

# CONTINUITY AND CHANGE: WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN REFORM-ERA CHINESE POLITICS

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## ABSTRACT

This essay uses a mix of secondary literature, primary sources, and quantitative analysis to offer a comprehensive account of the ebbs and flows in women's representation in Chinese politics during the reform (post-1978) era. The literature to date offers two conflicting accounts of women's representation during this era. Some scholars present the period as a time of consistent decline; others present gains in representation levels from the 1990s onwards. This essay reconciles these two narratives for a unified account. It does so by updating Jude Howell's concept of "state feminism" in reform-era China to show how state interests and civil society demands together determined women's participation levels during this period. The concept of "state feminism" treats women's representation in Chinese politics from 1949 to today as a reflection of state needs. Such a state-centric view has fueled many of the "declinist" depictions of female representation in the reform era. This essay affirms state feminism's dominant role in suppressing women's representation through the mid-1990s. But it also shows how the state, by promoting economic development and closing gender gaps in educational attainment, has had a moderately positive impact on women's representation over the past two decades. During the same period, civil society pressures have also emerged as a significant factor behind rising representation levels. For this reason, accounts of women's representation in Chinese politics today must incorporate both state and non-state actors in their analyses as substantive influences.

On October 1, 1949, the day of the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the *People's Daily* ran an announcement from the newly established All China Democratic Women's Foundation, calling on the women of China to welcome the newly established government.<sup>1</sup> "Under the leadership of this government," it said, "we women will achieve liberation and enjoy the right of male-female equality, and we will be able to effectively contribute our energies to participate in the building of a new China."<sup>1</sup> The statement represented the official continuation of the Chinese Communist Party's longstanding commitment to the political platform of gender equality. Although the Party's internal structure was thoroughly patriarchal, Party leaders advanced a comprehensive and radical agenda of women's liberation in their writings, which drew widespread support from women in China, especially in the upper middle classes. A commitment to

women's political participation at levels well above what was featured in the Party at the time was fundamental to that agenda. Mao himself spoke in 1934 of a future in which women were liberated from the institution of marriage. But "first," he said, "comes the possession of political freedom."<sup>2</sup>

Contemporary China has not realized the lofty goals of early Party rhetoric on women's equality in politics. Its failure is by no means unusual. Data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union indicate that women make up just 21.3 percent of parliaments worldwide at the beginning of 2014.<sup>3</sup> Higher positions of power are even more elusive. In 2010, just 11 of 192 heads of government worldwide were female.<sup>4</sup> Chinese views on the role of women in politics are fairly typical internationally, roughly at the median of Inglehart and Norris's data set of sixty-two countries that measures popular views of women's place in politics.<sup>5</sup> Many of the prejudices they identified that bear on Chinese women seeking careers in politics echo those experienced around the world. Chinese

<sup>1</sup> The All China Democratic Women's Foundation would later become known as the All China Women's Foundation.

men, like men of most other countries, often perceive women with political ambitions to be passive, lacking in leadership ability, and dangerously seductive.<sup>6</sup>

London School of Economics professor Jude Howell centers her brief survey of the history of women's political participation in post-1949 China around her concept of "state-derived feminism":

not just the official gender ideology in post-1949 China but also the set of practical strategies used to enhance women's status and the particular institutional arrangements made to that end. ... It has a monopoly on the explanation of women's oppression, on the management of social change, and on the imagination of the alternative.<sup>7</sup>

Howell sees state-derived feminism as the driving force behind "the cycles of advance and retreat that have characterized women's numerical representation in politics and government since 1949." She analyzes these ebbs and flows throughout four historical periods. Participation surged in the early 1950s, during the first years of the Mao period. A brief decline followed in the early 1960s, but participation picked up again from the late 1960s through the 1970s during the most infamous movement in post-1949 Chinese politics, the Cultural Revolution. Mao's death and the subsequent "reform era" of state overhaul under Deng Xiaoping precipitated a more extended fall in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>11</sup> Under Howell's framework, participation rises when the Party needs to mobilize women "for the purpose of socio-economic transformation, raising economic output, or for ideological and political ends"; it slumps when "the heat of political campaigns cools, and/or when economic restructuring requires adjustments in the labor force." The strength of state-derived feminism is largely dependent upon its juxtaposition with the larger political, economic, and social needs of the state.

Howell's essay stands out in the literature on Chinese women in politics since 1949, because it combines a broad historical sweep with an unusual level of theoretical sophistication through its conception of state-derived feminism. Nevertheless, more than ten years after the essay's publication, the reform period deserves a new narrative. Howell and other earlier scholars of women's place in reform-era politics present a picture of uninterrupted decline,

and some scholars today still subscribe to this view.<sup>8</sup> More contemporary scholars, however, present a more positive narrative of reform based upon trends from the past two decades, but they have yet to have yet to engage with the struggles of the early reform period documented by earlier scholars.<sup>9</sup>

This essay attempts to reconcile the "declinist" thesis with the successes of the past two decades that have come into focus in the works of more recent scholars. In doing so, it seeks to show how the "monopoly" state-derived feminism held in determining female representation in Chinese politics has weakened during the reform period to bring about a more nuanced relationship between state feminism and civil society pressures. The declines of the early reform period—from the late 1970s through much of the 1990s—reflect the dominance of state feminism. The progress of the next two decades, or late reform, in part reflects state feminism's increasingly positive influence, manifested in the edifying effects of economic development and in policies promoting women for cadre selection. However, that progress also owes to the growing women's movement in Chinese civil society, whose influence on policy in the past two decades has challenged the place of the state as the sole driver of changes in women's role in Chinese politics.

The paper will unfold as follows. The first section will examine the decline in representation levels in the early reform period from their highs during the early 1970s. Many general overviews speak of this decline as a single, temporally consistent process,<sup>10</sup> but I divide it into early and late reform. The former features a rapid drop during the early 1980s, followed by a subsequent period of stagnation through much of the 1990s. Early reform represented the state's determination to leave the tumultuous politics of the early 1970s behind; late reform reflected institutional developments in the Chinese bureaucracy that produced a very difficult environment for female political hopefuls. In both cases, state feminism suppressed female representation, because doing otherwise would not have been compatible with state ends. The second section will focus upon the interplay between state feminism and civil society feminism in lifting women's representation levels during late reform.

I will focus primarily on women's positions within relatively prestigious organs in the party-state bureaucracy: the National People's Congress (NPC),

ii She presents her analysis in terms of three periods: the 1950s, the Cultural Revolution, and the reform era. I speak of four to include her analysis of the 1960s, which she uses to set up her discussion of the Cultural Revolution.

Central Party Committee (CPC), and Politburo at the national level, as well as assorted leadership positions at subnational levels. I will supplement this data with statistics on membership in the neighborhood and village committees. My choices here follow the general approach in the literature, though it is restricted by lack of complete access to data in other parts of the bureaucracy.

### FROM REVOLUTION TO MODERNIZATION: DECLINE AND STAGNATION THROUGH THE 1990S

The declinist thesis of women's representation in reform-era Chinese politics draws much of its salience from the struggles that women faced from 1978 through much of the 1990s (what I call "early reform"). Representation had peaked during the political tumult of a decade in Chinese politics known as the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The bulk of the reform-era decline occurred in the early 1980s, as the Chinese state sought to distance itself from the legacy of the Cultural Revolution. Subsequent changes in the Chinese bureaucracy further ensured that female representation remained low through much of the 1990s.

#### The Early 1980s Backlash Against the Cultural Revolution

The early 1980s was a time of rapid retreat for Chinese women in politics. From the Politburo to the bottom rungs of the cadre hierarchy, female representation had reached unprecedented levels during the Cultural Revolution due to exceptionally strong central support. However, this level of support fell with the Cultural Revolution, as the Chinese state under Deng Xiaoping shed its focus on social equality to concentrate on economic modernization. As a result, by the mid-1980s, the gains of the Cultural Revolution had almost completely disappeared. This disappearance revealed just how superficial and state-dependent these gains really were.

The Cultural Revolution offered an unusually favorable environment for prospective female cadres. The decade featured a succession of nationwide factional struggles as Mao sought to purge his opponents under the guise of a campaign against Chinese society's anti-communist elements. He complemented these purges by seizing control of cadre selection to introduce a wave of proletarians into the party-state bureaucracy.<sup>11</sup> Maoist analysis had always viewed female oppression primarily through the lens of class struggle, and so women with political aspirations—especially proletarian women—were appropriated as a class free of bourgeois leanings.<sup>12</sup> Official policy required that each leadership group (*lingdao banzi*) had to have at least one female cadre in order to be approved.<sup>13</sup> Female prospective cadres

Table 1: Female Representation in the National People's Congress (NPC)<sup>18</sup>

NPC (Year Elected)	Number of Female Delegates	Number of Male Delegates	Share of Female Delegates (%)
1 <sup>st</sup> (1954)	147	1079	12.0
2 <sup>nd</sup> (1959)	150	1076	12.2
3 <sup>rd</sup> (1964)	542	2492	17.8
4 <sup>th</sup> (1975)	653	2232	22.6
5 <sup>th</sup> (1978)	742	2755	21.2
6 <sup>th</sup> (1983)	632	2346	21.2
7 <sup>th</sup> (1988)	634	2344	21.3
8 <sup>th</sup> (1993)	626	2329	21.0
9 <sup>th</sup> (1998)	650	2329	21.8
10 <sup>th</sup> (2003)	604	2381	20.2
11 <sup>th</sup> (2008)	637	2350	21.3
12 <sup>th</sup> (2013)	699	2288	23.4

also benefitted here from the ascent to the Politburo of Mao's controversial wife Jiang Qing in 1969, who used her political and personal status to become a powerful proponent for greater female representation.<sup>14</sup>

As a result, female representation in elite politics (Tables 1-3) is widely considered by scholars to have reached levels unprecedented in the history of the PRC during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>15</sup> Women reached the Politburo during this period

Table 2: Female Representation in the Standing Committee of the NPC (Full Members)<sup>19</sup>

NPC (Year Elected)	Number of Female Members	Number of Male Members	Share of Female Members (%)
1 <sup>st</sup> (1954)	3	73	4.0
2 <sup>nd</sup> (1959)	4	58	6.5
3 <sup>rd</sup> (1964)	17	79	17.4
4 <sup>th</sup> (1975)	39	105	27.1
5 <sup>th</sup> (1978)	35	148	19.1
6 <sup>th</sup> (1983)	13	125	9.4
7 <sup>th</sup> (1988)	16	121	11.7
8 <sup>th</sup> (1993)	17	121	12.3
9 <sup>th</sup> (1998)	16	118	12.0
10 <sup>th</sup> (2003)	21	138	13.0
11 <sup>th</sup> (2008)	26	161	16.1
12 <sup>th</sup> (2013)	25	161	15.5

Table 3: Female Representation in the Party Central Committee (Full Members)<sup>20</sup>

Central Committee (Year Selected)	Number of Female Members	Number of Male Members	Share of Female Members (%)
8 <sup>th</sup> (1956)	4	93	4.1
9 <sup>th</sup> (1969)	13	157	7.6
10 <sup>th</sup> (1973)	20	175	10.3
11 <sup>th</sup> (1977)	14	201	7.0
12 <sup>th</sup> (1982)	11	210	5.2
13 <sup>th</sup> (1987)	10	175	5.7
14 <sup>th</sup> (1992)	12	189	6.4
15 <sup>th</sup> (1997)	8	193	4.1
16 <sup>th</sup> (2002)	5	198	2.5
17 <sup>th</sup> (2007)	13	204	6.4
18 <sup>th</sup> (2012)	10	205	4.9

for the first time in the country's history, though the three who reached full member status were wives of top leaders Mao Zedong, Lin Biao, and Zhou Enlai.<sup>16, iii</sup> However, two women were named alternate members who did not have such status: Wu Guxian, an uneducated textile worker anointed as a “labor

iii The executive body of the Communist Party, and, as such, the second-most powerful political institution in the PRC behind the Politburo Standing Committee, a subset of Politburo members that works as a sort of inner cabinet and is responsible for the state's major legislative decisions. The Politburo has both full and alternate members; alternates are nonvoting.

heroine” by Mao himself, and Chen Muhua, a longtime revolutionary who had risen through the ranks since joining the party in 1938.<sup>17</sup> Representation in the National People's Congress rose sharply as well, peaking in 1975 at 22.6 percent in the general body and 27.1 percent among full members of the standing committee.<sup>iv</sup> More importantly, the proportion of women among full members of the Party Central Committee—the actual seat of decision-making power—reached its apex of 10.3 percent in 1973.

The Cultural Revolution also brought gains to female representation at lower levels of politics. Nationwide statistics are hard to come by for this period, but the proportion of female cadres reached 16-20 percent of cadres at district, county, and bureau levels in Beijing by 1972. Women also constituted 17-22 percent of cadres in Shanghai's Party Committee and its Revolutionary Committee, which was the Cultural Revolution-era proxy for municipal government.<sup>21</sup> Female representation at lower levels of the Party and the state was also strong, as women's share among lower-level cadres in Shanghai was almost 50 percent.<sup>22</sup> As for the Party itself, 13.5 percent of new recruits into rural Party branches were female between 1966 and 1975. More impressively, however, 11 percent of rural Party branches in 1973 had female secretaries or deputy secretaries, a sign that the traditional view that women can only handle women's work was perhaps starting to erode.<sup>23</sup>

In 1978, two years after Mao's death, the Chi-

iv Ostensibly the highest state legislative body of the PRC, though true legal authority lies with the Politburo, and especially the Politburo Standing Committee. The NPC historically served as a rubber stamp for laws ratified by the Politburo, but it has started to assert some degree of independence since the 1990s. It rarely rejects Politburo legislation today, but debates in the NPC have become an important forum for resolving disputes between the Party and other parts of government. The NPC also has its own Standing Committee, with around 5-7 percent of the members of the overall body. As with the Politburo, the NPC Standing Committee meets more regularly than the full NPC—several times a year, as opposed to just once—and is more powerful than the larger body.

nese leadership launched the Reform and Opening Up (*gaige kaifang*) program. The initiative sought to center state policy around a pragmatic approach to economic development instead of the ideologically charged dogmatism that had defined Chinese politics throughout the Mao era. Five years later, the Cultural Revolution-era gains in women's representation had disappeared. Women's share in the first reform-era Party Central Committee in 1982 dropped below 1969 levels to 5.2 percent, and no women were promoted to the new Politburo.<sup>v</sup> Female representation only shrank marginally in the following year's National People's Congress as a whole, but saw a precipitous drop in the NPC Standing Committee, falling to just 9.4 percent in 1983.

Lower levels seem to have experienced a similar clear-out. Wang Qi cites evidence from leading Chinese women's studies scholar Li Xiaojing that one to two-thirds of the cadres removed from office were female during the dismantling of the revolutionary committees in 1982-83.<sup>24</sup> Wang Yinpeng presents official data on the share of female leaders in what Wang Qi calls "State organs and their working bodies" in 1982, and found only 9 percent at the provincial level and just 5 percent in the country's prefectures, cities, and counties.<sup>25</sup> <sup>vi</sup> The female share of new cadres in rural Party branches fell from 13.5 percent in 1966-1975 to 8.6 percent in 1977-1982.<sup>26</sup>

Wang Qi writes that the Cultural Revolution "went down in history as a golden age for women's representation in China and is still remembered as such."<sup>27</sup> But the rapid reversal of the 1980s exposed just how limited that golden age really was. This reversal can in part be explained by the transformations in the Chinese party-state bureaucracy in the post-Mao era. The push to recruit more technically and professionally accomplished cadres—that is, cadres with educational backgrounds far more abundant among men than women—was inseparable from the program of economic modernization that lay at the heart of Deng's vision for China.<sup>28</sup> Still, such a drastic decline in women's representation cannot be attributed solely to a modernization program that

was only in its infancy. Deng and his supporters had a positive program for overhauling the state, but they first had to excise the legacy of Cultural Revolution, a decade of turmoil so extreme that, in their eyes, it demanded a wholesale rejection. Women were easy targets for this because of traditional social prejudices and because they were one of the favored classes of Mao and his deposed supporters.<sup>29</sup>

Comparing China in the early 1980s and post-Soviet states in the early 1990s provides a useful illustration of the role of the state in China's transition-era decline. Women experienced a drastic decline in political representation after the collapse of the Soviet Union; the female share in the national parliaments of post-Communist Europe, for instance, fell from a regional average of 30 percent to less than 10 percent in the new states.<sup>30</sup> Admittedly, the post-Soviet decline was a product of elections as opposed to changing top-down selection mechanisms, and the Soviet bureaucracy did not seek out uneducated cadres as Mao did in the 1970s. Nonetheless, the U.S.S.R. and Cultural Revolution China both featured states that (1) had appropriated formal female representation for their own political ends and (2) were politically abhorrent to their successors.<sup>31</sup> As a result, when those states collapsed, female political participation sank as well.

### Stagnation Through the 1990s

The low levels of female participation that emerged in the early 1980s remained in place well into the following decade. This was especially true at the lowest levels of government. In 1993, the female share of chief and deputy chief positions was 3.8 percent in townships and small towns, 5.9 percent in counties, 5.1 percent in cities, and 4.1 percent in prefectures.<sup>32</sup> The average recruitment share of female cadres in rural Party branches dropped to 5.9 percent in 1983-1990.<sup>33</sup> As late as the early 2000s, one survey of 218 villages in Zhejiang found that half of local Party branches did not have female members.<sup>34</sup> The provinces showed almost no improvement in the female share of leadership positions between 1982 and 1990.<sup>35</sup>

The national level showed some small gains. The number of women in the Central Committee held more or less steady between 1982 and 1992, even as the size of the body overall shrank by 10 percent, and representation in the NPC Standing Commit-

v The body of the Party charged with selecting members for the Party's most important positions, including the General Secretary, the Politburo, the Politburo Standing Committee, and the Central Military Commission. The Central Committee has more power within the broader party-state apparatus than the NPC, but its pseudo-democratic structure still belies a top-down approach to Party leadership selection.

vi Unfortunately, Wang does not specify what she means by "State organs and their working bodies," and I did not have access to the almanac from which she drew her figures.

tee climbed 3 percent to 12.3 percent. Overall NPC representation was unchanged versus the early 1980s but still quite high, as the NPC continued to serve as the body of choice for the state's attempts to keep up appearances on its commitment to gender equality.<sup>36</sup>, vii However, women's share in the Central People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), an important central advisory body, hit its nadir of 9.4 percent in 1994, and only four of ninety-nine ministries and commissions that year were headed by women.<sup>37</sup>, viii

The lack of progress reflected the dearth of state support during this period for women's participation in government. The Organization Department did not issue its first regulation specifically on selecting female cadres in the reform-era period until April of 1988, and the first with actual numerical targets came only in 1990.<sup>38</sup> State rhetoric no longer sought to efface gender differences as it had during the Cultural Revolution, leading to renewed acceptance in public discourse of traditional views of women as passive and domestic.<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile, the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF)—which cooperates with the Organizational Department to provide input on short-term and long-term plans for female recruitment—found its funding and staffing resources increasingly constricted.<sup>40</sup> To be sure, the ACWF's potential as a champion has always been limited. The organization succeeded the All China Democratic Women's Foundation in the 1950s as a state-affiliated "mass organization," tasked with transmitting Party policy and ideology on gender to the masses. Party ideology since the founding of the PRC has included the doctrine that women's liberation is merely a subset of economic liberation, rather than a separate problem in need of a tailored approach.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, the ACWF is a sub-ministerial organ, which limits its access to top Party decision-makers.<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, the organization could still provide politically-inclined women with a level of state access that no other women's group could match. However, state

policy in early reform left the ACWF gutted. Staffing reductions meant that some townships had just one or two ACWF staffers, while many counties in the early 1990s had just 500 RMB for ACWF activities annually after payroll expenses.<sup>43</sup>

In the absence of explicit state support mechanisms, women were expected to compete with men for cadre positions solely on the basis of *suzhi*, or "quality." The concept of *suzhi* is a uniquely post-Mao Chinese concoction: an amalgam of ideas about Confucian malleability, Maoist self-cultivation, and the reform bureaucracy's predilection for technical and professional competence, all coalescing into a mainstay of official discourse.<sup>44</sup> Today, educational background tends to serve as a proxy measure, and as such, its influence on cadre selection is profound.<sup>45</sup> More than half of Party members in the early 2000s had at least completed high school, and almost 90 percent of local officials had college educations.<sup>46</sup> This emphasis on education itself disadvantages women, given the persistent educational achievement gap in contemporary China. Moreover, gender prejudices seep into perceptions of female *suzhi*. In the context of cadre positions, *suzhi* entails excellence in fields such as logic and abstract thinking, which traditional conceptions of gender treat as women's weak spots.<sup>47</sup> The concept of *suzhi* also blames inequalities in women's access to political power on female inadequacy rather than structural injustice, discouraging governing bodies from adopting affirmative action policies.<sup>48</sup> Women's groups in China have not rebelled against this turn per se. The ACWF's efforts to bring more women into politics since the late 1980s have consisted in large part of efforts to improve women's *suzhi*, taking up programs offering technical training and instilling in women four qualities associated with *suzhi*: self-respect (*zizun*), self-confidence (*zixin*), self-reliance (*zili*), and self-strength (*ziliang*).<sup>49</sup>

The early reform changes detailed above affected women's representation through the traditional methods of cadre recruitment via state appointment. But the late 1980s saw the introduction of a new means of a cadre selection for village-level administration: elections. The NPC Standing Committee adopted elections for village government in 1987, and a nationwide survey in 1990 showed that 75 percent of villages had held their first elections, with half of these featuring more candidates than seats.<sup>50</sup> They

vii The most frequently cited ranking of women in politics internationally comes from the Inter-Parliamentary Union, who measure the share of women in national parliaments. The NPC is toothless compared to most democratic parliaments, but by preserving a relatively high level of female representation here, the Chinese government can buttress its place in these rankings for international and domestic audiences alike—as late as 1994, China ranked 12<sup>th</sup>. See Edwards, "Strategizing for politics."

viii The CPPCC serves as a central advisory body structured to represent a wider range of voices than most other party-state organs. It is comprised of delegates from China's various political parties as well as appointed individuals not affiliated with any particular party. (China does have parties other than the CCP, but they are functionally powerless.)

were not show elections—voters in Shandong alone ousted 10,000-20,000 cadres in 1995. In practical terms, elected village committees are not as powerful as village Party branches, and, in particular, local Party secretaries.<sup>51</sup> Nonetheless, they have taken over a broad array of economic management functions that were handled by people's communes in the 1960s and 1970s. They also serve as an important channel for villagers to enter the Party, as successful candidates from outside the Party are usually recruited for membership.<sup>52</sup> In this sense, their establishment served as the village-level equivalent to the post-Mao transformation in cadre selection methods at higher levels detailed above.

Many scholars claim that the introduction of competitive elections has brought about a decline in women's political participation at the village level.<sup>53</sup> While these scholars give plenty of evidence that elections are gendered, they cite almost no data to show that elections make for a more gendered cadre cohort than what was experienced under the people's commune system, and it is difficult to find data on gender differentials among village-level cadres to assess their claims. But it should be noted that even early Mao-era village governance seems to have made plenty of room for women: according to Wang Fenghua, 70 percent of villages during the 1950s had female heads or deputy heads.<sup>54</sup> In the early 2000s, however, just 1 percent of village committee chairs and 16 percent of members were female, for an average of two female committee members per three villages.<sup>55</sup>

Regardless, the disadvantages that women face in Chinese village elections are indisputable—they are less likely to be named as candidates, and less likely to win when they run.<sup>56</sup> These disadvantages in part reflect traditional views on gender among the rural Chinese. The end of the Mao-era suppression of gender and the introduction of elections has given these views full public expression. An early 2000s survey in rural Zhejiang found that 73 percent of respondents considered political participation to be “men's business.”<sup>57</sup> In contrast, results from the 2005 World Values Survey (WVS) indicate that 53 percent of Chinese citizens nationwide consider men more capable political leaders than women.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, the introduction of elections has disadvantaged the large proportion of rural women who marry men from other villages; such women are expected to move to their husband's village, and so they find it

more difficult to accumulate the needed social capital to mount a run for office.<sup>59</sup> From the same Zhejiang study cited earlier, a sample of female cadres from twenty-three villages found that just 13 percent had married into their villages, compared to 63 percent of women in the villages as a whole.<sup>60</sup>

One might view the negative impacts of elections cited above as collateral damage from a progressive state policy. But as with cadre selection at higher levels, the state's treatment of women in politics has also actively harmed female villagers' chances as candidates. The 1987 Organic Law of Village Committees that established elections contained the stipulation that village committees should include “an appropriate number of women” (*funü yingdang you shidang de ming'è*), but no explicit quotas were introduced until 2010.<sup>61, ix</sup> In the absence of stricter dictates, the clause became functionally interpreted as “no more than one” female member, out of each village committee's three to seven slots.<sup>62</sup> Meanwhile, an early 1990s survey of twenty unsuccessful female candidates in Liaoning cited in Rosen highlighted how the consistent shunting of women into women's work hurt the chances of female candidates.<sup>63</sup> Those who did have government experience had accumulated it primarily in “soft” jobs in fields like culture and education, and as a result, voters doubted their leadership and management abilities. Others came from backgrounds in “woman's work,” a term for jobs related to family planning; the unpopularity of these policies undercut their efforts to mobilize support. Beyond this, the funding and staffing reductions at the ACWF mentioned above weakened a resource that sought to link women with mobilization aids like lineages and higher-level officials, which are more easily available to male candidates.<sup>64</sup>

After the sharp declines of the early 1980s, Chinese women's representation in politics showed little improvement through much of the 1990s. The introduction of elections in the villages and the modernization of cadre selection at higher levels, combined with the weakening of the state's active mechanisms to promote women in politics, fostered a very difficult institutional environment for women with political aspirations. Many of the challenges that such women faced in this period—the *suzhi* discourse, toothless state dictates, and, of course, traditional notions of women's unsuitability in politics—continue

ix Note that the elections were initially established as a trial; they were adopted in full in 1998, and the new law preserved the language.

to work against female political participation today. Still, other developments over the past twenty years have brought about real, although very much incomplete, improvements. I turn to these below.

### A FITFUL ADVANCE: REFORM-ERA PROGRESS IN WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION

The data on women's representation in Chinese politics suggests substantive improvements in women's position over the past twenty years, most strikingly at lower levels of government. These improvements in part follow from measures that, as with Mao-era feminism, realized gender equality for ulterior state purposes—improving China's image in international eyes, or more indirectly, strengthening the educational qualifications of the Chinese labor force. But credit also goes to the growing women's movement in Chinese civil society, which, through its influence on the AWCF, has contributed to a succession of progressive initiatives regarding the composition of the bureaucracy: affirmative action, policy plans, and even a change in cadre promotion criteria. In this sense, the developments of late reform suggest that the concept of state-derived feminism is no longer sufficient on its own to explain changes in women's representation in Chinese politics; civil society feminism matters as well.

Women's formal representation in Chinese politics has grown on a number of fronts over the past several decades. The share of female cadres over the entire bureaucracy has increased steadily since the start of the 1990s, from 31.2 percent in 1991 to nearly 40 percent in 2007.<sup>65, x</sup> Women's presence in the Party also expanded, from 15.1 percent in 1993 to 19.2 percent in 2005. Once again, improvements have been concentrated in lower levels of government and at the grassroots level. The share of women among village committee members nationwide reached 21.7 percent in 2008, and the proportion of female heads inched up from 1 percent in 2000 to 2.7 percent.<sup>66</sup> Women made up 13 percent of mayors nationwide in 2006, up from 5 percent in 1989 and 10.9 percent in 2001.<sup>67</sup> One metric that fell was women's representation in the urban neighborhood committees, from 59 percent in 2000 to 50 percent in 2011.<sup>68, xi</sup> But this

seems to be a positive sign as well. The existence of a female skew in gender ratios in 2000 suggests that the neighborhood committees have been gendered as women's work. Such gendering is certainly consistent with their lowly standing; neighborhood committees are the lowest administrative unit in urban China and lack the level of self-governance afforded to their counterparts in the villages.

Progress at higher levels has been less consistent, though recent years suggest a possible uptick. The proportion of women among provincial-level elites sat at 10 percent in 2004, no different from similar figures from Yinpeng Wang calculated for women among leaders of what Wang calls "state organs and leading bodies" in 1990.<sup>69, xii</sup> The share of women in the CPPCC increased from 9.2 percent in 1993 to 16.8 percent in 2003, but female representation in the NPC and CPC reached their low points post-Mao in 2003 at 20.2 percent and 2.5 percent, respectively. More recently, however, representation in the NPC rebounded to its highest level in history in 2013, and the female share of full and alternate PCC members reached its reform-era peak of 10 percent.<sup>70</sup> More importantly, the Politburo admitted its first woman in the post-Mao era in 2002. Today, it has two female members for the first time since 1969, Vice-Premier Liu Yandong and Tianjin Party Secretary Sun Chunlan.<sup>71</sup> Neither of them are wives of high-level cadres or "labor heroines," as were the three Mao-era female full Politburo members. Rather, Liu Yandong and Sun Chunlan's posts such as Vice-Chairwoman of the CPPCC and Party Secretary of China's trade unions, respectively, have given them experience leading a host of different elements of the party-state bureaucracy.<sup>72</sup>

Some of these reform-era improvements in women's representation in Chinese politics reflect the force state feminism has championed most vigilantly since the launch of Reform and Opening Up: economic development. As Louise Edwards points out, this view is in certain ways consistent with traditional Party theory on women's liberation, by which "it would be assumed that women's status would be broadly improved with each increase in GDP—including in the sphere of political participation."<sup>73</sup> But if Mao-era state feminism promised liberation through development, it also mobilized women in

x If these figures seem high, note that most statistics cited to this point in the text refer to women in national positions or in leadership roles at sub-provincial levels, as opposed to more mundane assignments.

xi Urban neighborhood communities are the urban equivalent of the village committee, whose members have also been elected since 1990.

xii As with the instance cited above in fn. 8, Wang does not specify what she means by "State organs and their working bodies," and I did not have access to the almanac from which she drew her figures.



the political and production processes to accelerate development itself. The reform-era vision of liberation through development is more passive, with more of an emphasis on raising GDP levels and less on the targeted mobilization of women to realize that purpose.

Edwards is skeptical of this strategy, and, in some ways, she is right to be so. Speaking broadly, development's impact on female representation in politics is tricky to assess. It is true that villagers tend to have a more conservative outlook on gender roles than urbanites, but using the urban-rural divide as a proxy for development assumes too tight a connection between urbanization and development. More targeted analyses of development give more ambiguous results. As noted above, for instance, WVS data on Chinese attitudes towards women's place in politics shows no significant change between 1995 and 2004, despite annual GDP growth consistently hovering around 10 percent during the period. One might object that such changes would not appear over such a small time period, but a geographical comparison between locations at different GDP levels in China is likewise ambiguous about the significance of development. A gender equality index constructed by Fubing Su in his 1999–2004 survey of provincial-level elites suggests that levels of development, as measured by per capita GDP, have only a small impact upon women's representation in politics.<sup>74</sup> The impact for development is much smaller, for instance, than whether the unit in question is an autonomous region, a centrally administered city, or a province, or whether the region has a high sex ratio. Meanwhile, at the grassroots level, Guo, Zheng, and Yang's study of Zhejiang villages found that the villages with the highest share of women's representation on their village committees tended to be ones of moderate wealth.<sup>75</sup> Poorer villages lacked the consciousness to push against traditional gender norms, while wealthier villages were solely focused on economic development, the perceived province of men.

International comparisons are also useful in pushing back against explanations centering around economic development. Japan's per capita GDP exceeds \$45,000, and yet it ranks 122<sup>nd</sup> out of 142 countries in the latest Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) tables on women in national parliaments.<sup>76</sup> Montgomery also observes that national parliaments in Post-Communist Europe demonstrate no clear

connection between economic development and women's share: Slovenia excels economically but has seen no change in women's representation, whereas Bulgaria's economic weakness does not prevent it from having one of the strongest female presences.<sup>77</sup> Inglehart and Norris's analysis of IPU tables against GDP per capita demonstrates a strong correlation between economic development and female representation, but consideration of individual cases as above indicate that economic development here is likely disguising other factors.<sup>78</sup>

Nonetheless, economic development has bolstered women's place in reform-era Chinese politics in one very specific way: by shrinking gender disparities in educational achievement, a key prerequisite for cadre selection under the discourse of *suzhi*. The gap in male and female gross enrollment ratios at secondary schools shrunk from 13 percent in 1983 to 8 percent in 1997.<sup>79</sup> The post-1999 expansion in college enrollment has also made major dents in post-secondary education gender gaps. A study by Wei-Jun Jean Yeung calculated that the male-female odds ratio for progression from senior high school to college fell from 1.84 to 0.99.<sup>80</sup> The Party has aged moderately for much of the reform period, but recruits still skew heavily young: 75 percent of Party recruits 1997–2002 were under 35.<sup>81</sup> In this sense, the Party is drawing from a pool of potential cadres in which men and women are increasingly similar in terms of their educational qualifications.

These shrinking gender gaps emerge directly from the state's efforts to accelerate development through expanded access to education. Decades of growth have increased demand for skilled labor in the Chinese economy, a challenge that the state has addressed through massive investments in education. Due to the post-1999 expansion in higher education mentioned above, annual college enrollment increased from 1 million in 1998 to 6.3 million in 2009.<sup>82</sup> At the lower levels, the number of elementary schools in China rose consistently between 1980 and 2000, and slots in secondary schools have likewise seen steady increases.<sup>83</sup> These initiatives have not been specifically targeted at gender disparities, but they have nonetheless allowed schools to accommodate a wider array of students—an important development, given traditional preferences for educating males.<sup>84</sup> The state's fixation on bolstering the Chinese economy has pressed it into this expansion.

It has also funded the expansion by improving tax revenues.<sup>85</sup>

The heightened demand for skilled labor in China has also raised payoffs for education.<sup>86</sup> Urban China saw the marginal return of a year of education almost triple between 1992 and 2003 alone, from 4.0 percent to 11.4 percent. Education has become the primary factor determining whether rural workers can find more lucrative off-campus jobs.<sup>87</sup> Returns for women in urban China are even higher than those for men.<sup>88</sup> As such, parents during the reform era have an increasingly powerful incentive to obtain good schooling for girls.

Shrinking gender gaps in educational achievement constitute a “supply-side” explanation for the increases in female representation over the past twenty years—more women have attained the educational qualifications needed to become cadres. To be sure, it is not a comprehensive explanation. Analysis of 2000 Census data in Hannum and Yang suggests that Hunan is a middling province in terms of educational outcomes, but its village committee representation rates are exceptional.<sup>89</sup> Shanxi’s educational outcomes for pre-1980 birth cohorts are equal or better to Hunan’s, but its village committee representation rate is among the lowest in the country: just 7.7 percent.<sup>90</sup> These inconsistencies indicate the shortcomings of any analysis that links women’s progress entirely with educational attainment.

At the same time, women’s place in politics during the reform era has also benefited from “demand-side” initiatives by the state: a bevy of dictates on women’s participation in politics, following the Organizational Department’s first reform-era regulation in 1988 mentioned above. The first PRC law on women’s rights was passed in 1992, followed by the first national reform-era gender equality program in 1995, which explicitly set forward the goal of raising women’s participation in politics.<sup>91</sup> In 2001, the Organizational Department expanded on the quotas it suggested for sub-county bodies in 1990 to propose figures for participation at higher levels: at least one woman in every government leadership group (*lingdao banzi*) and Party standing committee, along with specific targets for participation in these at the province (10 percent), city (15 percent), and county (20 percent) levels.<sup>92</sup> The 10<sup>th</sup> NPC in 2007 mandated that its successors be at least 22 percent female and followed up in 2010 to demand that one-third of vil-

lage committee seats be reserved for women.<sup>93</sup> More intriguingly, “an index of women’s participation” has been added as a criterion in officials’ performance evaluations.<sup>94</sup> Subnational state organs have also taken steps of their own. In particular, several provinces have issued regulations requiring at least one woman in village committees and other governing bodies.<sup>95</sup> Hunan, in particular, is widely acclaimed as a progressive province.<sup>96</sup> Representation in Hunan village committees is more than 30 percent female, and 17 percent of mayors in 2003 were women, well above the 2004 national average of 10.9 percent. To be sure, most state regulations on women’s participation in the reform era have no enforcement provisions.<sup>97</sup> Still, the state’s success in meeting many of its targets—such as those set by the National People’s Congress, or the Hunan mayoral and village committee level—suggests that these regulations have had more than a nominal impact.

State-derived feminism can explain in part the impetus for this raft of reforms. After the events at Tiananmen Square, the Chinese leadership hoped to improve its image worldwide by hosting the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, awarded to China by the UN in March of 1992.<sup>98</sup> The event needed to be accompanied by a demonstrated commitment to women’s rights domestically in order to have the desired impact on international audiences.<sup>99</sup> The 1992 law on women’s rights and the 1995 gender-equality program, in particular, reflect these pressures.

Still, the concept of state-derived feminism cannot account for the role of the burgeoning Chinese women’s movement in bringing about the sorts of changes. In the early years of the reform period, the collapse of the communes closed important channels for women’s engagement in public life. As a result, production became an individual rather than a collective effort, and so women were once again relegated to domestic affairs (Rosen, 1995). Since then, however, the growth of civil society has created a new space for public expression. That space has manifested itself most prominently in the late reform explosion in social organizations focused on women’s issues, especially in the cities.<sup>100</sup> Women’s studies was unknown as a discipline in China until the ACWF held the first conference on the subject in 1983.<sup>101</sup> Ten years later, with the Beijing Conference approaching, sixteen research centers had been set up

around the country.<sup>102</sup> The energy around women's issues persisted well beyond the Beijing Conference; in 2000, there were 50,000 women's associations affiliated with the ACWF alone.<sup>103</sup>

The growth in civil society women's groups has had little effect on citizen attitudes towards women in politics; calculations based on WVS data suggest that the proportion of Chinese who considered men more able in politics than women was consistently a slight majority from 1995 to 2004.<sup>104</sup> Still, this proportion has been able to influence official policy in at least some capacity through the efforts of the ACWF, the only organization with the status to push for any serious policy change. In the late 1980s, under the influence of civil society feminism, the organization became increasingly disenchanted with its mandate to champion the Party line.<sup>105</sup> It has since grown more willing to represent women's interests when they clash with Party interests.<sup>106</sup> That shift has manifested itself in its efforts to improve women's representation at a host of levels: putting forward candidates for local People's Congress elections, offering training for prospective cadres, and lobbying for stronger quota provisions.<sup>107</sup> Organizational Department regulations on female cadre participation are formulated in conjunction with the ACWF. The existence of concrete targets in 1990 and 2001, as well as many of the subnational circulars noted above, were a direct result of ACWF input. At the grassroots level, Judd's ethnography of a county in Shandong Province shows how pressure from the local ACWF branch brought about a surge in women's participation in local village committees.<sup>108</sup>

At this point, I should briefly discuss women's political representation in China from another angle: intra-bureaucratic gender gaps. Scholars are unanimous in observing that women in the party-state bureaucracy consistently receive less prestigious assignments than men.<sup>109</sup> One common saying among Chinese female cadres, "the three manys and the three fews," sums up this problem nicely: "many in trivial positions, few in powerful positions; many deputies, few heads; many in culture, science, education, and health bureaus, few in economy and finance."<sup>110</sup> Su's survey of provincial-level leaders finds that female elites are four times more likely than male elites to be given deputy assignments.<sup>111</sup> 170 of the 183 female village committee members in Wang and Dai's survey of Zhejiang villages served as their

committee directors for women's affairs.<sup>112</sup>

I have glossed over intra-bureaucracy gender differentials in most of the paper because the extent to which they have been alleviated during the reform era is hard to assess. Time-series data on the ratios of deputies and heads, for instance, is difficult to come by. Many of the statistics on formal representation that I have cited in this paper concern positions in the party-state bureaucracy that are relatively prestigious at their administrative levels—mayor, Politburo member, village committee head, NPC delegate. Some of these increases in women's representation in these positions have outstripped the rate of increase of female cadres' total share, which rose by one-third; the share of female mayors, for instance, more than doubled. It seems also that more female mayors, at least, have been allowed to leave the traditional strongholds of culture, education and health (CEH). Rosen says that 70 percent of female mayors in 1989 were assigned to one of these fields or to sports, while Wang reports that the 2001 share in CEH was down to 50.2 percent.<sup>113</sup>

But to the "three manys, three fews" listed above, we might add another one: "many cadres, few in the Party." And for all the gains in state organs, it may be most significant that this phenomenon has changed little in the reform era. Women's share among cadres overall was twice their share among Party members in 1991; in 2004, the ratio was the same.<sup>114</sup> Given the still-dominant role of the Party in Chinese politics, and the significance of Party membership for career advancement in the bureaucracy, the stagnation on this front should temper enthusiasm over other indications of the improving status of women within the cadre system.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

My essay has sought to offer a new vision of women's political representation in the People's Republic of China that reconciles existing narratives of early-reform decline and late-reform progress. The post-Mao era began with a rapid decline in women's representation, with female cadres treated as symbols of the Cultural Revolution's influence on the party-state bureaucracy. Deng's modernization push brought about a decade of stagnation, but the state's tentative reconciliation with policies aimed at gender equality starting in the 1990s has brought about modest advances since. We should no longer speak

of the monotonic decline in the reform era as Howell did in 2002, nor should we speak of its ebbs and flows as defined solely by the concept of state feminism. It remained dominant during the early reform period, but the growing women's movement in Chinese civil society, has proved a significant factor in its own right over the past twenty years by persuading the AWCf to drift from its rigid adherence to Party theory.

It must be stressed that these advances over the past two decades are very modest—a few percentage points here, a few percentage points there. They certainly do not anoint China as an international standard bearer for female representation in government. Women make up 23 percent of Chinese NPC delegates, the 55<sup>th</sup> largest share among parliaments worldwide.<sup>115</sup> Thirteen percent of Chinese mayors are female, well above the regional average, but female mayors' shares in Serbia and New Zealand are 26 percent.<sup>116</sup> 2.7 percent of Chinese village committee heads are female; women in Cambodia, with the help of quotas, make up 7.0 percent of the chairs of equivalent rural councils.<sup>117</sup> And just as the early CCP relegated its female members to second-class status by concentrating them in the Women's Bureau, today's party-state bureaucracy keeps women out of high politics through disproportionately low levels of Party membership.<sup>118</sup> It will require a united front between state and civil society—and not one that kowtows to the state's needs, but one that takes the criticisms of civil society feminists as a guiding star—for China to establish a reputation as a leader in women's participation in government.

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