CHINESE VILLAGE WOMEN AS VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGISTS: A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH TO REACHING POLICYMAKERS

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Abstract—In developing countries, rural women are often neither seen nor heard, despite their extraordinary contribution to the labor force. Photo novella is an innovative methodology that puts cameras in the hands of rural women and other constituents who seldom have access to those who make decisions over their lives. As an educational tool, the practice of photo novella has three main goals: (1) to empower rural women to record and reflect their lives, especially health needs, from their own point of view; (2) to increase their collective knowledge about women’s health status; and (3) to inform policymakers and the broader society about health and community issues that are of greatest concern to rural women. In this paper we analyze the third goal: the contributions and limitations of photo novella as a tool for informing policymakers. We conceptualize first the theoretical and practical underpinnings of photo novella. After tracing the relationships among empowerment education, feminist theory, documentary photography and policy, we describe photo novella within the broader context of the Ford Foundation-supported Yunnan Women’s Health and Development Program and explain its application for influencing policy based on our experience carrying out photo novella in China. Copyright © 1996 Elsevier Science Ltd

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INTRODUCTION

In developing countries, rural women are often neither seen nor heard, despite their extraordinary contribution to the labor force. Photo novella is an innovative methodology that puts cameras in the hands of rural women and other constituents who seldom have access to those who make decisions over their lives [1].* As an educational tool, the practice of photo novella has three main goals:

(1) to empower rural women to record and reflect their lives, especially health needs, from their own point of view;

(2) to increase their collective knowledge about women’s health status; and

(3) to inform policymakers and the broader society about health and community issues that are of greatest concern and pride.

In this paper we analyze the third goal: the contributions and limitations of photo novella as a tool for informing policymakers. We present first the theoretical and practical underpinnings of photo novella. After tracing the relationships among empowerment education, feminist theory, documentary photography and policy, we describe photo novella within the broader context of the Ford Foundation-supported Yunnan Women’s Reproductive Health and Development Program and explain its application for influencing policy based on our experience conceptualizing and carrying out photo novella in China.

THEORETICAL BASES OF PHOTO NOVELLA

The theoretical and practical underpinnings of photo novella are empowerment education, feminist theory and documentary photography [1]. This section emphasizes the links between each of these approaches to policy. We draw on our experience carrying out photo novella in southwestern China among 62 rural women. These women, representing over 50 ziran cun, or natural villages, received intensive training in the techniques and process of photo novella. Technical aspects included learning to care for, load, use and unload an autofocus, autorewind 35 mm camera; the process is described below.

Empowerment education and policy

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire proposed a concept of empowerment education that integrates consciousness-raising and dialogue with teaching
efforts directed at individual change, the community’s quality of life and policy changes aimed at achieving social equity [2, 3]. In Freire’s approach, education empowers people to analyze critically social, political and economic relations, and to act as community advocates in order to affect policy.

In Freirian terms, one medium that can be used to reflect the community back upon itself, and to reveal the everyday social and political realities that influence people’s lives, is photography. Photo novella takes this principle one step further and specifies that the photographic portrayals of the community be generated by village women themselves. Just as Freire developed word lists for literacy classes forged from the life experiences of his students, so photo novella’s curriculum is the photographic image of daily life as depicted by the women. Initially, facilitated group discussions encourage participants to analyze critically and collectively the social conditions that contribute to and detract from their health status. The pedagogy is problem-based and contextual; the knowledge that emerges is practical and directed toward action.

One element of such action is to empower village women to recognize the vitality of their own voices in public spheres. Through education for empowerment the women come to see themselves as community advocates and as participants in the policy dialogue. In other words, empowerment education seeks to transform their self-image from objects of policy to actors in the policy arena.

International organizations, health researchers and community advocates have urged broader participation by women in the policy sphere [4, 5]. Photo novella seeks to support this goal in two ways. First, the process of creating visual images is often a source of empowerment, as are the group dialogues that affirm the women’s collective struggles and insights [6, 7]. Photo novella is designed to promote the sense of “self-esteem, autonomy, and competence” that enables women to develop their skills as advocates for themselves and their families [6]. Second, photographs by village women, displayed in the community’s public spaces, bear witness to often individualized, yet truly public, issues. A person need not be able to read or write in order to participate in photo novella. As our project demonstrated, photo novella can be taught to a person who has not attended school. As visual anthropologists, rural women document their health and work realities from their own perspective. The visual image is a communication tool that can educate, inspire and influence decisions.

**Feminist theory and policy**

The critique of approaches that designate women as the objects of other people’s actions, rather than actors in the world, does not belong solely to empowerment education, but derives also from feminist theory and method. Katherine Weiler identifies three themes that characterize a feminist methodology: the appreciation of women’s subjective experience; a recognition of the significance of that experience; and political commitment [8]. Here, we link these themes to their theoretical and policy relationship to photo novella.

The first theme, an appreciation of women’s subjective experience as researchers, advocates and participants, builds on the understanding that feminist theory and practice carry out policies by and with women instead of on women, in ways that empower people, honor women’s intelligence and value knowledge grounded in experience [9]. The choice to promote empowerment through an educational practice that revolves around women’s documentary images draws on the feminist influence that takes account of power, representation and voice in relation to gender. Feminist research views women as authorities on their own lives; it enables them “to construct their own knowledge about women according to their criteria as women, and to empower themselves through knowledge making” [10]. Built on an ideology of accountability, feminist scholars have contended that knowledge or practice that exploits or oppresses is unjustifiable. They have argued for a form of knowledge construction that includes those who are the subjects of research. The positivist assumption that objectivity exists in the research process has been critiqued by feminists, Marxists and other scholars. Feminist research, like any research, creates knowledge. It differs, however, from ‘objective’ research in that its methods are in part also its findings. In the oft-noted twist on convention, ‘the means are the ends’.

Second, photo novella has emphasized Yunnan women’s own voices and visions, and has recognized the importance of personal and everyday experience. Women first represent their lives to themselves, and to one another, thereby identifying common ground. Collective knowledge, and then action, arise from the shared experiences of a group and an understanding of the dominating institutions that affect their lives [2]. And through exhibitions in public spaces, their photographs and voices reach broader audiences in general, including policymakers in particular.

Finally, the union of feminist theory and policy gives birth to political commitment. As Stromquist notes, “The subordinate position of women in society, even though this position is somewhat attenuated in higher social classes, has well-known manifestations: limited representation in the formal political system, a large share of the economy’s informal sector and other types of labor with reduced financial rewards, almost exclusive responsibility for family and children”, as well as more subtle signs such as low self-esteem [6]. Nowhere is the urgency of improving women’s status more apparent than in developing countries. As empowerment education has challenged traditional approaches to schooling
and curricula, so do feminist critiques of the representation of self and voice call on policymakers to hear rural women on their own terms. The commitment to encourage women to use cameras to document their own health and work realities draws from that stream of feminist thought that values women’s experience as a catalyst for social action.

As Brem and Griffiths state:

If we are to take seriously the imperative of making listening and talking with women an organizing principle of our work, we need to: (1) dispel our assumptions and put a greater value on local knowledge; (2) understand how listening and talking to women as an organizing principle can benefit programs; (3) increase our efforts to work with women collectively; and (4) become familiar with the different ways that women’s voices can reach policymakers, planners, and managers [4].

Rural women’s participation in policy dialogue is an important but elusive ideal. Their taking part increases the likelihood that policy aims will reflect their needs better than would be the case were only outside professionals attempting to diagnose the village life. They are also more likely to be effective [4]. Finally, planning and carrying out reproductive health and development policies without the participation of the women most affected by them is antithetical to the ideal of community participation within public health. Stated positively, this means that rights related to women’s status and equality are essential for the promotion of reproductive health [11, 12].

Documentary photography and policy

Appalled by the urban decay and degradation affecting the working class, Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine exemplified the tradition of documentary photographers who put their work explicitly in the service of social change. They used their images, combined with other styles of discourse, to argue “for the rectification of wrongs” [13]. Yet photographs of violence, isolation and poverty do not ipso facto improve society’s response to social problems. Susan Sontag and John Berger are among those who have written of the paradox of photographic images that can arouse a viewer’s conscience even as they inoculate against pain, suffering or action [14, 15]. Notes Martha Rosler, “An encounter through which art audiences are satisfied that the poor are happy where they are...is as supportive of the status quo as art that leaves them out” [13].

Arguing the possibility of an “alternative photographic practice”, John Berger wrote, “For the photographer this means thinking of her or himself not so much as a reporter to the rest of the world but, rather, as a recorder for those involved in the events photographed” [15] (emphasis added). In the past, members of other groups denied access to social power have taken cameras in hand toward a variety of purposes. From her time in college, Wendy Ewald began to pioneer the technique of giving cameras to schoolchildren in the U.S., Central America and India as a way of allowing them to record their own perceptions of, and stories about, the world [16]. During the early sixties the anthropologist Sol Worth began to give motion picture cameras to young adults in Philadelphia and New York City to understand how they would reveal themselves through film [17]. Worth, with John Adair, wrote Through Navajo Eyes, a milestone analysis of their experience teaching Navajo to film their own images, subjects and themes. In the United States, the well-known project Shooting Back, founded by photographer Jim Hubbard, allows homeless youth to present their realities through their own eyes [18].

Certainly, photography has been used to promote class and national interests [19]. Yet it also can promote the specific concerns of a group whose voice is not heard in the policy arena. A country woman normally could not hope to have an audience with a policymaker responsible for governing the rural areas, but her photos can. Through photo novella exhibits, her depictions of women’s hardships may receive a powerful audience. The audience for recently organized photo novella exhibits in Chengjiang and Luliang counties included policymakers from provincial and county offices of public health, family planning, education, poverty alleviation and the All-China Women’s Federation,* as well as national and local journalists.

Why not recruit professional photographers to portray rural life? Indeed, since a key goal of photo novella is to communicate with policymakers, goes one way of thinking, surely the images taken by professional photographers would be superior. We argue that the village women are experts on their lives. Nor do the women need to adopt any role to legitimize or justify their presence, since they are members of the community, not outsiders. The significance of this advantage should not be underestimated, since access is often one of the most difficult aspects confronting photographers. The essence of photo novella is to avoid the voyeuristic quality that often characterizes professional photojournalists' work. Indeed, professional photographers who were initially skeptical acknowledged that the rural women were able to present a standpoint that differed from their own. In a developing country such as China, we also observe that virtually all professional photographers are men. We sought to enlarge the privileges and advantages of speaking with a ‘visual voice’ to include rural women who best know their own lives.

*The All-China Women’s Federation is a Party organization dedicated to the protection and advancement of women’s well-being. An enormous organization, it enjoys national, provincial, prefecture, county, township and village representation throughout China. Federation members, known as women’s cadres, engage in community activities aimed at mobilizing women and protecting their rights.
Women who participated in photo novella told rich stories about their photographs, but not all were able to read or write. In order to preserve their accounts so that they could be communicated in photo novella exhibitions, anthropologists from the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, travelling to cluster sites, interviewed these women. We asked the women to select from among their own photographs those they felt to be of greatest significance or, simply, those they liked best.

By using an innovative and powerful channel, photography by rural women draws attention to "the nitty gritty in their daily lives" [20] and arouses interest and curiosity within the larger population. A few of the 3500 laobaixing, or common people, who were attracted to the first opening exhibition, in Chengjiang County, are shown (Fig. 1). Local officials as well as high-level Yunnan province policymakers, seated behind women displaying their photographs, were drawn to the photo novella exhibition as well (Fig. 2). The 'human interest' strength of photo novella fires the attention of the media, too, as demonstrated by the attendance of national and local press at the Chengjiang County opening. Approximately 30 journalists were drawn to the opening of the photo novella exhibit in the provincial capital of Kunming. Given the well-known influence of the media in affecting what policymakers and the broader public talk about [21, 22], photo novella is a promising medium with which to draw attention to rural women's voices and visions. The appeal of photo novella helps to promote diffusion, the process by which an innovation is communicated through many channels over time throughout society [23].

PHOTO NOVELLA'S UMBRELLA: THE YUNNAN WOMEN'S REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

We carried out photo novella as one component of the larger, Ford Foundation-supported Women's Reproductive Health and Development Program conducted among village women in two counties of Yunnan province. Photo novella's initial links to policy decisions were formalized in two ways:

(1) first, through the establishment of Provincial and County Guidance Groups; and
(2) through the recognition of the role of photo novella as research expressly aimed at informing resource allocation decisions made by the Ford Foundation.

The Provincial and County Guidance Groups not only provided advice, coordination and support for the photo novella project, but also supplied a formal body with the political will to receive and address policy questions that would emerge from the rural women's photographs and stories. Guidance Groups consisted of leaders from the bureaus of Public

Fig. 1. Visitors viewing the opening exhibition in Chengjiang County. Photograph by Li Tai Hang, China Daily.
Health, Family Planning, Education and Poverty Alleviation; researchers from Kunming Medical University and Beijing Medical University; and provincial, county and township cadres from the Women’s Federation.

In identifying policymakers as agents who might repress or promote women’s health, we sought to increase women’s participation in the policy dialogue and to influence Chinese government reproductive health and rural development policies, especially at the provincial, county and township levels. And, as noted earlier, exhibits of the women’s photographs in public spaces would help to garner the attention of both policymakers and the media.

Second, as part of the needs assessment for the Women’s Reproductive Health and Development Program, photo novella belonged to a broader policy strategy, complementary to the use of a questionnaire survey, nominal group process and focus group interviews. Photo novella put a human face on the data. It allowed audiences the opportunity to witness the burdens that the women bear. It differed from the needs assessment devices of questionnaire survey, nominal group process and focus group interviews in another important way: it served not only as an information-gathering tool, but was also designed to create community and to empower participants to express their vision, literally and figuratively, to policymakers. It operationalized what John Gaventa calls “genuine popular participation in the production of knowledge” [24].

In June 1992, 53 women from Chengjiang and Luliang counties received intensive training in the photo novella process. During the second phase of the project, an additional nine women from Luliang County participated in photo novella training. We asked the county- and township-level Women’s Federation cadres to select women who represented a wide range of ages (18-56 years), marital status (single, married and widowed).* and income (low, middle and good). Among the 62 photo novella participants who received training, 50 were Han Chinese, while 12 were Chinese ethnic minorities, including 10 Yi women, one Miao woman and one Hui woman. No two women were selected from the same natural village. Nine women also served as county- or township-level Women’s Federation cadres. As we noted earlier, a few participants had up to 10 years of classroom education, while many had never attended school.

That the Women’s Federation cadres, not we, ought to select the participants, reflects central themes of empowerment education and feminist practice. While we were concerned about group interests among the rural women, and how guanxi or

*Although divorce in rural areas is rare, we would suggest the inclusion of divorced women, a group burdened by stigma, in future renditions of photo novella.
social relationships with Women's Federation cadres or local officials might bias the selection of participants, we also sought to encourage local control and autonomy rather than to impose our outsiders' notion of who ought to represent the women or how to randomize their selection.

In addition, the viability of women's equal opportunity to participate may assume the availability of resources such as telephones, vehicle transportation and roads. But these were luxuries not present. On the one hand, the critical ideal was equal access to participation; on the other hand, the reality was a situation of relative poverty. Who was able to participate depended on a constellation of factors beyond one's social connections to a Women's Federation cadre, including personal and kin health, age of children and available care, existing or potential family crises, spouse and parental support, family's immediate economic status, and labor requirements and responsibilities.

POLITICS OF RESEARCH: ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Frankenberg observes that "any research encounter is power-laden", regardless of whether it occurs in an interracial or cross-cultural context [25]. The notions of an objective reality, the reification of data and the decontextualized and ahistorical approach to human existence have helped to call into question a positivist theory of science. Such explorations pose challenges to the relationship between social power and findings. Put another way, these critiques problematize the role of the researcher.

As feminists who seek to locate our own place in collaborative research for social change, we draw from the philosophy and intentions of participatory action research [26-28]. Patricia Maguire writes that "Participatory research is a process of collective, community-based investigation, education and action for structural and personal transformation" [29]. Gianotten and de Wit further note, "Participatory research and popular education are in a state of permanent tension, attempting to create an appropriate relationship between research and action" [30]. In recognizing our role in the research process, we reject the construct of the dispassionate, objective researcher [25, 26, 31]. We identify ourselves as participatory researchers in a collective process that attempts to exert a positive impact on village women's lives and communities [4, 28].

Class, educational and national privilege shape our own perceptions of the process; the recognition of our role and status are tools for thinking through our experiences [25]. For example, a rigorous approach to participatory action research focuses attention on the uneven material or status benefits that may accrue to all participants associated with the project. Full analysis of the concepts and issues posed by these questions is beyond the scope of this paper.

Material and status benefits may include, however, access to services, improved quality of life, publications, political power, self-esteem, sense of empowerment, professional recognition and community approval. A critical stance should explore how material and status benefits are distributed as a function of citizenship, nationality, social class, geography and gender.

INFLUENCING POLICY

Photographs can communicate the voices of women who ordinarily would not be heard, and broadcast their voices to decision-makers. A key advantage of photo novella in reaching policymakers turns on the power of the visual image. Following the first phase of training, for example, we organized a photo novella slide presentation for the Provincial and County Guidance Groups. It was attended by several photo novella participants, who found themselves holding the attention of some of the most powerful policymakers in the province. The presentation began with an introduction to the objectives of photo novella, and then moved to slides that demonstrated how photographs have been used to educate and empower, to reach policymakers, and to achieve social reform in other settings around the world. It described how the village women were selected to participate and their overall demographic characteristics; the remainder of the presentation offered the women's own photographs and their words.

Photo novella influenced policy. Three decisions—involving day care, midwifery and girls' education—provide examples. The first decision, the program initiative to provide day care for toddlers, emerged as the women photographed babies squirming on blankets amid fields of tobacco and corn. The infants lay exposed to the rain and the sun while their mothers engaged in heavy farm labor. Women's group discussions about their photographs often focused upon the dangers for unsupervised older children; thus did the Guidance Group decide to set up experimental child care centers. Women's photographs showed that mothers often have no alternative to caring for their children in the field, because kindergartens are not widely available in the rural areas.

The day care decision was also influenced by photographs by the women of their children playing near water. On one hand, photos by one village woman of naked boys frolicking and diving by a stream were gloriously free-spirited. But many women worried about their children being near water when unsupervised by adults. A photograph by a 30-year-old woman showed her daughter and son one month before her son drowned while bathing in a lake. Four children, all under 10 years old, had been playing in the water, absent the presence of any adults.
According to many village women, the key dilemma was not simply money, but that the village level leaders, most of whom were men, would not pay attention to the problem and the need for day care. The women’s photographs and testimonies voiced their definition of the problem and enabled project participants to “ground policy in the reality of the particular” [32].

The second policy decision came about after participants documented the lack of birthing assistance for women. In response to this, a Foundation-supported training program in both counties for midwives, who were indigenous and mostly older village women, was set up. The photograph shown in Fig. 3, for example, depicted a mother lying in bed with her three-day old baby; she had not been able to afford travelling to a health center to deliver the baby, so she gave birth at home with the assistance of an older woman. In the words of 25-year-old photographer Fu Qiong:*  

She just gave birth to a baby three days ago. I wanted to show the poor medical, hygiene, and health service conditions for women in the countryside. This woman did her labor at home. In our village, this is very common. Seldom do women go to the hospital for labor. Rural women have very little knowledge about gynecology and reproductive health. The main reason this woman did not go to the hospital for labor was financial difficulties. The family cannot afford the midwifery fee for delivering the child. If their economic situation allowed them to pay the delivery fee, all would be willing to go to the hospital because they understand it would be safer for both the mother’s and the child’s health. They know the maternal and child care would be much better than doing it at home.

The photograph was a catalyst for discussion among women and policymakers about the widespread use of instruments such as unsterilized scissors and the use of ‘sickle and tile’ to cut umbilical cords and the fact that births without trained attendants are much riskier for both mothers and babies. It further enabled the village women to challenge publicly a generalization commonly held by intellectuals that ignorance, rather than poverty, prevented mothers from taking advantage of midwifery services. Discussion generated by this photograph cast a floodlight on the provincial and county Maternal and Child Health Bureaus’ responsibility to provide midwifery training, service and education. In turn, Maternal and Child Health Bureau cadres voiced their own problems, including shortages of labor, competing demands and the need to improve their own technical knowhow. The image, and the photographer’s own words, served to define the situation from one peasant’s point of view, to identify gaps in services, and to hold accountable the policymakers and cadres who serve the village women. The purpose of discussion was not to place blame, but to make the village women’s own definition of the problem count, and then to attempt collectively to grapple with and to address these needs.

The Guidance Groups’ decision to provide scholarships not only for poor girls, but also for outstanding female students regardless of income, provides a third example of how photo novella affected policy. During the photo novella process, a Women’s Federation cadre photographed a girl taking care of her baby brother during hours when she should have been in school. From the depiction of the girl’s home in the photograph, it was obvious that her family was well-to-do, and possessed the means to send her to school. Given the widespread attitude in the rural areas to zhong nan qing nu (to take males seriously and take females lightly) or yang nu song ren (to educate a daughter is to plow another man’s field), however, the girl’s parents did not allow her to become educated. Initially, the program assumption was to provide educational scholarships solely for girls from low-income families, but photo novella participants, aided by the evidence of their photographs, were able to persuade policymakers that feudal attitudes toward girls’ education made it necessary to encourage all girls to attend school.

**Limitations**

A basic criterion for the success of development policy is sustainability. Whether the changes described here will become permanent remains to be seen. Initial evidence suggests that the ongoing, increased availability of effective day care and midwifery services have the potential to become permanent improvements. The initiative to provide day care for toddlers has been aided by the strong advocacy of teachers who recognized the need long ago; the towns and villages now have come up with facilities. Midwifery skills, once acquired, may last a lifetime, and taught to peers or perhaps to the younger generation. Further, these skills may be reinforced by the Bureau of Public Health’s responsibility to provide continuing training. The provision of scholarships for all girls regardless of income may, however, be transient. While it is hoped that this initiative will contribute to a lasting impact on attitudes towards girls’ education, sustainability of scholarships requires a mechanism such as an endowment or continual capital earnings after donor agency contributions expire; such a case illustrates that change is incremental and progress may be modest.

Several further limitations arise. First, a potential ethical implication of photo novella concerns the unfair distribution of the burden of social change. Minkler cautions against placing the burden of organizing for change on less powerful groups—here, rural women—rather than on the privileged groups.

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*Ideally we would have audio-taped the women’s reflections about their own photographs, but as the village community is not a laboratory, this was not possible. Photographers’ discussion of their photographs were recorded longhand in interviews with anthropologists from the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences.*
who have a responsibility to redress inequality based on some notion of compensatory justice [33]. In a related vein, it would be untenable to spur a false sense of empowerment where there is no opportunity for meaningful participation. At the same time, we believe the magnitude of positive impact that women can exert through political action is significant.

Second, in carrying out photo novella, we would like to have relied primarily on women’s leadership. This was not feasible. In the male-dominated world of policymakers, many of the people with the authority to implement various stages of the project were men. Provincial and county deputy directors of the sponsoring bureaus, for example, were mostly male. The necessity of working with male counterparts to carry out photo novella was seen as an opportunity to educate them about the reality of rural women’s lives. Photo novella was conducted in the face of a pervasive assumption that peasant women lacked the intelligence and creativity to portray their lives in a meaningful way. The participation of male officials gave them a unique opportunity to support and to hear first-hand the village women’s voices. Indeed, the social division of gender often creates a
dominant reality in which women talk to women and men talk to men. When men saw social problems manifested in their own households, it was accepted as a natural way of life, rather than a social phenomenon that could be improved through policy decisions which would ease women's hardships. Women's Federation cadres and village women alike noted that they often talked about problems among themselves, but men didn't listen. Photo novella achieved what the women had not been able to do verbally: Women's Federation cadres said that for the first time men saw aspects of women's work and everyday life that previously they had not recognized.

Finally, photo novella may empower rural women to communicate to policymakers, but does not shift to women the power to decide policy. The premise for using photo novella as a tool for informing policymakers assumes that one will work 'within the system', however unfair or unbalanced the distribution of power may be.

SUMMARY

The photo novella project is an educational experiment. It attempts to integrate empowerment education, feminist theory and documentary photography in order to allow rural Chinese women to learn from themselves and one another, and to educate other people. Through large and small group discussions, they discover their common and different views of the world. Talking about the pictures, the women find the similarities and differences in how they were raised as young girls, are treated as wives, know as mothers and experience as workers. At the same time, the photo novella project reaches well beyond the villages. The project aims to teach Chinese officials and western social scientists alike about how rural Chinese women live.

In photo novella, Chinese village women are visual anthropologists. They use photography to record images to which outsiders are much less likely to have access. They are lay anthropologists as well. They acquired their skill at observation not from formal schooling in the social sciences, but from watching "the crops grow, the seasons change, the animals being born and slaughtered" [16]. They are also natural anthropologists. They draw on their existing relationships to serve the communities of which they will forever be a part.

Benjamin Barber writes, "Empathy has a politically miraculous power to enlarge perspectives and expand consciousness in a fashion that not so much accommodates as transcends private interests and the antagonisms they breed" [34]. Anthropology is ultimately carried out to increase our empathy. As our project demonstrates, photo novella creates the opportunity for village women to promote outsiders' empathy—rather than paternalism, condescension or idealism—toward their lives. Documenting their health and work realities on their own terms, these village women can educate health policymakers, researchers and other professionals about what is best about their lives and what needs to change.

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