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# THE EVOLUTION OF AUTHORITARIAN STATE FEMINISM IN THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY: WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION FROM MAO TO XI

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## Abstract

Since the founding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1921, women's liberation has been ideologically central to its revolutionary agenda, revealing a persistent gender paradox in Chinese socialist governance. This paper examines the extent to which authoritarian state feminism has expanded women's descriptive representation in China's legislative institutions while their access to elite political power has remained limited from the Mao era to the Xi era. Theoretically, it conceptualizes Chinese state feminism as an authoritarian model that instrumentalizes gender equality for national development and stability, subordinating it to class priorities under Mao and increasingly to Confucian family norms and demographic imperatives under Xi. It examines how the relationship between gender inclusion and political power has developed across the Mao era, the reform period, and the Xi era. Empirically, the study compiles and analyzes longitudinal data on women's membership in the Politburo, Central Committee, and NPC from 1954 to 2023. Key findings highlight elite-level exclusion despite gains in legislative representation. Drawing on existing scholarship and qualitative evidence, the paper also discusses gendered portfolio segregation and coalition-based lobbying through the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) as relevant dimensions of women's political participation under authoritarian governance. By comparing women's representation in legislative and elite Party institutions over time, the study contributes to scholarship on authoritarian state feminism by highlighting the limits of state-led gender inclusion and the distinction between women's numerical presence and their access to elite political power.

**Keywords**
Authoritarian state feminism; China; Chinese Communist Party (CCP); Women's political representation; Gender and authoritarianism

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since its founding in 1921, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has positioned women's liberation as a crucial component of its revolutionary and state-building agenda. Drawing heavily on the Soviet experience, CCP feminists identified women's oppression as part of a larger struggle to topple the "Three Big Mountains": imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism. The question of women's political participation and gender equality has occupied a central yet contested position in the history of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (W. Zheng, 2017).

A key institutional development came in April 1949 with the establishment of the All-China Democratic Women's Federation (ACWF, later renamed the All-China Women's Federation). Designed to extend the Party's reach into rural villages and urban neighborhoods, the ACWF became the primary vehicle for implementing state-led women's policies, institutionally separating women's policy machinery from the core executive and Party decision-making bodies while also limiting women's access to the core of state power (Zheng, 2017). In Maoist discourse, gender was never a standalone category of analysis; it was always subordinate to class (Dongchao, 2011). The CCP has maintained a long-standing practice of training women cadres and implementing gender quotas within the state administration. As a result, women held 22% of the parliamentary seats in the 1970s, while their presence in the CCP Politburo has never exceeded 10% and stood at zero. Because women are restrained from the core of power, successful lobbying requires a coalition of state agency allies to navigate the different legislative and Party-affiliated bodies (Jiang & Zhou, 2022).

The post-1978 economic reforms produced unanticipated gendered effects. Initially framed as gender-blind, marketization dismantled many Mao-era quota systems and appointment mechanisms. Scholars describe the 1980s as a "dark age" for women's political representation (Dongchao, 2011; Zhong, 2025). This study adopts a focused comparative framework that privileges the Mao Zedong era (1949–1976) and the Xi Jinping era (2012–present) as the principal periods for examining the descriptive evolution of women's political representation within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The reform era is treated as a distinct and analytically important period during which mandatory quotas eroded, meritocratic and patronage-based selection processes intensified gendered disadvantages, and elite female representation declined sharply. Empirical data, however, span all eras and cover the Politburo, the Central Committee (CC), and National People's Congress (NPC), thus

ensuring that conclusions are grounded in a full historical dataset rather than in selective periods.

In the current Xi Jinping era, the Maoist spirit of gender equality has experienced a conservative retreat (MERICS, 2024). Party-state discourse has increasingly invoked Confucian principles of family order, presenting women's domestic contributions, including caregiving and child-rearing as foundational to social cohesion and national rejuvenation (Evans, 2021). The PSC, typically consisting of 5–9 members (currently seven), is the highest decision-making body within the CCP, effectively controlling China's political direction. All listed leaders (Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping) were male top leaders, with no exceptions (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2023). The Politburo currently has no female members, and women hold no full ministerial positions in the State Council. This creates a gender discrepancy in which women are present in the larger legislative body but excluded from the core decision-making organs.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study primarily examines descriptive representation. It draws on existing data and secondary sources on female membership in three key institutions: (1) the Politburo (full members only, as the apex decision-making body below the Politburo Standing Committee); (2) the Central Committee (full and alternate members); and (3) the National People's Congress (NPC) deputies. The study uses published membership figures and statistics from existing sources to examine women's political representation across these institutions and historical periods.

Data for 1954–1997 were drawn primarily from historical research of Rosen (1995) and cross-verified against official CCP announcements in Xinhua archives, *People's Daily* reports, and secondary sources including, Li (2022) leadership analyses. For the post-1997 period (15th–20th Central Committees and 9th–14th NPCs), membership lists were manually compiled from primary official sources: Xinhua News Agency releases, the Central People's Government portal (gov.cn), the National People's Congress website (npc.gov.cn), CCP communiqués on Intra-Party Statistics released around June 30 each year by the Central Organization Department, and State Council Information Office summaries. These sources were triangulated with independent institutional reporting and scholarly works (Cai, 2023a; Li, 2022; MERICS, 2024; Reddy & Bhole, 2022; U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2023) to mitigate potential presentational bias in Party sources. Visualization was performed using Python (pandas for data cleaning and standardization and matplotlib for time-series plots) to facilitate direct temporal and cross-institutional comparison.

## 3. THEORIZING FEMINISM IN MODERN CHINA

State feminism, commonly studied in liberal democratic contexts, operates differently in authoritarian political systems. The concept of state feminism was originally developed by Helga Hernes in the 1980s to describe the institutionalization of feminist goals within the state apparatus. In democratic welfare states, state feminism typically combines two dynamics: "feminism from above," implemented through gender-equitable social policies and institutional reforms, and "feminization from below," referring to political and cultural mobilization by women's movements (Borchorst & Siim, 2008).

Unlike in capitalist democracies, where women actively engage with and shape state policy, in postsocialist China, state feminism refers to a state-sanctioned model characterized by a monopoly over women's affairs, with the state acting as the ultimate benefactor of women's rights (Dong, 2023; Sun, 2026; To, 2016). Based on socialist ideals, the ACWF tends to carefully distinguish Marxist women's liberation theory from Western bourgeois feminism (Q. Huang, 2023). In a May 2017 speech to Women's Federation officials titled *"Integrate political awareness throughout the entire process of women's federation reform and work of the Women's Federation System"* (把讲政治贯穿于妇联改革和工作全过程), ACWF Party Secretary Song Xiuyan warned that Western hostile forces were stepping up their Westernization and divisive strategy against China. She stated that these actors attacked the Marxist theory on women and "our fundamental state policy of equality between men and women," and actively promoted Western feminism and feminist supremacy to interfere in domestic affairs and undermine state policies (Song, 2017).

This brings us to a core debate in scholarship on Chinese gender politics: scholars examine the three-faceted relationship between the Party-state, the state-sponsored Women's Federation, and feminist movements, but they disagree on whether China should be viewed as a form of state feminism at all (Zhou, 2023). Zhou (2023) distinguishes between authoritarian and illiberal state feminism. Authoritarian state feminism refers to state feminism tied to specific non-democratic regimes, while illiberal state feminism describes a political environment that counters the premises of liberal scripts, which include an emphasis on individual freedom and rights, limitation on state intervention, the protection of minority rights, and the defence of pluralism. Zhou argues that illiberal is a more relevant term because illiberal tendencies and actors are on the rise globally and can exist even within liberal or hybrid democracies, not just in overtly non-democratic regimes.

### 3.1. *Defining Features of Authoritarian State Feminism*

Building on Dong (2023), Luo (2026) and Sun (2026) this paper identifies two central dimensions of authoritarian state feminism. These dimensions generate observable expectations about women's descriptive representation, which the empirical sections examine.

### 3.1.1. Top-Down Institutional Control and Institutional Containment

In China, the resilience of authoritarianism lies in the state's capacity to transform and selectively incorporate certain politically safe feminist discourses while marginalizing autonomous feminist activism (Sun, 2026). The state adopts the language of gender equality and women's empowerment from global discourse, particularly following the 1995 Beijing Women's Conference. Official discourse shifted from the longstanding formulation of "equality between men and women" (nannü pingdeng 男女平等) toward "social equality between men and women" (shehui xingbie pingdeng 社会性别平等) (Yang, 2022). The state selectively appropriates feminist successes, codifying issues such as domestic violence into law while suppressing the activists who campaigned for them (Dong, 2023).

The ACWF is increasingly viewed as "the 'good daughter of the Party,' meaning that its agenda" is strictly secondary to the CCP's priorities of societal stabilization and power consolidation. This institutional structure necessitates what Jiang and Zhou (2022) term coalition-based gender lobbying: to advance any initiative, gender advocates must build strategic alliances with powerful Party and state actors across legislative and executive bodies. The Xi era is marked by increasingly strict political control, which has redefined the safe limits for gender-based political action. Gender issues that were previously neutral have become sensitized due to their associations with international movements (such as #MeToo) or digital activism.

### 3.1.2. Ideological and Performative Legitimation

State feminism in China advances a strictly heteronormative ideal that prioritizes marriage, motherhood, and reproduction. State-controlled media play a central role in enacting this gendered logic, acting as mouthpieces of the Party and producers of gendered knowledge (Luo et al., 2026). Under Mao, women's liberation was subordinated to class struggle and mobilized for socialist construction. Mao mobilized women into social production with the iconic slogan "women hold up half the sky," redefining them as revolutionary subjects essential to nation-building (Shen, 2016). Even as the state promotes Wolf Warrior masculinity, the regime invokes the role of women in national liberation wars to portray the ruling party as the sole guarantor of the nation (Dong, 2023; Lorch & Bunk, 2016).

On the international stage, the regime employs autocratic genderwashing: adopting women's rights reforms to distract from authoritarian practices and burnish its reputation (Bush & Zetterberg, 2024; Johnson, 2023). Chen and Lu (2025) refer to this as *discursive state feminism*, in which progressive rhetoric serves as a strategic tool to enhance international prestige and maintain domestic control without genuine commitment to women's rights. A central part of this genderwashing strategy involves highlighting the perceived failures of Western democracies to legitimize China's own model. By promoting Chinese wisdom and a

Chinese model, the regime positions itself as an international leader offering a state-led alternative to Western liberal approaches. Globally, the state promotes a Chinese model of gender equality to act as a rule-maker in international discourse (Bush & Zetterberg, 2024; Chen & Lu, 2025; Johnson, 2023).

The ACWF is organizationally embedded within the Party-state apparatus and lacks autonomous decision-making power. Its leadership is appointed by the Party, its budget controlled by the state, and its agenda subordinate to Party priorities (Cai, 2023b; Cheng, 2026; Jiang & Zhou, 2022). Chinese gender politics is best understood as authoritarian state feminism, in which the Party-state institutionalizes gender equality not as a response to feminist pressure but as an instrument for achieving national development, social stability, and demographic control (Luo et al., 2026). As discussed above, scholars and feminists have criticized the Mao-era approach to women's liberation for prioritizing state needs over women's autonomy (Shen, 2016). Under Xi Jinping, this state-centered approach to gender has increasingly foregrounded the traditional Confucian construct of *jia guo tianxia* (家国天下) (Cai, 2023a), often translated as family-state-all under heaven or family, nation, and the world. The state tolerates pink feminists only when their advocacy aligns with nationalism and patriotism, using them to reinforce regime legitimacy (Sun, 2026). At the same time, independent feminist movements are repressed or stigmatized as Western hostile forces by the state (Cui, 1998).

### *3.2. The Historical Construction of Gender in Chinese Discourse*

Modern authoritarian gender governance in China is the culmination of a century-long ideological battle over the shifting definitions of femininity and emancipation. Theorizing feminism is described as one of several ideologies adopted by educated Chinese individuals who were seeking modernity and the rejection of the ancient dynastic system. The term *nüquan* first appeared around 1900 in Chinese translations of foreign texts, primarily Japanese translations that utilized the neologism to represent the concepts of women's rights or power. This new terminology challenged the traditional *nannü* system, specifically opposing Confucian ideals such as gender differentiation (*nannü youbie*) and segregation (*nannü shoushou buqin*). Following the rise of the New Culture Movement in 1915, the term *nüquan zhuyi* became the standard Chinese rendition for feminism, associating the movement directly with the pursuit of women's power and rights (W. Zheng, 2017).

Early twentieth-century reformers and revolutionaries recognized that transforming gender practices was essential for national revival and combating feudalism *(fengjian zhuyi)*. Chinese intellectuals adapted feminism through a process of Sinicization, integrating it into the nation's quest for modernization and power rather than adopting it as a mere Western import (X. Huang, 2018; W. Zheng, 2017). This process of national transformation was also reflected in the changing meanings of *funü* and *nüxing*, both referring to women and pointing

to Chinese notions of gender. Historically, funü signified women within the kinship structures under Confucian doctrine, a collective identity tied to traditional familial roles. In the 1920s, the term nüxing (female sex) emerged as a challenge to this Confucian kinship model. When the Communist Party-state redefined funü to designate a new political entity, it reshaped women's gender roles and repositioned them within guojia (国家, the state, production) and jiating (家庭, the family, reproduction). Women were transformed from members of the family/kin to citizens of the nation/family. Class identity was deliberately prioritized over gender, and Western feminist notions were denounced as bourgeois and individualist (X. Huang, 2018). The triumph of totalitarian ideology in China precludes individual subjectivity, leading to a literary and social world where the emphasis on class struggle obscures gender differences. State feminism is defined as the advocacy of women's movement demands from within the state (Cui, 1998).

The term *funü jiefang* (women's liberation) gained rapid ascendance during the May Fourth Movement, led by educated women and men advocating equal educational and employment opportunities as the foundation for women's liberation. Many of these activists later joined the CCP and became key figures in China's political and cultural transformation. The term *nüquan zhuyi* lost favor within the Party due to its association with Western socialist movements, which viewed feminism as a bourgeois concept emerging from early 20th-century rivalries between radical suffragists and socialist women (Dongchao, 2011; W. Zheng, 2017). To continue the feminist agenda within Party ideology, CCP feminists replaced *nüquan* with *funü quanli* (women's rights) (W. Zheng, 2017), popularizing women's liberation as a revolutionary slogan advocating gender equality in labor (Chen & Lu, 2025).

Since the 1980s, the term "feminine-ism" has increasingly replaced "feminism" in official narratives to depoliticize feminist language. Since 2012, the term "gender equality" has appeared more frequently in *People's Daily* than the other three terms (Chen & Lu, 2025). To analyze women's political participation systematically, this study draws on the classic typology of political representation (Pitkin, 1967):

**Table 1 - Pitkin's Typology of Political Representation Applied to China**

| Type | Definition | Application to China |
|---|---|---|
| **Descriptive representation** | Descriptive representation is defined simply as who holds office. It refers to the physical or numerical presence of a specific group, such as women, within elected assemblies. Descriptive representation is a form of standing for the represented based on resemblance rather than action (Childs & Krook, 2009; Dovi, 2018). | In the Chinese context, this is measured through women's membership in the NPC, CC, and Politburo. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Substantive representation** | The articulation and advancement of women's interests through policy outcomes; acting for women by representing their needs and promoting women-friendly policy change (Childs & Krook, 2009; Wängnerud, 2009). | Women disproportionately assigned to feminine portfolios (health, education, ACWF) and the Women's Federation which typically offer fewer resources and promotion opportunities than masculine portfolios (finance or security). Executive posts are more difficult for women to reach than legislative seats (Jiang et al., 2022). |
| **Symbolic representation** | The symbolic significance and legitimizing function of women's presence; how it shapes citizens beliefs about inclusion and regime legitmacy (Celis et al., 2014; Ferree, 2015). | State uses descriptive gains to signal gender commitment internationally; absence from top bodies undermines domestic credibility |

Source: Author

## 3.3. *StateFeminism under Mao and* Xi

### 3.3.1 *Mao Era* (1949–1976): *The Socialist Legacy* (1949–*Late*1970s)

Under Mao Zedong's leadership, the CCP framed women's emancipation as an integral component of the grand proletariat class emancipation. Women could only achieve genuine liberation once the proletariat seized power (Tian, 2021). Class was an alien concept in pre-revolutionary China. Following the Marxist-Leninist tradition, the CCP analyzed Chinese society and politics as a struggle, defining the revolution as the overthrow of the old society and the creation of a new egalitarian order free from class exploitation (Roberts, 2019). The theoretical foundations were laid before the PRC's founding. At its Second National Congress in July 1922, the CCP adopted the *Resolution on Women*, China's first official document on women's rights. It articulated a proletarian path to women's liberation that rejected bourgeois feminism. After 1949, gender equality was institutionalized through successive constitutions. "Article 48 of the 1954 Constitution redefined women as state assets rather than mere family members, granting formal equality in political, economic, cultural, and family life." Some researchers describe this liberation as passive or pseudo, serving socialist objectives rather than arising from a distinct feminine consciousness (Gammons, 2014; Shen, 2016).

Central to the Maoist gender project was the large-scale integration of women into productive labor. Women were expected to take on tasks traditionally reserved for men, including farming, mining, and combat. Iconic imagery of the female tractor driver symbolized the new socialist woman and the masculine strength *(yang)* of the nation (Roberts, 2019). By the 1950s, 70% of villages had at least one female head or director

(Dongchao, 2011). During the Great Leap Forward (1958–1960), millions of women entered productive labor in agriculture to replace men moved to industrial projects (Johns, 2010).

Scholars argue that Mao did not merely desexualize women but actively masculinized them (Yang, 2022). The Seventeen-Year Period (1949–1966) brought notable descriptive gains through top-down cadre policies and mandatory gender considerations in appointments. In the early years (1954–1964), women's presence in the central power structure was modest but established. There were 20 women in positions at or above the vice-ministerial level (4%), and one of the six national vice presidents was female (Y. Zheng et al., 2009). Implementation succeeded more in the workplace than in transforming domestic gender relations. Women continued to bear a double burden of productive and reproductive labor, and state feminism stayed rooted in a patriarchal revolutionary system (X. Huang, 2018; Yang, 2022).

### 3.3.2 Feminism in Chinese Communism (Xi Era of National Rejuvenation)

When Xi Jinping took office in 2012, China entered a new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics, but for women in politics, progress has been uneven. The PSC has never included a woman since 1949. At the Politburo level, at least one and at times two women served continuously from 1997 until the 2022 leadership reshuffle, when the 20th Party Congress resulted in an entirely male leadership, ending this two-decade precedent (Graham-Harrison, 2022; Monti, 2024).

Confronted with fertility rates below 1.09 births per woman and ongoing population shrinkage, Xi has framed marriage and childbearing as national duties, drawing selectively from both Mao and Deng to reinforce CCP supremacy. At the 2023 National Women's Congress, he urged a renewed culture of marriage and family, reinforcing a conservative turn that sidelines feminist demands (Bloomberg News, 2023; Impiombato & Grünberg, 2025; Stevenson, 2023; Yang, 2022). China's family planning policies—one-child (1979), two-child (2016), and three-child (2021)—have yielded only modest increases in birth rates (Zhong, 2025). Lower-level quotas have not offset a conservative reorientation emphasizing stability, family roles, and ideological conformity (TIME, 2023).

At the same time, the state has codified certain gender-related protections into law, most notably through the 2016 Anti-Domestic Violence Law. It has also introduced quotas in certain civil service sectors and advanced successive national policy frameworks for women's development, including the 2011–2020 program and the most recent Outline for the Development of Women (2021–2030) (Dong, 2023; Gillezeau, 2019). In October 2025, President Xi Jinping delivered a keynote address at the Global Leaders Meeting on Women in Beijing, pledging USD 10 million to UN Women, USD 100 million from the China Global Development Fund for gender initiatives, and training opportunities for 50,000 women worldwide (CGTN, 2025; Xinhua, 2025b).

Women's descriptive representation in bodies such as the National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) has grown modestly, accompanied by the introduction of new legal frameworks targeting women's rights and workplace discrimination (Xinhua, 2025b). Nevertheless, these discursive and symbolic efforts remain largely decoupled from substantive institutional reforms. China's approach reveals major policy gaps, including limited support for educated women's human capital utilization, insufficient attention to women's demand for economic independence, and the unintended consequences of demographic policies (Zhong, 2025). In diplomacy, women's representation is modest: the 2023 Women in Diplomacy Index reported that only 9 percent of fambassadors were women, although new appointments between 2021 and 2023 reached around 12 percent. Official data from the 2015 State Council white paper showed that women comprised of 30.7 percent of diplomatic personnel overall, but far fewer held senior roles (Chehab, 2023; Rana, 2023; *White Paper: Gender Equality and Women's Development in China (Full Text)*, 2015).

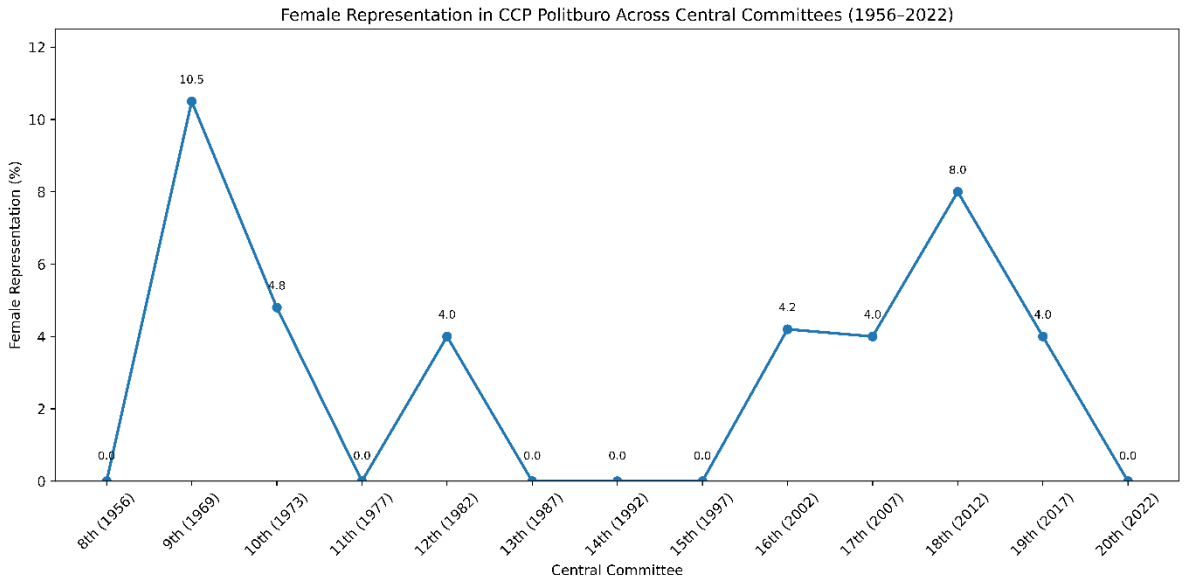
Elite bodies show little to no progress, and independent feminist NGOs have faced closure or restriction since 2015. The CCP retains a controlling backstage role, bifurcating the gender advocacy landscape into sanctioned institutional channels and increasingly repressed activist efforts (Jiang & Zhou, 2022; Reuters, 2025; U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2023; Zhong, 2025).

## 4. ANALYSIS

### *4.1. Elite-Level Exclusion: Female Full Members in the CCP Politburo*

This section examines women's representation among full members of the Politburo (Political Bureau of the Central Committee), a small elite Party body below the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC), typically composed of 14–26 full members, that participates in major policy decisions. Across the CCP's history, only six women have ever served as full Politburo members: Ye Qun (1969–1971), Jiang Qing (1969–1976), Deng Yingchao (1978–1985), Wu Yi (2002–2007), Liu Yandong (2007–2017), and Sun Chunlan (2012–2022), with the latter three rising through career paths rather than direct spousal ties (Cai, 2023a).

**Figure 1 - Female Full Members of the CCP Politburo Across Central Committees (1956-2022)**




Source: Author

*Note: Data for 1956–1992 are from "Women and Political Participation in China" by S. Rosen (1995), Pacific Affairs, 68(3), 315–341. Data for 1997–2022 were compiled by the author from official CCP announcements (Xinhua and gov.cn), Politburo membership lists cross-referenced with primary sources, and secondary analyses, including The China Story (2023), U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission reports (2023), and MERICS briefs. All figures were cross-verified as of early 2026.*

Women were absent from the full membership of the Politburo during the early post-revolutionary period (1956–1960s). Although the 1950 Marriage Law and the 1954 Constitution codified formal gender equality, the Constitution functioned primarily as a declaratory instrument of socialist ideology rather than a mechanism for substantive gender inclusion, and the Politburo elected by the 8th Central Committee in 1956 remained exclusively male (0 of 17 members). The Mao era's peak female representation in the Politburo reached 10.5 percent in 1969, with Jiang Qing and Ye Qun as the two female members, followed by 4.8 percent in 1973 with Jiang Qing alone.

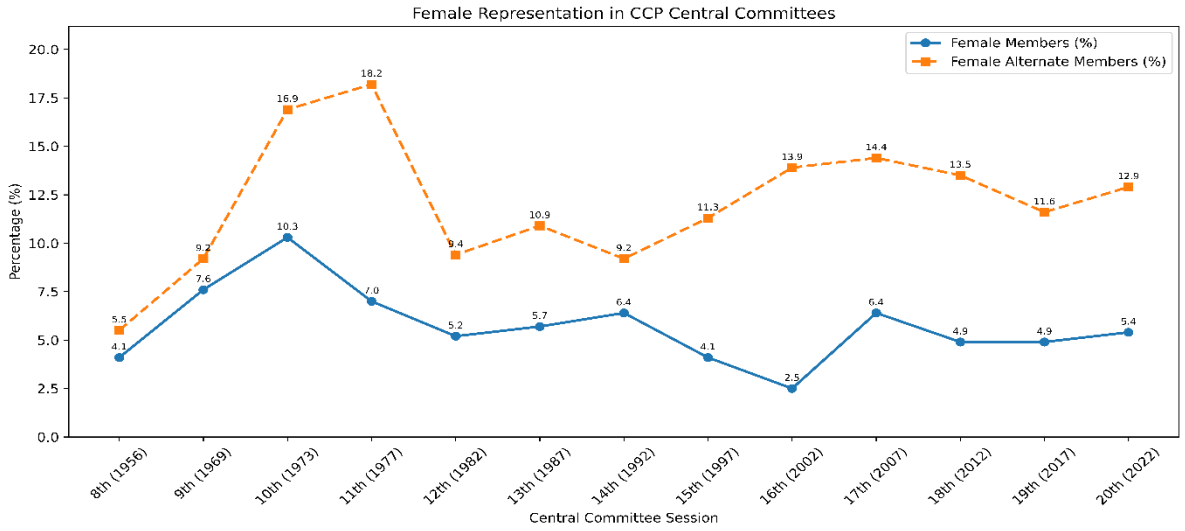
The post-Mao transition and early reform period (1977–1997) witnessed a marked regression in female representation. The Politburo of the 11th Central Committee (elected 1977) reverted to 0% female full members (0 out of 26), erasing the modest gains of the late Mao era. Deng Yingchao, who joined the Politburo at the Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee in December 1978 rather than at the 1977 Congress, accounted for 4 percent representation in the 1982 Politburo (1 of 25 full members) (北京组工整理自中国共产党新闻网, 2021). Deng's reforms prioritized economic modernization, merit-based selection, competence criteria, and administrative efficiency over ideological imperatives like class struggle or gender balancing.

Departing from earlier patterns in which elite women's political advancement was linked to spousal connections with top leaders, Wu Yi became the first woman in the reform-era Politburo without marital affiliation to Party or state elites. She served as Vice Premier (2003–2007), overseeing foreign commerce, trade, and health affairs. Modest recoveries in female Politburo representation occurred post-reform, including 4.2 percent in 2002 with Wu Yi, the first post-reform woman without direct spousal ties, and 8 percent in 2012 with Liu Yandong and Sun Chunlan, who were assigned portfolios often coded as "feminine" such as education, health, and sports. Female representation then declined to 4 percent in 2017 with Sun Chunlan as the sole member and fell to 0 percent in 2022, marking the first all-male leadership in nearly a quarter-century (Cai, 2023a).

### *4.2. Female Representation in the CCP Central Committee*

The Central Committee is the party's key leadership pool, responsible for electing the Politburo and overseeing major policy directions. It typically comprises 97–210 full members (with voting rights), non-voting alternates. This analysis covers 13 sessions, from the 8th (1956) to the 20th (2022).

**Figure 2. Female Members of the CCP Central Committee (Full and Alternate) Across Sessions (1956–2022)**




Source: Author

*Note: Data for 1956–1992 from Rosen (1995). Data for 1997–2017 from Li (2022). Data for the 20th Central Committee (2022) from the official CCP membership announcement as reported by Xinhua News Agency (2022) and compiled by the Organisation for Research on China and Asia (ORCA, 2022).*

In the early PRC and buildup period (1956–1969), women's presence grew gradually: full members increased from 4.1 percent to 7.6 percent, and alternates from 5.5 percent to 9.2 percent. This growth signaled the early phase of state feminism, driven by the ACWF. Mao-

era peaks emerged in the 1970s through deliberate state interventions: in 1973, women comprised 10.3 percent of full members, and in 1977, they reached 7.0 percent of full members alongside 18.2 percent of alternates. Party-promoted imagery of female tractor drivers, prominently featuring Liang Jun as a model worker in posters from the 1950s–1970s and on the 1962 one-yuan banknote helped redefine women as equal revolutionary subjects integrated into mechanized labor (*New China's First Female Tractor Driver: Greatest Wish Is to Attend National Day Parade*, 2009).

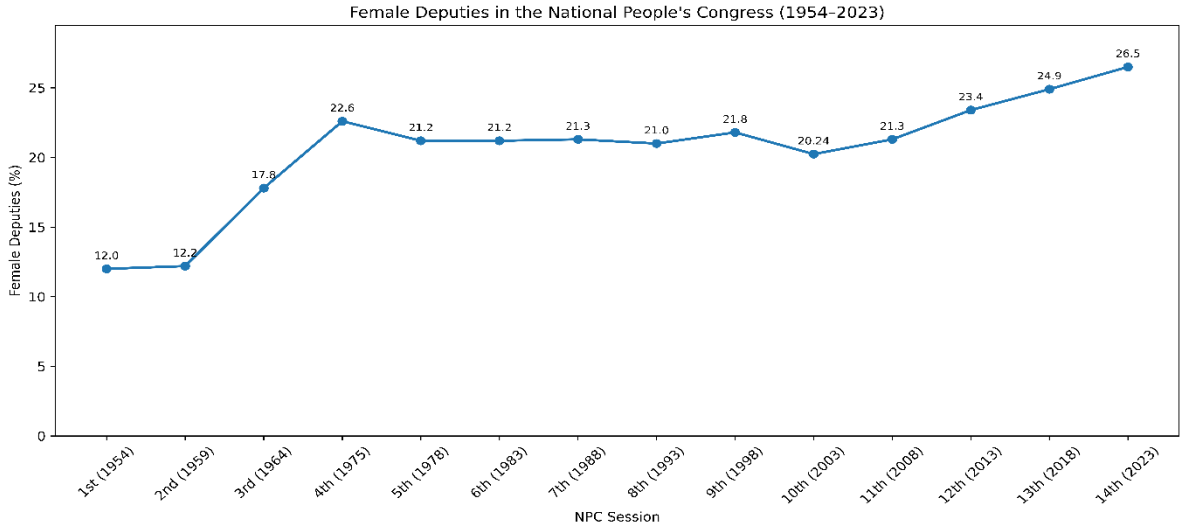
Post-Mao declines were pronounced following the 1978 reforms. The proportion of women among full members fell to 5.2 percent in 1982 and reached a low of 2.5 percent by 2002. Alternate member representation remained higher than full-member representation during the early reform period but did not show consistent growth. Scholars note that market reforms removed mandatory quotas, increasing gender wage gaps and disadvantaging women in criteria such as education and party tenure.

According to the Communiqué on Intra-Party Statistics (June 30, 2025), women accounted for 30.9 percent of the CCP's total membership as of December 31, 2024 (中共中央组织部, 2025). Under Xi, nominal lower-level quotas have not offset a conservative reorientation that emphasizes stability and family roles. After the low point of 2.5 percent for full members in 2002, female representation in the Central Committee experienced a temporary increase to 6.4 percent in 2007, followed by a decline and then modest levels between 4.9 and 5.4 percent from 2012 to 2022. Alternate member representation peaked at 14.4 percent in 2007, then fluctuated between 13.5 and 11.6 percent during the 2012–2022 period, settling at 12.9 percent in 2022.

### 4.3. *Female Deputies in the National People's Congress*

The NPC, China's apex legislative organ with roughly 3,000 deputies, is indirectly elected every five years through a CCP-controlled, multi-tiered process. Theoretically, it is the highest organ of state power, with authority to enact laws, amend the constitution, and elect central state officials (Cai, 2023a). In practice, real decision-making lies with Party elites; the NPC meets annually in March during the "Two Sessions" to formally approve laws, budgets, and leadership appointments.

## Figure 3 - Female Deputies in the National People's Congress (NPC) Across Sessions (1954-2023)




Source: Author

*Note: Data for 1954-1993 are from Rosen (1995). Data for 1998-2008 are from the official National Bureau of Statistics. Data for the 12th-14th NPCs were compiled by the author from official NPC Standing Committee reports on deputy qualifications and election results (via npc.gov.cn and gov.cn announcements), cross-verified with Xinhua News Agency releases and State Council Information Office summaries.*

## Table 2 - Female Deputies in the National People's Congress by Session (1954-2023)

| NPC Session | Total Deputies | Female Deputies | % Female Deputies |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1st (1954) | 1,226 | 147 | 12.0% |
| 2nd (1959) | 1,226 | 150 | 12.2% |
| 3rd (1964) | 3,040 | 542 | 17.8% |
| 4th (1975) | 2,885 | 653 | 22.6% |
| 5th (1978) | 3,497 | 740 | 21.2% |
| 6th (1983) | 2,978 | 632 | 21.2% |
| 7th (1988) | 2,970 | 634 | 21.3% |
| 8th (1993) | 2,978 | 626 | 21.0% |
| 9th (1998) | 2,979 | 650 | 21.8% |
| 10th (2003) | 2984 | 604 | 20.24% |
| 11th (2008) | 2987 | 637 | 21.3% |
| 12th (2013) | 2,987 | 699 | 23.4% |
| 13th (2018) | 2980 | 742 | 24.9% |
| 14th (2023) | 2977 | 790 | 26.5% |

Source: Author

Female representation among NPC deputies has shown a long-term upward trajectory, rising from 12.0 percent in the 1st NPC (1954) to a record high of 26.5 percent in the 14th NPC (2023), an increase of 14.5 percentage points over nearly seven decades. The figure rose modestly to 12.2 percent in 1959 and jumped to 17.8 percent in 1964. Female deputies reached their historical peak in the Fourth National People's Congress convened in 1975, comprising 22.6 percent of the total (653 women out of 2,885 deputies). After a brief levelling near 21.2 percent in the late 1970s and early 1980s, representation remained relatively stable, punctuated by slight regressions during the 1990s and early 2000s, falling to 21.0 percent in 1993 and 20.24 percent in 2003.

This plateau reflected a structural constraint rooted in the socialist era: the enduring "double burden" of productive and reproductive labor. As Evans (2021) documents, Mao-era policies mobilized women into the workforce but did not transform the domestic division of labor, leaving women to shoulder disproportionate household responsibilities even as they entered public life. The gradual uptick from the 11th NPC onward rising to 23.4 percent in 2013, 24.9 percent in 2018, and 26.5 percent in 2023, can be attributed to a combination of international and domestic factors. At the international level, China's hosting of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 played a pivotal role in introducing global norms of "gender equality" into official policy discourse.

At 26.5 percent, women's representation in China's legislature aligns closely with the global parliamentary average (about 27.2 percent in 2025) and approximates levels observed in the U.S. House of Representatives (Jackson, 2025). However, the NPC is characterized as a "rubber-stamp" institution where the Party maintains high female quotas (consistently above 20%) to demonstrate a commitment to equality without ceding actual power (Su, 2006). In addition, the 13th National Committee of the CPPCC included 440 women, accounting for 20.3 percent of members, an increase from 17.8 percent in the previous term. Among ethnic minority deputies to the 13th NPC, 42 percent were women (Cao, 2019).

### *4.4. China's Gender Paradox: Women's Mobilization and the CCP's Elite Bottleneck and Comparative Evolution*

Women's underrepresentation in China is most pronounced at the apex of political and military power. As of August 2025, women account for two of the 26 ministerial appointments in the central government. In the People's Liberation Army, senior gender parity remains elusive: no woman has ever attained full general rank, only two have reached lieutenant general historically, and current data show just eight female major generals, none holding senior roles across the five theatre commands (Lin et al., 2018). This rhetorical-progress gap is evident in updated metrics. In 2025, China ranked 103rd out of 148 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index, with a score of 68.6 percent (Voronoi, 2025). Globally, these figures place China below the 2025 parliamentary average of 27% female representation (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2025).

Elite selection is central to understanding how the CCP's appointment system shapes access to China's top political bodies and sustains authoritarian rule (Yao, 2018). This system is institutionalized through the nomenklatura (职务名称表) under the principle "the Party manages cadres" (党管干部) (Manion, 2023). Internally, the system incentivizes the formation of patron-client relationships, where career advancement depends on cultivating relationships with powerful patrons within the Party hierarchy (Rozman, 1989).

Since the late 1990s, the CCP has implemented quotas requiring at least one woman in subnational government leadership positions. The Party targets four specific marginalized identities through these quotas: women, ethnic minorities, non-CCP members, and intellectuals. However, the CCP often utilizes triple-dipping strategies, appointing women who also satisfy other diversity requirements, such as being an ethnic minority or a non-CCP member, thereby protecting the career paths of Han men (Jiang et al., 2022). These leaders are colloquially labeled *wu zhi shao nu* (ignorant young girls), a phrase highlighting the powerlessness of those selected primarily to improve statistics for multiple categories while preserving the majority of seats for Han male CCP members (Su, 2006).

Despite these institutional barriers embedded in the nomenklatura system, the Party-state projects an alternative narrative of progress. Based on the 2025 White Paper, *China's Achievements in Women's Well-Rounded Development in the New Era*, China's monitoring systems address the glass ceiling in leadership by transforming gender representation into a quantifiable metric of state governance. The 2022 revision of the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests added a system for collecting and publishing gender statistics, integrating gender into national censuses and time-use surveys. The new era, which began with the 18th CPC National Congress in 2012, redefined gender equality as an integral component of Chinese modernization (Xinhua, 2025a).

Article 14 of China's revised Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests (2022) requires an appropriate number of women deputies in the National People's Congress and local people's congresses, and directs the state to take measures to gradually increase their proportion. This provision establishes a formal legal commitment to expanding women's descriptive representation in legislative institutions. (National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, 2023). The NPC is the only national-level political institution in China to have adopted a gender quota, mandating that the number of female delegates in any given term must not fall below the level of the previous term. Although this requirement allows the NPC to claim record levels of female participation, the resulting growth in representation has been painstakingly slow, rising by only 6.3 percentage points over the two decades between 2003 and 2023 (Sharma, 2024).

In 2023, the United Nations, through the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), expressed serious concern over the absence of women among China's top leadership. To address this, the UN recommended that China implement statutory quotas and a gender parity system to accelerate the equal representation of women

in government (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 2023; Reuters, 2025).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

For regime legitimacy, the absence of women at the apex creates a credibility gap between the CCP's ideological commitment to equality and its empirical reality, a gap increasingly noted by international bodies such as CEDAW. Across three eras, a consistent pattern emerges. Women were valorized as productive labourers, while domestic hierarchies and reproductive burdens remained largely intact. Maoist liberation produced high levels of participation without dismantling patriarchal power. The post-Mao reform era marked a significant regression in women's elite political representation. Market reforms dismantled quota-based appointment systems, prioritized meritocratic and technocratic criteria, and widened gender inequalities in education, career trajectories, and promotion opportunities. The Xi era, despite integrating gender metrics into state governance and codifying feminist demands into law, has reinforced women's primary identification with family and reproduction amid a demographic crisis.

Chinese political elites are selected and promoted according to meritocratic criteria and *guanxi*-based patronage (Jia et al., 2015). Women face institutional disadvantages in political advancement, as decision-makers may use a single appointment to satisfy multiple representational quotas for ethnic minorities, non-CCP members, women, and intellectuals, a practice known as "triple-dipping" that generates the misleading impression that female politicians in China are predominantly non-CCP ethnic minorities (Jiang et al., 2025, pp. 68–69). Overall, the Chinese case represents a distinctive form of "state feminism" in which limited descriptive representation coexists with women's continued underrepresentation in the CCP's highest decision-making institutions. Future research could extend this study beyond national-level institutions to examine subnational variations in women's political representation and assess whether women's appointment to less powerful portfolios nevertheless produce incremental policy gains.

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