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Campaigning for Training. Ten Years *shuangxue shuangbi* Education for Women Farmers in China

Is training possible through campaigns? Is campaign-style training sustainable, and can it be effective? Probably even more effective than regular training because of the political backing a campaign receives? If so, isn't campaigning devalued as a political tool unsuitable for acquiring useful practical and objective knowledge?

This paper is an introduction to *shuangxue shuangbi* as the main campaign reaching out to rural Chinese women in recent years. The paper discusses the chances an educational campaign might provide; and elaborates on the disadvantages inherent in campaign style education.

Shuangxue shuangbi means „Double Study Double Compete“. The campaign combines education and competition. Studies include literacy and culture² on the one hand and training in agro-technical skills on the other. Women compete for the best performance in studies and the biggest output and the most dedicated voluntary services to (rural) society.

Beginning in 1989, *shuangxue shuangbi* proved well adapted to national policies, so that the campaign, originally planned for 5 years, was extended several times.

Background of timing

Chinese farmers were the first to benefit in reform China after 1979. Family farming greatly increased output on the plots redistributed to individual households. But additional land was unavailable, and the Chinese government turned to fixed prices and quotas again to feed urban industrial workers. Men left farming when industrial jobs proved to generate more income³. Women became the majority of the farm workforce. State policy of increasing agricultural output to feed a growing population relied on rural women. That was when – and most probably why as well – the Women's Federation discovered them as their main target and developed *shuangxue shuangbi*. The campaign is part of a wider network including poverty eradication⁴, micro credits, and education as a tool for women's empowerment⁵.

¹ The author is editor of the *Yellow Series* on Women in China and Vietnam. An earlier version of this paper has been published in the Proceedings of Fourth International Conference of the Centre for Women in Rural Development, Humboldt University, Berlin 2000, pp. 79 – 84.

² „Culture“ classes are on family-based child education; or on general behaviour and morals.

³ More than twice the agricultural income, including food value for household consumption for unskilled non-agricultural labour

⁴ China participates actively in the First International Decade on Poverty Eradication (1997 – 2006) proclaimed by the United Nations, and the preceding International Poverty Eradication Year in 1996. Part of poverty eradication policies is achieving a standardized „small welfare“ (*xiao kang*).

⁵ The Women's Federation runs its own projects for girls dropping out of school. They collect domestic as well as international funds. Most famous is the „Spring Blossom“ project with several project sites throughout China. Schools were closed and education politicized during the Cultural Revolution. Formalising and standardizing education is an ongoing process in China nowadays, and *shuangxue shuangbi* is also part of this effort.

Structure

The Women's Federation lobbies heavily for participation in the campaign that is voluntary in principle. The range of activities varies locally. As campaigns of the Federation are realized top – down step by step, the campaign, having gone from the central through the provincial level, only reached county governments in the 1990s. Meanwhile, the slogan of *shuangxue shuangbi* is widely known, but not every township or village got in touch with the campaign, and an even bigger number of women never participated personally.

When *shuangxue shuangbi* reaches an administrative level, a campaign office is established, where the Women's Federation, the Agricultural Bureau and the trading cooperative (*gongxiaoshe*) cooperate.

Didactic Methods

- Campaign style characteristics (although normally, campaigns are much shorter) are retained through periodic competitions, celebrations⁶ and awards. Women are awarded the honorary titles of *nengshou* („capable person“) or *nüzhuangyuan* („female baccalaure-ate“)⁷. Media coverage of the ceremonies spreads news of the campaign. Awards – titles and gifts⁸ – are an additional incentive to participate.
- Short term trainings are run, sometimes for women only. The Women's Federation considers mobilising women farmers as its responsibility, while the training itself is managed by the agricultural extension services and the agricultural bureau. Sometimes, representatives of enterprises train women in the production of the crops they need.
- Excursions to successful locations and farmers are organized. They are mostly run and financed by village governments and are thus not for women only.
- Award holders (female role models) contribute to local television programmes and lecture on their experiences
- Informations on weather conditions and on the timing of planting and fertilizing are announced through the wireless broadcasting system in the villages⁹.
- *Shuangxue shuangbi* concentrates on various written materials like leaflets, information sheets, booklets, wallpaintings, posters and journals. Videos are sometimes available. State officials are usually reluctant to work “at the grassroots” and do not normally lecture at village level. Courses are only run at the county seat that might be out of reach for village women.

⁶ Last autumn, the 10th birthday of *shuangxue shuangbi* was heralded with a big national exhibition in the Agricultural Exhibition Hall at Beijing.

⁷ *Zhuangyuan* is a degree from imperial examinations that were held till 1901 and for men only!

⁸ Gifts are often not suited to the needs of women farmers. In Hebei Province, a recipient did not even unwrap her gift, a washing-machine that she did not need and did not plan to use as villages do not have regular access to running water.

⁹ Those informations are not properly distinguished from advertisements run over the same loudspeaker. Women may decide not to trust on or the other completely any more.

- In some villages, satellite television is available at village government headquarters. There are programs on agricultural technics, but not exclusively managed by *shuangxue shuangbi*.
- At village level, the campaign concept would require women of 10 households to organise as a small group. They elect their representative, who is trained in a specific agricultural skill and who then, back in the village, teaches the members of her small group. Teaching is unstructured and informal aside the normal work or social exchange. Although most villages have women's small groups, these concentrate on birth planning and on birth planning education. Women and even village governments are usually unable to distinguish between both groupings. Formal associations are directly linked to control and the enforcement of state policies.
- Township extensionalists visit villages regularly and give informal advice during field visits. They concentrate on state-managed crops like cotton or wheat, and do not specifically target women.
- The *baocun*-system provides for a member of township government responsible for all affairs in a certain village. The responsible person may well be a bookkeeper unable to offer advice him- or herself, commitment varies widely.
- Village government buildings sometimes include a room for women's education. *Shuangxue shuangbi* recommends a parents' school (*jiazhang xuexiao*) with classes on family education or child hygiene, but normally the women's classroom is for birth planning classes only.
- *Shuangxue shuangbi* promotes research on women in agriculture, scientific meetings and conferences.
- *Nongjianü baishitong* [Rural Women Knowing All], a very popular monthly edited by the Women's Federation¹⁰, was founded in 1993 as a direct outcome of the campaign. Since the 80's, the Women's Federation ran agricultural training classes at Beijing Agricultural University. In 1999, *Nongjianü baishitong* opened its own school in the outskirts of Beijing. Women farmers can study single technologies or an agricultural degree.

Aims of the Women's Federation

The Women's Federation is a mass organization executing Communist Party policies within the female population. Gender issues are always second to party orders. Increasing agricultural productivity is prior to the empowerment of women. It should be achieved without much additional state funding, because investments in the industrial sector come first. The Federation is deeply convinced – and has always been – that equality can be achieved with women working outside the private household. Even given the priority of production,

¹⁰ Current circulation is 200.000 copies. This would just be enough to cover the villages (one copy per village) in 10 counties (not even one province). The booklets of *nongjianü baishitong* are printed in 8.000 copies each. They are probably too expensive for farmers (12 yuan). The monthly is 1,50 yuan each issue.

fulfillment of their productive role empowers women and may prevent female unemployment that the Federation is very worried about. The Federation wants women – still considered deficient - to be qualified, professional and absolutely indispensable at their workplace. Qualities include technical skills, but also a bunch of traditional female virtues summed up as „*suzhi*“. For the Federation, it is most important to teach the eagerness to learn and to be productive. The usual method is positive examples and role models.

Gains and Opportunities for Women

Shuangxue shuangbi channels government resources as well as international project funds to adult education for rural women. In the face of decreasing investments in the social sector, this is a big success in itself. Although figures are most possibly greatly inflated, a number of women had the chance of additional schooling. They were honoured and celebrated for their educational efforts, and they even took the exams for the title of „agronom“ (*nongyishi*). New products and new technologies gave meaning to their village life, caring for the children and the elderly. Some women even moved into village government positions. The communist party just started actively recruiting women farmers as members. The status of women might have improved, although the question of how much and how sustainable has not been addressed.

Critical Areas and Problems

- *Shuangxue shuangbi* is implemented top-down. Participation is not cared for, the needs of the target group are rarely and not regularly assessed.
- Women feel overburdened with new and labourintensive products meant to be especially suited to women (housewives). They feel hurt by the general accusation that they are “lazy”, and do not care for the needs of their motherland.
- Core issues are not addressed, e. g. the gendered division of (rural) labour and its value¹¹.
- The campaign does not address power relations within the household. Female earnings increase a little (but they still earn less than men do in non-farm jobs), but are spent for the education of the children. Investments into agriculture do not increase.
- *Shuangxue shuangbi* does not actively address gender stereotypes. Women do not drive tractors – and would never think of learning it. Female tractorists are considered a bad habit of Cultural Revolution times. The campaign ignores the qualifications that village women acquired during the 60s. One village with half a dozen female walnut tree specialists (certified) cut down its plantation and did not think of using their women’s knowledge elsewhere.

¹¹ In Hebei (1997), two female rural workers are counted as one male labour unit.

- Women farmers are left alone with their produce except for some state-managed cash crops like cotton. Marketing is not taught. Waiting passively for a trader to come to their doorsteps, women might be offered a price just enough to cover their costs (which is how things are really going with the sale of pigs in Hebei Province).
- The most part of agriculture is still state-regulated. The growth of crops like cotton is mandatory. Wheat or rice are traditionally felt indispensable to feed the household members. Women's decision-making power does not increase.
- Training contents are often not adopted to local conditions. If *shuangxue shuangbi* recommendations fail, the position of women is weakened.
- Courtyard farming is a traditional female responsibility. The Women's Federation lobbies for a more productive courtyard agriculture with produce for sale and not solely for home consumption. While the Federation tries to professionalize and enlarge courtyard farming, government officials, on the opposite, promote bigger, often collective, „economy-of-scale-farms“. Bigger, specialized farms tend to exclude women from the management.
- Federation officials require women to study, but usually do not teach themselves and are often not qualified for agricultural extension services. The Federation is currently trying to improve the situation by hiring graduates of agricultural schools for township level jobs. County level Federation jobs are career positions for only a couple of years that do not require any interest or specific training in women's issues.

Final Assessment

Shuangxue shuangbi, although implemented for more than ten years, is still a campaign. The common feeling is that it is not going to last and that it cannot possibly be an attempt for fundamental structural change. Long-term progress is not defined. *Shuangxue shuangbi* is no blueprint for the new century. The campaign does not demand equal access to education for girls, but provides middle-aged women with the opportunity to pick up some of the schooling they missed in younger years. On the other hand, the campaign does influence – albeit indirectly – gender relations. The appearance of new organisations prove the need for a stronger women-specific and professional approach. The campaign must be adopted to widely differing local conditions. Foreign donors explicitly looking for women's projects can strengthen women's position. The Women's Federation pronounces to be interested in and open for any advice and good ideas (“best practices”) from abroad.

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