Political Mobilization of Women by the CCP

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Abstract

This essay provides an overview of the political mobilization of women by the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter, CCP), particularly since the formation of the PRC. It also assesses the continued challenges and roadblocks in women's political ascendancy arising out of ideological and policy barriers. Finally, the essay briefly looks at the emerging trends in the Xi Era.

Keywords

Instrumental Mobilization of Women

Women's participation and representation in politics are rooted in their social, economic, and cultural contexts. Historically, women in Chinese society occupied an inferior position in a highly patriarchal system where practices like sale and purchase of women, infanticide, foot binding, and lack of education were standard (Li 2000). From the beginning of the 20th century, in elite pronunciations by reformers like Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, nation's emancipation became closely associated with the idea of a strong nation. It was argued that China's weak status and underdevelopment resulted from the feudal family structure and that women's liberation would modernize the nation. Educated women would also contribute to the economic life of the country. Subsequently, early Communists like Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu also made a case for women's liberation through socialism, which would usher in economic independence, democracy, and equality between the sexes and women of different classes. Notably, the goal of women's mobilization by both reformers and revolutionaries was always subservient and instrumental to the state's purposes, and an independent feminist movement was not allowed to flourish. Catherine Gipoulon (1989: 50) argues that women's appearance on the Chinese political scene coincides with a period of reappraisal of established order and establishment of a new political order, for e.g., first in the year 1898 and then in the period between 1919-1927. Activists and early feminists like Qiu Jin (1897-1907), He Yinzhen (1884-1920), Xiang Jingyu (1895-1928, the only female founding member of CCP), among others, were pioneers in women's political activism.

In the Chinese Communist Party, the history of women's political participation is as old as the Party itself. The CCP was established in 1921 and was followed by The Women's Department's formation in 1922. The CCP advocated "equal rights for men and women" and "freedom from feudal culture and society" for women (Hong 1997). Accordingly, women were granted the right to vote, and restrictive laws on marriage, labour, etc., were abolished. In the coming decades, women were recognized as an essential group for mobilization as an oppressed section that could help achieve revolutionary goals. Song Qingling, a prominent leader in her own right and wife of Sun Yat-Sen, extensively promoted women's emancipation by organising feminist groups, advocate marriage, property, and civil rights for women, etc. (Women of China in

1949, 1971). During the anti-Japanese war efforts, women were recruited in the military and performed such services as cooking, nursing, and intelligence gathering. In many areas, women took up the charge in industries and agriculture, freeing men for military service (Hong 1997: 5; Goodman 2000). The CCP also carried out independent mobilization work among female peasants and urban workers and promoted their education and skill development. In the Marxist tradition, women's emancipation was a natural outcome of the general class struggle against forces of capitalism and thus was a necessary but not primary consideration for the Party.

With the establishment of the PRC in 1949, significant progress was made in women's empowerment. The feudal system that subjugated women was abolished, and equal rights were given to all women in voting, marriage, employment, etc. In the same year, the All-China Women's Federation was established as a 'people's organisation' under the CCP leadership that would unite women and strive for their 'development and emancipation'. Its stated responsibilities are to 'represent and safeguard women's rights and interests and promote gender equality" (ACWF website). The 1954 Constitution of the PRC further stated that "Women in the People's Republic of China have equal rights with men in all spheres of life including the political, economic, cultural, social and family spheres." (Constitution of PRC, 1954)

With the reforms mentioned above, it was claimed: "there is nothing that now holds women back in their strivings for the betterment of their conditions." (The Women in China 1949, 1971) In Mao's China, women were to be no longer confined to homes and expected 'to hold up half the sky' by contributing to social and economic goals of nation-building. The state's achievements on this front have been numerous, for e.g., by the 1980s, female labour force participation was around 80 percent (falling to approximately 68 percent in 2018, still relatively high in comparison to the global average of 48.5 percent) (World Bank)

In the political sphere, Guo and Zheng (2007: 4) argue that women's progress can be divided into three stages. Between 1949 and the 1960s, policies like affirmative action of the party-state, quotas for women, and top-down appointment guaranteed their political inclusion. The proportion of women increased from 12% (147) in the first NPC to 17.9% in 1964. The second stage in the 1970s saw the peak of women's political participation. Women not only accounted

for 22.6% of the 4th NPC, almost 25% of the Standing Committee of the NPC were also women indicating that female cadres were placed at all levels (Guo and Zheng 2007: 6; NPC Observer). After a period of decline in the 1980s, the third stage of progress was initiated in the 1990s as China responded to the international community before and after the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing. Strategies like recruitment and training of female cadres, compulsory quotas, etc., were pursued actively.

Howell (2002: 44) argues that these ebbs and flows in political participation are closely aligned to elite politics, shifts in economic policies, and state responses. In the communist system, women's liberation was subsumed to class struggle. Thus, women's participation in public life and politics increased when the state mobilized women to achieve socio-economic transformations like raising economic output or spreading official rhetoric and policies. However, party pressure to mobilize women receded once the political campaigns cooled off or economic restructuring demanded adjustments to the labour force. In such scenarios, the Party's push for women to enter the public domain decreases and is reflected in their falling participation in party and government affairs. For instance, in the early years of the communist regime, many women were recruited and relocated to cities to fulfill the demands of rebuilding the cities and setting up industries. A second push to this trend came during the *Great Leap Forward* Movement when more women were incorporated into the workforce and political life. They became involved in collective agriculture and took up leadership roles in cooperatives. Further, there was a need for women to do 'women's work', advocating government policy on family planning, social reforms, etc.

The strategy of mass campaigns reached high noon during the Cultural Revolution. While at the top, Jiang Qing (Chairman Mao's second wife) gained a seat in the Politburo and unprecedented personal influence; establishing revolutionary committees at various levels opened up new avenues for women's political engagement at lower levels. Moreover, women's participation served the regime's interest in several indirect ways, e.g., improved optics for the CCP, which appears as representatives of all sections of the society. Further, women in particular positions of power allow an authoritarian government to present a friendlier public face. (Read n.d.)

However, despite official pronouncements on gender equality, women's presence in state politics has remained low, especially at the upper echelons of power. E.g., since 1949, China has had only six female members on the 25-member Politburo (of whom three owed their positions to their husband's political clout); there has never been a female member of the Politburo Standing Committee or a female President. Further, even at lower levels, there is a concentration of women cadres in less powerful departments related to women's work. (Li 2017) Socially constructed norms and practices around differences between men and women determine what is perceived as a proper role for them and affect political recruitment. Gendered ideas of the public and private sphere see women as more closely connected to the sphere of home and family and restricts their entry into politics. There are various other serious roadblocks to women's promotion to higher positions that have discouraged women's political participation. The following section examines these factors and the emerging trends in the Xi Jinping regime
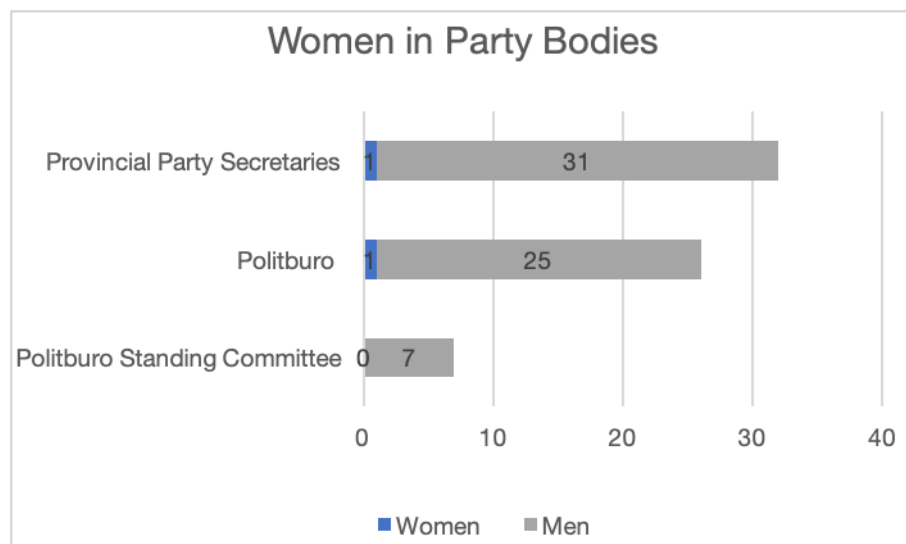
What is Keeping Women out?

While the CCP has to be credited for much advancement in women's status than in Imperial China, in taking up the mantle of women's empowerment and monopolizing it, the revolutionary state denied the women of a private language that could be used to express and share personal experiences (NYT 2017). Further, women's interests were made subordinate to collective goals, and official rhetoric did not often translate into reality. For e.g., women continued to bear domestic burdens like child care and housework; even as they contributed to collective farming, there were fewer positions of authority. Women also had to perform more physically demanding jobs. In contrast, men performed seemingly the more valuable mechanized tasks since it was an internalized belief that men are more intelligent and thus apt for jobs requiring skills (Howell 2002: 47)

Furthermore, in the Party ideology, it was understood that women's economic emancipation would lead to their upliftment. However, this did not consider addressing the structural patriarchy and gender biases prevalent within homes and outside. Finally, periods of progress in women's political mobilization were often followed by an ebb, wherein the Party-state

promoted conservative values of family life, duties, etc., that negatively impacted women's presence in public life. (Howell 2002: 44)
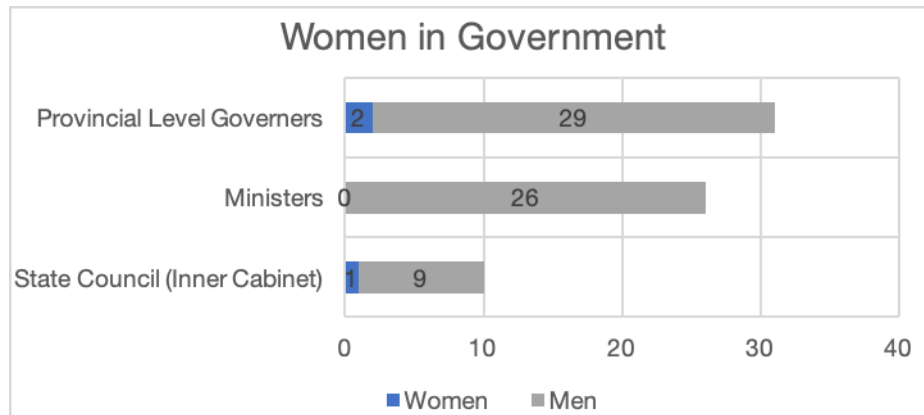
As has been described above, state-led feminism of the previous decades had put the initiative in the Party's hands. With the paternalistic state-changing direction in the reform period, women's participation both in economic and political life took a hit. Unequal employment opportunities and increasingly unequal income distribution between men and women became rampant, particularly with the decline of the state sector. The labour force participation of women in China fell from 73 percent in 1990 to 63 percent in 2010 (World Bank) . In politics, female members in the Political Bureau declined from 10.5% (2/19) in 1969 to 0% (0/20) in 1992; in Central Committee from 10% in 1973 to 6.4% in 1992; while in the NPC proportion of female representatives remained stable around 21%, their share in the Standing Committee declined drastically from 25% in 1975 to 12.68% in 1993 (Li 2006; Rosen 2000: 320). In 2017, women made up about 26 percent of CCP membership. In the last decade, women's share in the new recruits has increased from 37.4% in 2009 to 42% in 2019 (Xinhua). However, the numbers keep declining in subsequently higher positions. For e.g., as of 2017 in the Central Committee, the proportion is 9% (33), and in the Politburo, the further declines to 8% (2/25). There is no female member in the Politburo Standing Committee. Among government bodies, there is one female leader in the State Council (9); and 16 in the outer cabinet (Shih 2017)

Fig 1: Women in Top Party Bodies

Source: MERICS

Fig 2: Women in Government

Source: MERICS

Su (2006: 144) argues that, while NPC is the highest legislative body, it is largely ceremonial and can easily maintain its quota for women. However, that does not translate into real political power. To assess women's share in Chinese politics, one needs to look at provincial elites as important power brokers who exercise influence in policymaking and implementation. According to various studies, the situation on this front has been dismal too. In 2017, there were no women among 31 Secretaries of provincial party committees; and only 29 women among standing committee members of the provincial party committees compared to 290 men. In the same year, there were two female Provincial level governors and 14 Deputy Governors (Shih 2017: 8). Thus, less than 9 percent of Party secretaries and heads of local governments at the provincial, municipal, and county levels are women. At the county level, women make up 9.33 percent of leadership, 5.29 percent at the city level, and 3.23 percent at the provincial level (Lu 2020). In contrast, women comprise 49.7% percent of members in the Party's neighbourhood and village committees[1] (2017) which enforce policy at the ground level, clearly indicating a glass ceiling for women's rise in politics. (Shih 2017: 8)

These figures once again highlight the question as to why despite a tremendous rise in educational and economic status, women remain an outlier in state and party politics. As Guo (2013: 1) puts it, it is a problem of 'three lows' opportunity, power, and numbers. First, the opportunities available for women are fewer, with often higher entry criteria for women. Second, there is a glass ceiling on women's rise due to ideological and institutional factors

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[1] 四、妇女政治地位显著提高 (scio.gov.cn) Sì, fùnǚ zhèngzhì dìwèi xiǎnzhù tígāo Women's Political Participation has improved significantly- Report of the State Council Information Office

resulting in fewer promotions to positions of power. Third, an existing lower proportion of women, i.e., since a majority of high-level positions are occupied by men, they act as gatekeepers and resist entry of women while setting workplace culture.
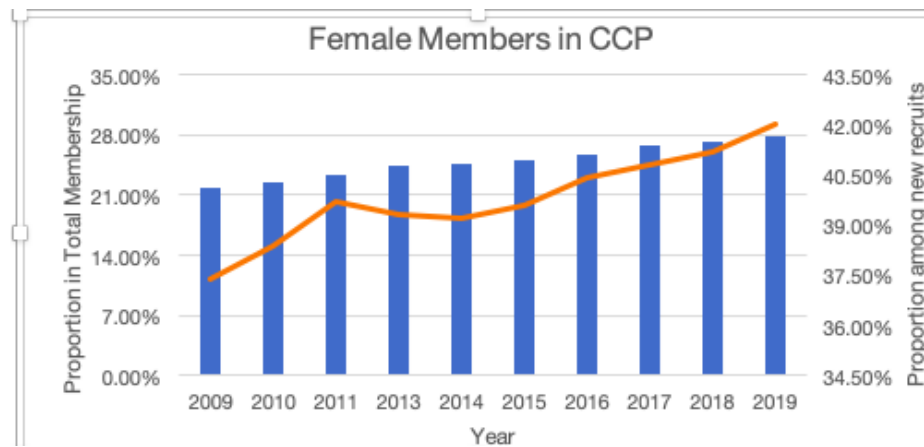
Other scholars have identified the problem of theoretical framing resulting in the failure of state-led women's empowerment. Howell (2002: 49) argues the official frame of understanding is that of socialism, where women's emancipation is part of the broader class struggle. Further, in their pursuit of equality, the CCP de-emphasized the difference between the sexes in the pre-reform period (Chandran 2009: 299). The old ideological framework cannot adequately explain the changing sources and forms of women's oppression in the reform period. Over the years, the ACWF has been running campaigns to promote poverty alleviation, entrepreneurship, family happiness, and well-being. These and other training campaigns are meant to solve the supposed supply-side factor for women's low participation: their low standards (*suzhi di*). Deriving from gender biases, it is understood that women lack leadership qualities. This message is often internalized by female cadres to believe that their exclusion and lack of promotion is an outcome of their poor quality and lesser educational qualifications resulting in low self-worth. As a result of socialization, women leaders are seen as lacking decisiveness, confidence, and skills for performance. Thus, despite there being higher entry qualifications for women than their male counterparts, women are shown as lacking the ambition and initiative needed for managerial positions.

Next, there are systemic factors, which include the greater difficulty women face in succeeding in politics. From the outset, the training routes are different for men and women. Due to the patriarchal value system and gendered roles, which seep from the private sphere into the public sphere, women cadre are often concentrated in departments related to women's work like family planning, healthcare, education, etc. which are considered as requiring womanly qualities of organisation and care instead of skill and competitiveness that is needed for achieving economic goals or managing large industries. Prevalence of cultural and gender norms of a male-dominated political system like "*nan zhu wai, nu zhu nei*" reduce women to their roles as dutiful wives and mothers. At the same time, their male colleagues get to be responsible for work in departments like industry and agriculture. This leaves women cadre with neither functional experience nor tangible results that are needed for promotion to higher

levels of authority. Further, even women who make it to high-level positions intentionally conceal gender characteristics and behave in a way that the predominantly male culture dictates (Guo 2013: 3). There is also the matter of gatekeeping by men who occupy positions and those who do not want to serve under women. As a result, it is difficult for women to rise above deputy positions, making politics un-lucrative for young women. Women are also excluded from the networking that happens among male colleagues through wining and dining. According to social norms, familial duties have to be the first priority without much additional support from the workplace, negatively affecting their competitiveness vis-a-vis men.

Moreover, institutional constraints like early retirement age (55 years as compared to 60 years for men), unequal pay, childbearing and domestic responsibilities also hold back women's career advancement. This discrimination at the policy level leads to loss of income and pension and also keeps competition from women leaders for the top jobs at bay for men (Chandran 2019). Quotas for women have been paid lip service by barely fulfilling minimum requirements, even while leading to male dissatisfaction and reverse discrimination. (Guo 2013: 19)

More competitive elections and recruitment process for cadres have tended to work against female candidates. Women leaders have to withstand a higher pressure of public opinion. Howell (2006) shows in villages how women cadres' roles are limited to family planning tasks. Their role in implementation of One Child Policy often made women unpopular in elections (Guo 1993:11) People also tend to doubt the decision-making skills of female cadres in general, and more so if they do not have prior experience in managing places such as township enterprises (Guo 1993:12). Furthermore, apart from a gendered division of labour within the family, which allows men greater freedom to participate in public processes, women's participation is also affected when they move from their native villages to regions where they do not have kinship ties, that would form their support base. Su (2006: 145) argues that women candidates and representatives are expected to represent several discriminated categories simultaneously, allowing the Party to improve its statistics for multiple categories while leaving more positions open for preferred candidates.

Note: Values for 2012 is missing due to unavailability of data for new recruits, Sources: Central Organisation Department Annual Membership Data 2009-2019

The policy and ideological barriers discussed above have not come down in the Xi era, and the state narrative has become more oriented towards tradition. There is also little demonstrated political will to address the gender question. Even though the recruitment of women members has increased, and women comprise 42% of the new recruits and 27%[2] of the overall membership, the persistence of the barriers discussed above means that women are concentrated at the lower echelons of political power.

Further, trends in the recruitment of cadres align with the broader regime agenda (Bian et al. 1994). With government policy focused on technological goals and industries like AI, an education sector where women are severely underrepresented due to cultural and institutional discrimination (Adlakha 2021), women cadres might face further exclusion from higher positions in government. Confining women to family planning and other departments with 'women's work' implies that women can enter into political life only as representatives of their gender and not their profession, class, or ideology

Moreover, under President Xi Jinping, the focus on ideological purity and stability has constrained the development of independent women's movement and feminist voices (Lu 2020 Golley 2018). ACWF, since its formation, has been a Party-affiliated and directed organisation that performs the task of top-down implementation of the Party's policies and rally women for the Party's cause. While clampdown on corruption and ostentatious parties for officials has

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[2] 2019 年中国共产党党内统计公报_共产党员网 (12371.cn) 2019 CPC Members Statistics Bulletin

ignited fledgling hopes of creating a more suitable environment for women's participation, there is a continuation of derogatory biases for e.g., women in professional positions are referred to as 美女 by male colleagues, making them not equal peers but a sexualized subject (Lu 2020). Even though taking inspiration from international currents, a nascent #MeToo movement has sought to influence government policy (as is visible in the new sexual harassment laws in the 2020 Civil Code), the State has sought to take over narrative power. Through campaigns like the "Most Beautiful Family' Campaign of the ACWF[3], the Xi regime has sought to reinforce traditional family values and promote higher childbirth to meet the challenges of demographic change. This not only merely focuses on social roles of women but also reiterates the initial subordination of the matter of women's empowerment to the goal of national rejuvenation.

To conclude, first, the CCP's mission of politically mobilizing women is still plagued by ideological and structural biases. As a result, higher recruitment at the grassroots level is not transitioning into real positions of power for women within the Party. Second, improvement in women's political position requires reforms in other spheres like education, economy, and social values. But with the Party aiming for an overall control in all spheres, one can only expect changes in a top- down direction, and even those would be confined by the official Party ideology.

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