverty and encourage migration to urban areas by those who are mobile and employable.

Discussion

Photonovella with rural women has provided an inside view of what it is like to live and work in a Chinese village. Other qualitative data from focus group interviews and village visits, although offering useful data, did not give us the depth of information obtained from the photonovella sessions and the women's accounts of their selected photographs. The immediacy of a photograph and the story behind it, told by someone with intimate knowledge of it, is powerful.

Returning to the four ways in which still photographs can be used in research, we locate our research in the fourth category, in which a researcher, interested in how and what a research participant selects to photograph on a given topic or theme, interprets or analyzes the resulting

photos. In our photonovella activities the women selected photos on themes they wanted to depict and describe. During the group sessions held to discuss the photographs, the women talked about the act of selecting and taking photographs and what they experienced as novice photographers. They also told us about the reactions of others who wanted to have their pictures taken. Many of the group sessions led to questions and comments by group members and the researcher about the content of the photos, which helped to further clarify their significance to the photographer.

The photos and stories of the women enriched our understanding of rural women in three different areas of China. The themes identified in their photos and stories varied somewhat across the three provinces in our study. Women's work in agriculture and enterprise is a strong theme in Shandong province where rainfall is higher and agricultural and agriculture-related activities prominent. Many women have benefited from opportunities to develop businesses and trade in goods beyond their home villages. In Inner Mongolia, where many men migrate to counties and cities to work, women experience a heavier burden of agricultural and household work and smaller returns from their labor. In this area, environmental degradation and water shortages affect family income and well-being.

All members of the rural Chinese family, except young children and those who are too frail, contribute their labor for the economic well-being of the household. Economic survival and success are predicated on interdependence and harmony between family members. Children, traditionally boys, represent the future security of a rural family. According to Confucian beliefs, boys maintain the family line and support their parents in old age. Girls, however, leave to marry outside the family and are required to contribute to their husband's family. The rapid economic and social changes now reshaping social values and priorities in urban areas of China will reach further into rural areas. Traditional rural values and practices will be challenged and new opportunities for rural women in the village and family will be introduced.

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