# THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF CHINA: WHERE ARE THE WOMEN?

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AT THE TWENTIETH National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), not a single woman was elected to the Politburo. Women's participation in Chinese elite politics has stalled as men continue to dominate political power. The systemic underrepresentation of women in elite politics in the People's Republic of China (PRC) clashes with the party's propaganda about increasing 'the proportion of female cadres in the leading groups of state organs, ministries and commissions'.[1] Is there still hope for fair representation of women in the political arena?

## Women in Elite Politics

Historically, only thirty-two women have ever held top positions in the state and the party at the national level 正/副国级, commonly referred to as 'party and state leaders' 党和国家领导人. Among them, only six women have ever been full members of the Politburo: Ye Qun 叶群 (1969–1971), Jiang Qing 江青 (1969–1976), Deng Yingchao 邓颖超 (1978–1985), Wu Yi 吴仪 (2002–2006), Liu Yandong 刘延东 (2007–2017), and Sun Chunlan 孙春兰 (2012–2022). Two women, Wu Guixian 吴桂贤 (1973–1977) and Chen Muhua 陈慕华 (1977–1987), were alternate members 候补委员.

Unlike her predecessors, Wu Yi was the first female leader to make it to the top political circle in post-reform China, and the first to do it without being married to a party or state leader. The three post-reform female members of the Politburo have also served as vice-premiers of the PRC's State Council at different times: Wu Yi (2003–2007) was in charge of foreign commerce, trade, and health affairs, and Liu Yandong (2013–2018) and Sun Chunlan (2018 to present) were overseeing the broad portfolios of health affairs, education, and sports. There has never been a woman on the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC), which is the most powerful governing body of the CPC and has seven members today.

Although there is nothing new about the underrepresentation of women in elite politics, 2022 marked the first time since 2002 that women were completely absent from the Politburo, which has twenty-four members. In the leadup to the Twentieth Party Congress, Chen Yiqin 谌贻琴, the only woman provincial party secretary in China; Shen Yueyue 沈跃跃, president of the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF); and Yu Hongqiu 喻红秋, deputy secretary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection of the CPC, were all spoken of as likely to be promoted to the Politburo. None was, and only Chen made it on to the CPC's Central Committee, becoming one of only eleven women among the 205 full members, who make up 5.36 percent of the membership. The only small improvement was in the proportion of female representation in the overall congress: of 2,296 delegates, 27 percent (621) were women, compared with the Nineteenth Party Congress, which had about 24 percent women delegates.

The lack of explicit institutional quotas means there are no guarantees or protection of women's representation in CPC politics. There have been no regulations or policies specifically aimed at promoting women cadres at the national level. In the latest Program for the Development of Chinese Women — a five-year plan for women's development in major aspects, including economic participation, health, education, participation in decision-making processes, and social welfare — strategies for political participation are vague and general. For example, 'a certain

**Wu Yi meets governors of Hainan**
Source: Philip McMaster, Flickr

percentage' rather than a specific goal is required for proportional representation.

Greater emphasis is given to promoting women at the local level. The most recent published research on female provincial leaders shows that thirty-one women were selected among 276 governors and deputy governors, or 11.2 percent, in 2018. Among the 2016–2017 cohort, there were thirty-four (9.1 percent) women among 375 members of provincial CPC standing committees.[2] According to the *Opinions on Further Improving the Work of Training and Selecting Female Cadres and Recruiting Female Party Members*, issued by the CPC in 2001, party committees, governments, people's congresses, and people's political consultative conferences at provincial and prefectural levels should each have 'more than one female cadre in its leadership'.[3] While the proportion is still low, the gender quota in local governance at least is explicitly regulated in official documents. Research shows that women's representation in provincial leadership is not just tokenism; these female leaders have similar qualifications to their male counterparts.[4] Although greater participation by women in elite

politics does not necessarily mean that women's interests are being represented, it is a starting point.

Current scholarship suggests that Chinese political leaders, in both party and state systems, are selected and promoted based on the criteria of age, education, years of membership in the CPC, and relevant career trajectory.[5] While political allegiance continues to be the dominant factor, educational background and work experience have each played an important role in the progress of post–Mao Zedong elites in China. However, women are disadvantaged in all these aspects. They have fewer options to advance in politics because even official posts reflect a gendered division of labour, with women typically overseeing 'soft' areas such as health care and education while men manage such things as industry and development.[6] This deprives women of the relevant social networks required to achieve higher public positions.[7]

## Representing Women's Interests within the State

If women have limited access to the core of state power, how likely is it that the party-state will formulate women-friendly laws and policies? Who represents women's interests within the Chinese state? Theoretically, the National People's Congress (NPC) is the highest organ of state power and has the authority to enact laws, amend the constitution, and elect members to the central state organs; and the State Council, chaired by the premier, functions as the highest administrative body. Women hold less than half of all seats in the NPC: there are 742 female deputies in the Thirteenth NPC, accounting for only 24.9 percent of the total of 2,980 seats. There are only nineteen women among the 175 members of the current Standing Committee of the NPC; of the Standing Committee's fourteen vice-chairpersons, only one is a woman. Given that the process of lawmaking in China is a 'multistage and multi-arena' process involving not only the NPC and its Standing Committee, but also the CPC and the executive branch of the state,[8] women's substantive representation in the process is severely constrained.

National organisations for women seem to be the party-state's primary forums for demonstrating its commitment to women's political

participation while separating women from the mainstream political domain. There are two official women's organisations in China: the National Working Committee on Children and Women (NWCCW) 国务院妇女儿童工作委员会, which is a government bureaucracy, and the All-China Women's Federation 中华全国妇女联合会, a CPC-led 'mass organisation'.

The NWCCW, established in 1990, was the first and remains the only state-level government organ dedicated to the rights of women and children in China. Current director, Sun Chunlan, who is also the vice-premier of the State Council, has held the post since 2018. One of the committee's three deputy directors, Huang Xiaowei 黄晓薇, has also been the vice-president of the ACWF since 2018; the other two deputy directors are high-ranking male bureaucrats. The committee oversees China's National Program for Women's Development and National Program for Children's Development.

However, the efficacy of the NWCCW in advancing the position of women is questionable. It is not a policymaking institution, nor does it participate in the processes of policymaking by consultation or other visible means. Other than the programs it oversees, it is hard to find any substantial contribution that it has been able to make to women's advancement. The absence of documentation of the NWCCW's work could be the result of its relationship with the ACWF, which supervises and guides its work — a 'mass organisation' in charge of a government organ.

## The ACWF

The ACWF, established by the CPC in 1948, has played an important role in pushing forward laws that advance women's causes, including equality. The ACWF does not have any policymaking or legislative power, but it has the capacity to influence policymaking and legislative processes. An overlap in personnel also improves the likelihood of the ACWF's policy advocacy reaching policymakers: the presidents and vice-presidents of federations at all levels simultaneously belong to the standing committees of the people's congress at the same level. The ability of its representatives to directly submit bills and proposals to the NPC is convenient for the ACWF, but only to advocate for policies: it does not in any way guarantee

that the federation's proposals will be approved. Lobbying from both local federations and the ACWF is essential to persuade policymakers to support their proposals. The ACWF has directly participated in the drafting and revising of national policies and laws including the *Marriage Law*, the *Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests*, and the *Anti–Domestic Violence Law*. Because of its privileged relationship to the party, the ACWF does the work of a national women's governmental organ without being one. As a government official once pointed out, 'We have no specific governmental department [for women's advancement] in our country, but the Women's Federation takes this responsibility and functions as a national institution for the improvement of women's status.'[9]

Established during the party's revolutionary emergence, the ACWF has over the years prioritised party-directed assessments, inspections, activities, and projects. The ACWF's work predominantly serves the party-state's broader interests and ideological goals. When advancing women's rights has aligned with bigger plans, the ACWF has been able to leverage party and state support; when it has not, women's interests have been subordinated to the needs of the party-state.

Following Xi Jinping's emphasis on 'the unique role of women in the family', family-centred discourses have become the focus of ACWF's recent work, including its Family Happiness and Wellbeing Project 家家幸福安康工程 and the recently adopted *Family Education Promotion Law* 家庭教育促进法, both of which reinforce the domestic role of women, traditional constructions of masculinity and femininity, and rigid gender roles within a patriarchal family structure.

## The Party-State's Gender Ideology under Xi

The sidelining of women in the PRC's political sphere reflects the retrogressive gender agenda under Xi Jinping. Xi has particularly highlighted his idea of *jia guo tianxia* 家国天下, which considers families 'an essential foundation' for national development and social harmony. In the name of promoting Chinese traditional culture, the party-state today draws on the conservative content of Confucianism — such as social

harmony, respect for authority, obedience to one's superiors, devotion to the state, and protection of the family — to regulate people's behaviour, and women's behaviour in particular. In his speech to the new leadership of the ACWF in 2018, Xi pointed out that the federation 'needs to help women strike a balance between family and work to become women of the new era who can take up social responsibilities while contributing to their families'. The party invokes Confucian values in the domestic sphere in a way that associates traditional ideas about marriage and family, including women's domestic obligations and subservience to men, with the preservation of social stability.

The party-state has accordingly become more interventionist in matters of family and marriage. In 2020, the ACWF and the Ministry of Public Affairs jointly issued *The Instructions on Strengthening Educational Work on Coaching in Marriage and Family* 关于加强新时代婚姻家庭辅导教育工作的指导意见. The document asserts the importance of 'publicising and carrying forward the excellent traditional Chinese marriage and family culture' and the necessity of 'establishing pre-marital education and consultation' to reduce conflicts within the family.

The party-state's paternalistic agenda includes the now compulsory thirty-day 'cooling off' window for couples who want to divorce, the newly adopted *Family Education Promotion Law*, and the Three-Child Policy. The emphasis on 'women's unique role in promoting family virtues' exacerbates the essentialism of women's domestic role and, along with pressure on young women to marry and ideally have three children, further disadvantages women when it comes to working in the political sphere.

## Conclusion

In a nutshell, it is unlikely there will be a significant improvement in women's status in Chinese politics in the coming years, in terms of both descriptive representation and substantial representation. Under President Xi, in 2022, a general deterioration in women's access to political power was clearly observed in tandem with the promotion of the 'traditional family virtues of the Chinese nation'.

This text is taken from *China Story Yearbook: Chains*, edited by Linda Jaivin, Esther Sunkyung Klein and Annie Luman Ren, published 2023 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/CSY.2023.02D