Wu Zetian (武则天) – China’s only female emperor. Image Courtesy: China Simplified

C3S Issue Map II

Politics & Feminism in China - Will Women Hold Up Half the Sky?

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About the Author

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About C3S

The Chennai Centre for China Studies (C3S), registered under the Tamil Nadu Societies Registration Act 1975 (83/2008 dated 4th April 2008), is a non-profit public policy think tank. We carry out in depth studies of developments relating to China with priority to issues of interest to India such as geopolitical, economic and strategic dynamics of India-China relations, Chinas internal dynamics, border issues, Chinas relations with South Asian countries, prospects of trade, the evolution of Chinese politics and its impact on India and the world, ASEAN and SAARC relations, cultural links, etc. C3S attempts to provide a forum for dialogue with China scholars in India and abroad and give space for the expression of alternate opinions on China related topics. We also provide a database for research on China with special attention to information available in Chinese language. Additionally, events, lecture discussions and seminars are organised on topics of current interest.

What is an Issue Map?

C3S has launched the Issue Map initiative. The reports under this series analyse the status and developments of current scenarios in detail. They attempt to aid the reader to get a more comprehensive idea of the issue being addressed, along with illustrations and data.

Issue Maps are available for download as PDFs.
Objective

The objective of this Issue Map is to understand and analyse the prospects for China adopting a semblance of feminism in its foreign policy. The recent move by Sweden to declare an official feminist foreign policy has put the political status of women in China and other countries under the lens. The work will particularly examine the participation of women in the political domain of PRC. In this Issue Map an analysis of the potential for China to adopt a feminist foreign policy will be conducted.

Introduction

With great power comes great responsibility. As China moves forward in the 21st century, a visible power transition is witnessed from the West to the East. As a rising power, China is expected by the international community to play a more significant role in fulfilling its global responsibilities. These responsibilities can be categorized into four: the internal responsibilities of China as a large developing state; the legal responsibilities of China as a normal sovereign state; the additional responsibilities of China as a great power; and the special responsibilities of China as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.¹

These responsibilities could only be fulfilled with sheer commitment towards international law and implementing them with an effective foreign policy. Advocating and promoting women's rights and representation in the political arena is one such responsibility which falls under the rubric of all the above mentioned postulates.

A model of the above can be seen in the launch of Sweden’s Feminist Foreign Policy on August 24, 2018. This move by Stockholm is an endeavour to kindle the earlier thought to be two-mutually exclusive fields - Feminism and Foreign Policy. It leads to several questions on whether Sweden will be able to live up to this policy, will this policy be able to encourage more women into the arena of...
international politics and how this kind of foreign policy is perceived by the other countries. This report mainly focuses on the question of the status of women in China’s political timeline, and whether China will be able to take the giant leap in the direction of a feminist foreign policy in future. In order to make an educated prediction on China and the concept of a feminist foreign policy, it is necessary to evaluate the country’s stance on the concept of feminism itself.

**Definition and Motivations behind a Feminist Foreign Policy**

The theoretical domain of international relations has been dominated by traditional mainstream theories which focused on the imposition of some form of order. Feminism is one such post-structuralism theory which aims to evaluate international politics using the lens of gender. Since its inception, the concept has remained debatable. It has also been widely acknowledged and is mostly associated with activism at various levels. Recently, with the launch of Sweden’s feminist foreign policy, the debate has been stirred again.

Fundamentally, a feminist foreign policy aims to apply systematic gender equality perspectives towards the foreign policy agenda of the country adopting it, and aims to bring in women into power spaces. A feminist foreign policy could act as an instrument to create greater gender parity especially in the country’s political domain, by increasing opportunities for women in leadership positions. It aims to do so by bringing three R’s of Rights, Representation and Resources to the women and for the women. On a parallel note, it would generate greater gender sensitivity towards other nations, by making it imperative to consider the impact of the country’s foreign policy decision on...
the women around the world. A study of this concept would reveal how the present power structures create foreign policies which are gender insensitive.

According to Shoemaker & Dharmapuri as mentioned in the Oxford research Encyclopaedia of Politics, a feminist foreign policy is one that “prioritizes the full implementation of international and national commitments to advance human rights—that includes gender equality.” It has two central policy goal; gender parity and gender sensitivity. It goes beyond gender mainstreaming and aims ‘normative re-orientation’ of foreign policy to a policy which is more cosmopolitan and could endorse global peace and justice.

For some observers, this recent action by Sweden shows that feminism has moved beyond just being a theoretical concept and is actually coming into practice. However, for critiques Sweden’s new policy is seen as unrealistic and a hypocritical move by the country. They argue how a country could promulgate foreign policy which has peace and justice as its fundamental principles, while it itself is one of the biggest seller of arms and ammunition to West Asian countries.

This is in contradiction to the fundamentals of feminist foreign policy. In this light, it will be examined subsequently, how China’s outlook towards women’s rights could be evaluated alongside its global military sales, given that women and children are among the most affected in armed conflict.

These aspects as seen above, prompt the question of whether China, which calls itself as an upcoming global power, is ready to adopt a feminist foreign policy? This question becomes especially relevant since, Beijing is the site where the Fourth World Conference of Women was held in 1995, when it was affirmed that “Women’s empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development [\], and peace.”

Hence, one asks if China, a country which claims to rise peacefully and is soon to become a global leader, would be able to accommodate the idea of gender parity and gender sensitivity in its list of core agendas. To understand these prospects, it becomes necessary to first understand the political

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Report on Fourth World women Conference. Image Courtesy: Alexander Street
status of women in China down the ages, and how it has evolved over time.

**Journey of Women in China’s Political Realm**

With the economic progress of China, the country’s women have come a long way as well. But this journey has not been consistent. Rather, there have been highs and lows. The status that present day Chinese women have been able to acquire in terms of education and career opportunities are based on the efforts and hard work of several activists who had put their determined efforts for promoting the cause of their country’s women citizens.

This section aims to evaluate how the status of women has evolved in China. Along the process it would also trace the rise of the concept of feminism and how it has changed over the generations in China. This journey could be categorized into four phases: Pre-modern era, Republican era, Maoist era and Reform era and onwards.

**Phase 1: Pre-Modern Era**

This era refers to the time period 8500 – c. 2070 BC. Historians suggests that this was a matriarchal time period in the Chinese history, with women being the leader of the house. In this phase, women did not suffer under significant oppression and there was comparatively higher gender equality in the Chinese society. The examples of this greater gender equality could be seen in the way women retained their last names after marriage and even passed on their last name to their children. Women were the ones who kept the account of the money earned, managed the household and were among those who inherited the family property. The men and women were both considered to be breadwinners and all kinds of workload were shared between them in their everyday lives.

The scene is drastically different in contemporary China. One can often observe the promulgation of sexist norms in the society. Instances of it can be seen in the idea of women are being compelled to fulfil their domestic ‘duties’, and phrases like ‘leftover women’ being formulated for the women who choose to complete PhD and not marry.

During the pre-modern era, even mythological anecdotes emphasized women as the creator of humankind, which shows the value which was associated with women in the society. The most popular mythological folklore is of *Nu Wa’s Creation Story*.

[Image depicting Nu Wa creating mankind. Image Courtesy: Deviant Art]

It emphasized that how the character *Nu Wa*, in the quest of ending her loneliness, started creating figures by modelling clay. These clay models had limbs and facial features like *Nu Wa*. Once she modelled them, these figures came alive and formed the ‘humans’. She called them ‘ren’ (个)
which is the Chinese word for ‘people’. “Legend has it, the noblemen of the human world were descendants of those moulded by Nu Wa and the lower class people were descendants of those created by her rope. In order to keep her people happy, Nu Wa later created the idea of marriage and the ability to reproduce. Nu Wa was then freed of the tiring task of creating humankind.” Hence, unlike in other societies, in China it was a female figure who was considered to be the creator of humankind and hence held crucial position in the society.

Unlike the present day scenario in China, in this period women were considered to be the prime parent out of the mother and the father. Literary phrases like “zhi qi mu buzhi qi fu” (Knowing mothers but not recognizing fathers) described that children belonged to mother and not to father. Whereas, in the contemporary times since, father is considered to be the ‘bread-earner’ of the family, he is considered to be the prime parent. Hence, in the matriarchal era, females held the prominent position in the society.

In China, there are still a few matriarchal societies today, such as the Mosuo tribe, which struggle to maintain and sustain their traditional semi-matriarchal social structure. The Mosuo tribe is a minority Chinese-ethnic group which lives near the Sino-Tibetan border. It is a tribe which can be described in the literal sense as one in which ‘the children belongs only to their mothers’. In this tribe each home is owned by a matriarch, or Ah mi, who has the absolute authority at home. They perform all tasks to support and earn a livelihood for the family. Since they follow the practice of ‘walking marriage’ in which women can change and choose their partners according to their will, after marriage the wife stays at the home of her mother and the man at his family’s house. As a result this reduces the women’s dependence on men, and moreover gives an upper hand to the women of the tribe as compared to their male counterparts. However, the Chinese government are inconsiderate about their culture and did not consider them more than mere a tribe who offers tourist attraction.

This practice is in total contradiction with today’s majority Han society in China, in which women is often recommended take on the domestic duties, rather than making an independent life for themselves. Historically speaking, it is with the advent of Confucianism during the Han Dynasty era, when Chinese society started to fall into the grip of gender inequality and prejudices undermining the importance of women in the social structure began taking its root. In the period between 206 BCE-220CE, Confucian principles spread across China and were reinforced by the
court/Kingdom. Confucianism defined the roles of men and women in the society, how women should behave in public and what are the functions of an ideal women. This does not imply that prior to Confucianism gender inequality was absent in the Chinese society, but adoption of the Confucian principle by court institutionalized the oppression of women.

**What makes Confucianism oppressive towards women?**

According to Confucianism, men and women holds a dominant-subordinate, independent-dependent or superior-inferior relationship in the society. It says, this equation of relationship has been defined by heaven and hence must not be questioned. According to Confucian, women had to observe the ‘three obediences and four virtues’ (三从四德). The three virtues states that women should be obedient to the father before marriage and elder brothers when young (未嫁从父, to the husband when married (既嫁从夫), and to obey sons when widowed (夫死从子).

Thus, this resulted in the permanent subordination of the women in the Chinese society by making women rely on men’s mercy from cradle to grave. The four virtues were ‘Female virtues (妇德)’, ‘Female words (妇言)’, ‘Female appearances (妇容)’ and ‘Female work (妇功)’. Hence, women should be cautious about how they behave, how they speak, how they appear, what work they should do. All these virtues were defined by Confucius.

In Confucianism it is also believed that it is the duty of women to stay at home, be the nurturer and not the bread-earer. “The ideal of feminine behaviour created a dependent being, at once inferior, passive, and obedient.” Women had no right over their own bodies and were merely used as slaves and sexual tool in the Confucianist society. In the text of Confucianism it is stated that “The functional importance of all women in traditional China lay in their reproductive role. In a patriarchal and authoritarian society, this reproductive function took the form of reproducing male descendants.”

Hence, the assumption about women being pacifist and therefore having a lesser important position amidst issues of concern, such as foreign policy and state related matters, can find its roots to Confucianism. It shows that such assumptions about woman’s behaviour is socially constructed.

Such sexist norms could still be seen being reinforced within China in the recent times through the country’s education system. One such instance was reported in 2017 when in a cultural institute in Fushun city of northern China, women were being taught how to be ‘virtuous’. The core messages which were being delivered in the centre were ‘Career women don't end well.’ ‘Women should just stay at the bottom level of society and shouldn't attempt to go up.’ ‘Women must always obey the orders of their fathers, husbands and sons.’ ‘Never fight back when your husband is beating you, and never argue when your husband is scolding you.’ ‘If a woman has sex with
more than three men, she could catch disease and die.’

Confucianism created a degrading image of women which could be understood by the analects in his text that state, “Women and servants are most difficult to nurture. If one is close to them, they lose their reserve, while if one is distant, they feel resentful” and ‘yang initiates, yin harmonizes’ or ‘men act, women follow’.

Apart from T’ang Dynasty in every other dynasty women oppression was deeply embedded. Confucian impacts in the Han (206 BC-220 AD), Song (960-1279 CE), and Ming (1368-1644 CE) Dynasties were tremendously high. Polygamy and the practice of having concubines were once widely prevalent. This practise was being taken as a symbol of having a wealthy status; virginity and illiteracy in women was considered to be the quality of finest women. Certain texts were widely promulgated amongst the women, such as The Mother of Mencius, which describe the duties of women as a mother and a wife, and the text Admonitions for Women which served as a reference to what a woman’s virtues and vices were under the principles of Confucianism. These were the measures which were being used to indoctrinate or rather ‘tame’ the women of Chinese society.

T’ang Dynasty (618-906 CE) to 1901

During the time period of T’ang Dynasty 618-906 CE, women were provided with relatively more freedom as compared to other dynasties. This improvement was seen in terms of higher literacy rate among women as compared to other periods. Education was considered to uplift underprivileged out of poverty and hence, at each and every level of society, individuals were promoted to attain literacy. This does not imply that women had attained freedom in the T’ang Dynasty era, as the text which were being prescribed to them were Confucian Analects for Women, written by Song Rozhou. The text described how women should behave in the public sphere. This indicates that although Chinese women were encouraged to attain basic literacy, their indoctrination into moulds set by patriarchy continued in one form or the other.

Despite the above, factors such as foreign cultural influences, interracial marriages, and spread of religious thoughts of Buddhism and Daoism led to a reduction in oppression of women and improved their social status during the Tang Dynasty. Notably, the fading away of Confucian ideological domination eventually paved the way for China’s first female emperor, Wu Zetian.

Wu Zetian, the only Female Emperor of China

Wu Zetian’s reign was the only phase when having a political career for women was possible. She tried to end several policies which promoted patriarchy, and replaced
them with other policies which were pro-
women in nature. For instance, she
suggested that the *Daodejing*, which is
philosophy of Dao encouraging feminine
traits, be added to the required reading for
students. She introduced a three-year
mourning period to be observed for a
mother’s death as well, which was earlier
only associated with the death of male
member of the family. “She (Wu Zetian)
allowed other females to be present at
courtly rituals and even took multiple male
bed mates at the expense of male emperors
who preferred the joys of polygamy under patriarchical social systems”. She was one of
the women in China’s history who proved
that women are equally capable to handle
positions of power.

A distressing period of women’s history in
China could be seen between the Song
Dynasty and Qing Dynasty (1644-1912). It
was a period when women were forced to
practice the long-standing and ruthless
tradition of foot binding. It was a custom
which initially was only restricted to the
well-off household women but later spread
to all levels of the society. It coerced
women to bind their feet, as this practice
was considered one of the beauty
benchmarks.

The logic behind this practice was that it
made women appear gentle and fragile,
which was a desirable attribute that men
saw in women. Apart from the male
fetishization of small women’s feet, the
other reason was that, it restricted women’s
ability to walk and hence, they had to be
inside and take care of the household. It was
also associated with the idea of cultural
nostalgia, the cultural nostalgia refers the
constant desire to differentiate one’s culture
from another. It was a fanatic approach of
embracing one’s own culture and
disregarding others, moreover showing
superiority of one’s culture as compared to
that of others. Hence foot binding as a
practice became an expression of Han identity after the Mongols invaded China in 1279. None the less this practice is also associated with claims of male privilege over women. Such cultural nostalgia could still be witnessed within China at various levels, in terms of education, ideologies and movement. The country’s current disregard and scepticism about the concepts of ‘feminism’ and ‘feminist movement’ stem from these ideas being considered as foreign or a non-Chinese.

The situation of Chinese women started to change drastically in the late Qing Dynasty period. During the later days of Qing Dynasty, China was occupied with internal and external wars. The Opium Wars of 1839-42 and 1856-60 forced China to open up trade to other countries. Opening up to other societies brought in new ideologies and hence, the barbaric chains of the feudal society began to break. Also, the Taiping Rebellion of 1850-64 further shook the societal structure of the Qing dynasty. Due to the extensive number of deaths in the civil war, China faced labour deficit and hence, it led to the entering of women in the economic domain. With China facing a humiliating defeat in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95, a revolutionary movement to overthrow the Qing Dynasty began, which called upon educated men and women in the society to participate in the revolution. This marked the beginning of political participation of women in China.

**Phase 2: Republican Era (1911 - 1940’s)**

This phase could be termed as the ‘First wave of Feminism’ in China. The striking feature about this period was that, initially the call for liberation of women came from the Chinese intellectual men and not from the women. However, the major motive behind calling out women and their emancipation was not to improve the condition of women but to introduce ‘more hands’ in the task of “nation-building.” Therefore, the underlying agenda behind this movement was not based not on what women wanted for themselves but was rather was based on what men thought was women’s role in society.

Influential Chinese nationalist thinkers, such as Liang Qichao, called for the emancipation of women, improved education for females, and women’s participation in nation-building. Qichao argued that the weakness of China was due to the lack of education amongst the country’s women. Till that time women were being motivated to join the nationalist movement to reduce “freeloaders” from an already poverty-ridden China, and not that women were thought to be capable enough in contributing to a movement like this. It was a general notion among the country’s male revolutionaries that China’s underdevelopment and weak status could be attributed to the Chinese family structure. The activists argued that women’s lack of education and bound feet, prevented the women from bearing and
raising a healthy and strong future Chinese population.

To his response the first Chinese pro-women female theorist-activist He-Yin Zhen in 1907 responded:

“For thousands of years, the world has been dominated by the rule of man. This rule is marked by class distinctions over which men—and men only—exert proprietary rights. To rectify the wrongs, we must first abolish the rule of men and introduce equality among human beings, which means that the world must belong equally to men and to women. The goal of equality cannot be achieved except through women’s liberation.”

Due to her pro-women approach, she is considered as the pioneer of the feminist movement in China.


She just not only advocated for women’s freedom but challenged the traditional Confucian norms, patriarchy and feudal way of life in China. Her book *Natural Justice: A Feminist Journal* highlighted gender equality as a natural right. In her other book *On the Revenge of Women: Instruments of Man’s Rule over Women*, she criticized Confucianism by saying

“Ancient teaching held that the wife is to the husband as the minister is to his lord, therefore men come first, women last; men are superior and women inferior. One the basis of ‘men first, women last,’ such other deviant teachings as ‘yang initiates, yin harmonizes’ or ‘men act, women follow’ were concocted to restrict women’s freedom. And, from ‘men superior, women inferior’ such deviant teaching as ‘the husband is the heaven of the wife’ also came into being. The husband is this made into heaven and the wife earth; the husband becomes identified with yang and the wife yin. The relationship between men and women thus became one of absolute inequality through cosmic abstraction. I cannot but sigh at this.”

These different approaches towards the cause of women’s liberation show the variety of feminist ideas prevalent during China’s reform period, which were trying to describe the idea of “New Women” (*Xin Nuxing*). In whichever way these ideas flowed, Chinese women started entering into the political domain and republican administration in order to launch movements against the Japanese warlords and imperial Qing Dynasty. This movement was termed as ‘May Fourth Revolution’ which saw active participation of women. However, the employment of women in the political arena and workforce was less of a move for their emancipation, but a nationalistic move to get more hands in the process of nation building. Also, the movement only included and affected a small number of urban and elite women. There was minimal impact on the vast majority of women who lived in the countryside.

**Phase 3: Maoist Era**

The revolution of 1949 marked the breaking point in the history of status of Chinese women. The new Chinese
government under Mao Zedong took measures which impacted the lives of hundreds of millions of Chinese men and women. Mao’s famous quote, “Women hold up half the sky” reflected the determination of PRC towards bringing equality to the women. The first law which reflected such commitment was introduced in 1949, which stated:

*The People’s Republic of China shall abolish the feudal system which holds women in bondage. Women shall enjoy equal rights with men in political, economic, cultural, educational and social life. Freedom of marriage for men and women shall be put into effect (Article 6).*

In 1950’s Chinese Communist Party (CCP) also adopted Marriage Law which outlawed prostitution, arranged marriage, child betrothal and concubinage. This resulted in a higher rate of divorces, which was considered to be as a result of women freeing themselves from ‘feudal’ and ‘forced’ marriages. According to the estimated figure, the divorce rate in China during the early 1950s was as high as 1.3 per 1,000 population. CCP also encouraged women to enter into the workforce and take part in the re-building the glory of Chinese Middle Kingdom. The female members of the Chinese Communist Party established the All-China Women’s Federation to ‘mobilize women for economic development and social reform.’ The members of the organization were women who held powerful positions in CCP and described themselves as ‘Socialist State Feminist.’ These women from 1949-1966 period worked alongside the government to strive for gender equality. Their mission was to challenge male authority and power through the Communist mission statements. Hence, as they were moving along the lines of party messaging, they were not greatly challenged in return.
During this period the magazine ‘Women of New China’ (中國女性), which was the first ‘feminist’ magazine began in 1949. It was run originally by Zhou Enlai, Dong Bian and Hu Yuzhi (all of whom were members of the Chinese Communist Party.) The magazine aimed to “help its readers correctly and comprehensively understand the way to achieve women’s liberation in new China….with the double theme of ‘participation’ and ‘liberation’, adopting the Party’s mass line as the guiding method, the magazine soon evolved into a public forum for state feminists to express their visions of a new socialist China as well as a major site for their discursive practice in the pursuit of women’s liberation.”

Women of New China gradually adopted an anti-feudalistic rhetoric. Anti-feudalism was a goal high on the agenda of the Chinese Communist Party at the time. Hence, to legitimize their activism, CCP adopted to create a discourse which associated sexism with feudalism. This reinforced the agenda of spreading socialist state propaganda using a fabricated feminist discourse.

It is important to note that throughout the years, Chinese authorities were trying to propagate their own agenda using the mask of women’s rights. This shows that how women’s issues have always been put secondary by the Chinese authorities throughout its history. Although the motive of CCP was to spread socialist propaganda within China using a feminist discourse, the use of media combined with CCP messages resulted in a massive spread of female-focused content that challenged opinions, and elicited debates and conversations on women’s issues.

During this period numerous women were recruited for various occupations. The recruitment involved the relocation of large numbers of women in the cities, the areas which were sparsely populated, and to the areas with a concentration of female-oriented employment such as textile and silk production, and other light industries. However, till 1953, the level of workforce required reached its saturation point, and hence CCP took a U-turn from its policies. Not only did CCP stop with this move, but the Party also faced severe opposition from male members of the Chinese society. Women were resisting marriage and were also taking up jobs, causing loss of opportunities for men. This led to series of regulations and campaigns to motivate women to be ‘socialist’ housewives and bear their perceived moral responsibilities of domestic work and motherhood.

The employing of women as in the case of economic restructuring, and recommending them to go back to housework when the workforce reaches its threshold, has become a trend in China. Women faced a similar situation after the agricultural collectivization and the start of the Great Leap Forward Movement in 1958. This also led to the collectivization of domestic duties and the subsequent establishment of service canters in forms of cafeterias, kindergartens, and nurseries. “There were estimates that 4,980,000 nurseries and kindergartens and more than 3,600,000 dining-halls were set up in rural areas by 1959.” This again brought women into workforce and the trend persisted throughout the Cultural Revolution.

The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) brought in the biggest changes for women in the Chinese society. Slogans like ‘The times have changed, men and women are the same’ (时代不同了，男女都一样) asserted that men and women were equal in political consciousness and physical strength. However, the slogan’s seeming emphasis on gender equality was a misinterpretation. The concept of ‘equality’ was inaccurately equated with ‘sameness’.
The female CCP cadres were motivated to dress like male cadres and even behave like them, not only in terms of employment and career, but also in terms of dress style, behaviour, demeanour, family life, social activities, political rights, and public image.

This ultimately defeated the idea of women empowerment in itself, as this was more of making women emulate men rather than letting women progress while displaying their own characteristics, will and freedom. To emphasize the sameness of men and women, the CCP forced All Women’s Federation to suspend itself. It indicated that women’s affairs were placed in a secondary position compared with what the CCP considered as the more pressing political agendas during those years. Moreover, to the Party, women did not require a separate body and hence can be governed with the already existing institutions which were predominantly run by men.

This phase marked the disregard of differential needs of women, and provided them with no special assistance to overcome the mental and physical trauma of subjugation. With the implementation of One-Child policy, the matter became even worse as it resulted into increase in number of female infanticide further deteriorating status of women. Mao and his prodigy considered it to be the golden period for women, marked with prosperity, participation and equality of women. However, this period overburdened Chinese women with expectations which were imposed on them by the state.

**Phase 4: Reform Era and onwards**

In the reform era, with the opening up of China in 1970’s, private businesses flooded the country creating more job opportunities and better prospects of future for the Chinese women. However, it did also bring inequality in employment opportunities and an increasingly unequal income distribution among men and women. In the rural areas the de-collectivization of agriculture post Cultural Revolution, resulted into loss of jobs for women; this restored traditional sexual division of labor within rural households which ultimately reduced participation of rural women in the labor force and public services.

Although reforms resulted in a rapid rise in the percentage of women in the Chinese labor force, it is still lesser than that of men. If one looks at the present status of women in the Chinese economic domain, 63.3% of women are in the labor force as compared to 77.9% of men. Although there is a high percentage of women in China’s labour force, there is a huge gender-pay gap. Chinese women earn on average 35% lesser than their male counterparts for doing the similar work, thus positioning China’s ranking within the bottom third of the Global Gender Gap Index (ranked 99th out of 144 countries).

In 2010, Chinese women earned just over two-thirds (67.3%) of Chinese men’s income in urban areas, and just over half (56%) of men’s income in the country’s rural areas. In a 2010 survey on China, more than 72% of women stated they were not hired or promoted due to gender discrimination and over 75% believed they were “being dismissed” due to marriage or childbirth. In 2016, women constituted just 17% of all legislators, senior officials, and managers in China. Only 17.5% of firms in China have women as top managers. In 2015, women represented 9.2% of boards and 22% of CFOs of companies in China. In 2013, only 3.2% of CEOs of Chinese companies were women.

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In terms of ideological evolution due to increasing globalization, many women scholars and activists started taking a turn towards global feminism, the concept of women empowering women. They started realising the role of non-governmental organizations for challenging the Chinese government and authority as well as the patriarchal structures. Unlike the ‘socialist feminists’ of the feminist of this era choose to shift away from following Party messages.

Feminist started to gain political attention within PRC when the growing connection of Chinese feminists with the feminists outside the country started to garner global attention. The movements by the Feminist groups like #MeToo movement has now started to gain more attention by the Chinese citizens. It ultimately became a matter of concern for PRC’s leadership. This led to imposition of regulations and surveillance by the government. It was in this period that more women began to identify themselves as feminists, and began discussing about how Chinese feminism was shaped in comparison to the Western concept of feminism. These years also marked an increase in women’s academia and spread of feminist discourse.

**Present Wave of Feminism within China**

With globalization and the growing association of Chinese women with global
feminist movements, Chinese feminists have come to loggerheads with the Chinese state. PRC believes Feminism as a concept is a western notion which is not sync with the values of Chinese women. China claims it believes in empowering women, but in a socialist way, and denounces using any foreign terminology for the same. Presently, “Feminist Five” or “Five Feminist Sisters” (五名女权姐妹), comprising five women who are heavily involved in activist demonstrations across China, is one of the most famous and active feminist groups in China.

They gained further notoriety in 2015, when Li along with Wang Man, Wei Tingting, Wu Rongrong and Zheng Churan were detained for 37 days in 2015, after planning to distribute anti-sexual harassment stickers on the public transport systems in Beijing, Guangzhou and Hangzhou on International Women's Day. This has caught the attention of the international community. It is noteworthy that feminists in China unlike the members of All Women’s Federation are working independently outside the ambit of CCP.

They are using social media to spread their movements across China.

These aspects brings back attention to the question of how far have such developments helped Chinese women to attain their space in the political arena. Have these movements been effective enough to make space for women in the power structure? If one particularly sees the condition of women in the political arena there were only few who entered the political arena and much fewer who attained leadership roles within the political system itself.
It is worth noticing that due to the lack of support from the Chinese government towards feminists, it is difficult for such groups to get directly involved in the political realm. Till date, the women who have been able to attain higher political positions in Chinese political arena have been members of the All Women’s Federation and active members of CCP. Hence, the only way for candidates to enter into Chinese political legislature is by attaining candidature of CCP. Apart from members of active feminist groups, the other women who attain the candidature of CCP are very low in number.

From Figure 1 it is visible that although there is a slight increase in the percentage of women entering into political arena via CCP, the number of female cadre is still very low.

If there is an examination of the number depicting women’s representation at NPC and especially at the standing committee it is far lesser than male candidates.

**WOMEN REPRESENTATIVES IN THE NPC AND ITS STANDING COMMITTEE (%)**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women Representatives</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women in Standing Committee</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>16.6</td>
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Present participation of women in the Political Domain

After the National People's Congress in 2012, only 33 women sat on the Central Committee which elects the powerful Politburo - that is 9%. The present status is even more alarming. Only one-quarter i.e. only 24.2% of all positions in China’s single parliament are held by women. Since the end of the cultural revolution in 1976, a maximum of two women have been able to enter into the second highest executive body- the 25-member executive Politburo at the 18th Congress. They were Liu Yandong (刘延东, born in 1945), and the head of the Central United Front Work Department, Sun Chunlan (孙春兰, b. 1950).

Liu Yandong retired in the 19th Congress, 2017. No women has ever been able to gain a seat in the core, 7-member Politburo Standing Committee which is the highest-decision making in China. The scenario is particularly depressing for a country which has the world’s largest legislature body.

Why is there a lower representation of women in the Chinese political arena?

Since the Imperial times, Chinese women have been put through extreme subjugation and oppression which has affected on their morale to participate in the political domain. Terminology such as ‘leftover’ women testifies the presence of patriarchy in every level of Chinese society. This patriarchal attitude deeply embedded at the family and cultural level restrains women to enter into political domain, which is thought to be a ‘man’s world’ from the beginning.

In a survey conducted by All-China Women’s Federation & National Bureau of Statistics of China in 2011, the main explanation given for women’s numerical under-representation in the lower level of the political structure, and in politics more generally, is that of “women’s lack of self-confidence”, and “the enduring drag of
‘feudal’ attitudes (e.g. women being constructed as inferior to men)”. More than half of the surveyed people (61.6% of men and 54.6% of women) agreed that ‘the field for men is in public and the domain for women is within household’.

It is ironic that the same Chinese government-run organization, which talks about taking up the cause of women, has often made derogatory remarks on women who are aged above 27. In a statement by All China Women Federation, it was stated that “Do leftover women really deserve our sympathy? Girls with an average or ugly appearance ... hope to further their education in order to increase their competitiveness. The tragedy is they don’t realise that, as women age, they are worth less and less, so by the time they get their MA or PhD, they are already old, like yellowed pearls.”

The Chinese women who manage to get into politics are not often provided with the opportunity to reach up to leadership roles. There are several reasons for such a predicament. China’s retirement age is 60 for men, 55 for female white-collar workers and 50 for female blue-collar employees. The assumption for such a law is that they are the primary caregivers for grandchildren and elderly relatives and hence should focus on their domestic life more than on their careers. This sexist approach is constitutionally embedded in China. It is difficult for a woman in Chinese politics to climb the career ladder, and once she reaches the higher level, age forces her to retire.

Similar inequality can also be witnessed in the Chinese civil services, where the CCP officially adopted a mandatory retirement policy in which men retire at age 60 and women at age 55. Due to this, the representation of women reduces in the civil services as well. Women hold only about 20% of civil service posts overall, in China (Interview, Ministry of Personnel, 19 March 2004) and less than 10% of leading positions at provincial or county level (7% at provincial level and 9% at county level)

Even if female candidates think of entering into the political space, the practice of ‘guanxi’ or nepotism is prevalent within China to such an extreme extent that women often finds it difficult to enter politics without the aid of politically established male counterparts. So far the most notable woman who has ever held a powerful position in Chinese political arena is Jiang Qing, Mao Zedong’s fourth wife. She was a Politburo member and she played a major role in China during the Cultural Revolution. Although it is worth noticeable that women who entered into political arena during that period, did not utilized their position to proliferate the cause of women in anyway. The women cause had not taken up much place in the party’s agenda and even after entering the political sphere, Chinese women were and still are not credited or acknowledged for their achievements.
Even when female candidates enter China’s political arena by winning elections they are given the “softer” sociocultural ministerial positions, whereas men are provided with more prestigious positions overseeing economics, national security, and foreign affairs, irrespective of their merits, background or areas of expertise. Such a phenomenon is common elsewhere in the world, however, it is predominantly visible in China. Scholars also find that in China, there exist stereotypical portfolios for women leaders; these include women’s affairs, family and child affairs, health, education, and culture. These scenarios reduce the interests of Chinese women to set foot in politics, as they are not provided the opportunities to showcase their talents in the areas of their expertise.

Hence, for numerous reasons there is a persisting trend of low numeric representation of women in the arena of politics within China. PRC’s aversion towards the term ‘feminism’ shows its lack of commitment towards women’s issues. Further, while other South Asian countries depict their support towards Sweden’s move, PRC’s unresponsiveness makes a clear impression of PRC non-supportiveness towards feminism. A study of the data on current arms imports and exports between China and rest of the world, which are USD 1.117 Billion and USD 1.21 Billion respectively, strictly shows China has its priority set on its own geostrategic interests, rather than pressing for improvement on issues of human rights within its own territory.

Although it is well established that women and children are the ones who get most affected by wars and conflicts, China does not shy away from making bold and aggressive statements about going into armed conflict with neighbouring nations. This depicts the aggressive nature of the Chinese government. The issues of minority rights and women’s rights figure very low in the priority list of the Chinese government; this is the core arguments made by Chinese feminists who have kept the matter at the top of their agenda. The frequent reports of atrocities conducted by PRC on its minorities and the country’s indifference towards women issues leads to the doubts on whether China will ever be able to implement, or rather consider, adopting a feminist foreign policy far fetched. By and larger it can be understood that, it is hard for a country, which has not been able to give women the legitimate space they deserve in the social and political structure, to adopt a feminist foreign policy; a policy that supports gender parity and sensitivity.

‘Nu’ Hope for the Future?

Although Chinese women exist in a challenging societal environment within their country, it does not mean that their hard work and perseverance is not yielding success. With or without the support of the government, Chinese women have been able to make a space for themselves in the Chinese society. Although, they still lag behind in the political domain, they have been able to show wonders in the field of business, medicine and arts.
have been highly successful especially in the business arena, despite women entrepreneurs still being a minority. A 2011 working paper ‘Framework for female entrepreneurship in China’, which was published by the Journal of Business and Emerging Markets, noted “Women entrepreneurs represent only 20% of all the Chinese entrepreneurs even though 98% of these women are ultimately successful”.

Also, with the increase in the number of feminist activists within China, emerging critical voices are challenging Chinese authorities in the form of art, movements, organizations and campaigns. This public debate generated by the feminists and the recent international attention on them, has made it difficult for the Chinese officials to ignore them.

In fact, it has resulted in certain improvements in the attitude of PRC towards them. For instance, PRC have begun to take gender-equitable policies, such as launching of women-only subway cars at in Guangzhou and Shenzhen. Moreover, there was no resistance shown by authorities to the visual imagery used in the Beijing metro to campaign against sexual harassment, which is a vastly different scenario from the government stance towards a similar campaign launched by the Feminists Five Group in 2017.

It is evident that, even if the Chinese government officials would never get influenced by the country’s new feminist activism, or even if they do not show any support towards the feminists, it has become imperative for the authorities to be silent spectators. Therefore, there is still hope that China perhaps not in the near future, but in the times ahead, would be capable of becoming a gender sensitive and gender neutral country, one which will give equal share to the women of its community.

Like the Chinese written character for ‘woman’ which has changed over the ages,

![Modern Feminist Art. Image Courtesy: leahmariani.com](https://leahmariani.com)

from earlier picturising her as kneeling down and submissive before her man, to the new character which shows ‘woman’ as one with her arms swinging freely and walking with confident strides, the fate of Chinese women in reality will change as well. The Chinese have been able to find their own way of doing things in almost every aspect of the world. It is possible that someday the world will witness rise of the Chinese way of feminism, or feminism with Chinese characteristics, or even oriental feminism; and the day will come when
China’s women will indeed hold up half the sky.

References


iii Williams, Kristin P. "Feminism in Foreign Policy." (2017).


xxiv Ibid.

xxv Ibid.