



Development strategies for Qiang women in Eruo Village, Sichuan Province, China¹

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Summary

This paper describes the interfaces between Qiang women in Eruo village and natural resources. The text discusses the problems, faced by them and the causes of such problems. It seeks to determine development strategies for the Qiang women of Eruo village in order to improve livelihoods, the environment, and conservation practices.

The Qiang are a minority ethnic group inhabiting the valleys of the Mianjing River in Sichuan Province. Of the two populations (198 and 252), 194 and 209 (1996 figures) of them respectively live in remote highland areas which are the repositories of mountain forests and the major source of the Yangtze River. Forty years ago the forest covered 42% of the land area, today it covers nine per cent, resulting in a loss of biodiversity. Eruo village itself is 190km from Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan, and altitudes range from 2,150-3,200masl. The demographic statistics give us a clear idea of the enormous odds these villagers face: total population 147:78 male, 69 female; flatland two ha, forest 443ha-216ha government forest and 47ha village owned; forest slope >25°. Potatoes, corn, millet and soybeans are the staple crops and potatoes are used in exchange for rice. There is electricity, but it is used exclusively for illumination. A simple road was completed in 2001 connecting the village with the town of Mao county an hour away, and there is a village primary school, but it is in a rented room and the education level is low – there are only three grades. Teachers are not willing to come to the village because salaries are too low, and a middle school graduate is the teacher. Boys do go to the township school, five kilometres away, but girls usually stop going to

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school at Grade 3. Men migrate out in search of wage labour in the township and women take care of the agricultural activities and forest management. (It is stated here that most families can't afford a TV, significant pertaining to the indicators of prosperity). Management and maintenance of infrastructure are carried out by men and they attend public meetings and groups, women provide the labour. However in terms of family activities and the household, women make the decisions and organise activities: most of the work carried out by women is given no monetary value. There is no hospital at all and severe illnesses necessitate a trip to the town. Men in this village were previously employed as loggers at about 20-25 RMB a day, but after the inception of the Forest Protection programme (2000 AD), they have begun to migrate out in search of labouring jobs. Obviously, since 2000, family incomes have been adversely impacted by logging bans and incomes of between 1,500-3,000 RMB per year have dropped to 1,000-2,500 RMB per year. To bolster its forest policy, the government has provided subsidies: cereal 100kg, seedlings worth 50 RMB, and cash 50 RMB. These subsidies are limited to five years and alternative income strategies are crucial.



Practical and Strategic Needs

Needs	Men	Women
Practical Needs	1. To build a good house	1. Enough food for the family
	2. To own a colour TV, telephone	2. Enough money to buy clothes for the family
	3. A good road	3. Expand numbers of domestic livestock
Strategic Needs	1. Higher education for children	1. Training on practical technology
	2. Training on practical technology	2. Family chores shared by men and women
	3. Travel to other places in China	3. Decision-making authority

The author analyses this chart in terms of women's needs being more family oriented.

The author uses tables to compare men's work with women's. Not surprisingly it shows that women do most of the physical work, but are not involved in income-generating activities outside the village or gathering commercial timber. This predictably places most of the economic power in men's hands. Men are the representatives in public meetings and make the decisions regarding involvement in community work, whereas women contribute their labour. The table given on practical and strategic needs (above) shows a difference in men's perspectives and women's; women's needs being more family oriented.

There are a number of possibilities for income generation for the women of this village; however they appear to have remained undeveloped and

unexploited. Some of these are discussed in the following passage, along with pertinent, general recommendations given by the author in her concluding passages.

Women in this ethnic group have a great deal of knowledge about medicinal plants and herbal medicines. These are currently used for family consumption. From May to October each year they collect edible mushrooms and dry them for family consumption the year round. They are very careful about fuelwood selection, so that the ecosystem is not degraded. In addition it is they who look after the kitchen gardens, which they manage along agroforestry lines, and there are possibilities for cash crops, such as tea, because women have experience in growing, processing and selling.



This village, as is the case with other villages in China, is managed under the contract responsibility system of 1981. Although the forests are national forest, each family gets a plot with accompanying rights to manage and use it. Insofar as this is state governed, women have the same access rights as men.

The problems that prevent these opportunities being exploited include lack of marketing information. All activities focus on and within the village, few people come in and agricultural extension agents are sorely needed. The potato variety has never been improved in the past 30 years and production is low. However, the biggest problem for Quiang women is their own traditional attitude. They believe women shouldn't come into community life as it is seen as a man's prerogative. Girls aren't educated because they will marry, hence education is a waste of money. All of these are familiar traditional concepts the world over. Hence there is no training for women and, even if women did want to become involved in income generating activities, they can't get guarantees for bank loans.

Conclusion

In such an inward-looking society, what can be done? The author recommends the following interventions.

- Establishment of a women's organisation in the village with democratically elected representatives
- Establishment of a market information channel
 - Practical training courses
 - Conscientiousisation of women to change their outmoded attitudes
 - Provision of micro-credit.

