

**China's Feminist Impulse:  
Reinvigorating Security and Status of Women in China for Legitimacy**

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**12/09/2016**

### **Policy Problem**

Due to the rise of the Communist Party of China and Mao's philosophy of equality, women entered the workforce, became officials, and gained positions in society that they had not previously experienced in the pre-Communist world. Recently there has been a shift away from this philosophy of equality, manifesting itself in a lack of women in high-ranking positions (and less societal awareness which female leadership brings), female infanticide, sex-selective abortions and disproportionate sex ratios, and women being used as chattel. Since the Party has lost the feminist momentum that was prevalent in its early rise, the status of women has declined. This could lead to the Party potentially losing favor in the eyes of these women, which in turn could lead to questioning of the legitimacy of Party policies by members of society.

### **Proposed Solution**

The proposed solution would require positions for women in high-ranking government posts, and include grassroots groups in those positions as well. The Party would need to improve the possibility for women's voices to be heard in China in order to combat inequalities and social norms. They will need to continue working with International Organizations to improve the status of women, and continue enforcing policies to prohibit sex-selective abortions. These solutions would add legitimacy to this cause, and could combat the instability stemming from the disproportionate number of young males in society.

### **Supporting Evidence**

The major challenges that have led to a shift away from the idea of equality manifested in the early years of the Communist Party, are due to "significant inequalities between the sexes"<sup>1</sup>. These inequalities manifest in traditional gender roles becoming the standard, a lack of women in leadership and high ranking positions, the increased incidence of female infanticide resulting in disproportionate sex ratios, and the cascading effects from these issues. "Different treatment for men and women can easily be seen in many areas of society. In China, inequalities between the

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<sup>1</sup> Attane 2012, 4

sexes remain not only as regards access to education, employment, and health, but also in matters of inheritance, salaries, political representation, and decision-making within the family”<sup>2</sup>.

### **Historical Status of Women and the Rise of Communism**

In order to understand how women’s role in a society has been and will continue to affect China’s development and goals through political and economic representation, disproportionate sex ratios, and male child preference, and additional issues resulting from these situations, it is critical to understand China’s past. “In Imperial China, women assumed a relatively subordinate position to men”<sup>3</sup>. Because young women were often viewed merely as another mouth to feed before being marriage, there was a lack of respect for the life of a female. Men in Chinese society were viewed as the legitimate leaders, whereas the society had “Feudal attitudes [meaning] of women being constructed as inferior to men”<sup>4</sup>. In fact, there was only one true female Emperor in all of Chinese feudal history, Wu Zetain of the Tang Dynasty. There were Empresses and Empress Dowagers as important actors in Chinese history, but the lack of female leadership combined with the societal mindset of man over woman during the time period before the rise of the Communist party, translated into the current societal and political perspectives. Unfortunately, “within society, women had few alternatives as to what roles they could play. The main options available were those of the wife, concubine, or prostitute; each role successively less desirable”<sup>5</sup>. Regardless of the role, a woman generally did not have power over her own life because the men surrounding her made those decisions for her. This societal norm of male dominance and their attitude that women were possessions or property translated into harmful cultural practices such as foot binding, servitude, and prostitution.

After the rise of Communism in China, “In the period between the end of the Qing dynasty in 1911 and the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the role of women in Chinese society began to change dramatically”<sup>6</sup>. During the rise of Communism, Mao actually

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<sup>2</sup> Attane, 7

<sup>3</sup> O’Sullivan 2012

<sup>4</sup> Fulton, 35

<sup>5</sup> Fulton, 35

<sup>6</sup> O’Sullivan 2012

enlisted many women to his cause and raised their status by incorporating women's equality in the same ideology for oppressed people in China. "In his Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan," Mao spoke of overturning all authority, not just the patriarchy. He said, "These four authorities - political, clan, religious and masculine - are the embodiment of the whole feudal-patriarchal ideology and system, and are the four thick ropes binding the Chinese people, particularly the peasants"<sup>7</sup>. It is important to note here that Mao was clearly striving to get women (and men) peasants into the workforce. His political philosophy was built upon his time in the countryside with peasants, and he believed they were part of the strength of China. Since Mao needed to mobilize and use that strength, women were included, and their position in society was elevated. While many of Mao's decisions before coming into power and during the beginnings of the Communist Party when he was in power, were not necessarily the best choices, he did initiate equality between the sexes. Because of this initiative, China saw, "As early as the 1950s, concrete action was organised in favour of the development of women's work outside the home and for the equality of spouses within the family"<sup>8</sup>.

### **Current Status of Women in China**

While Chinese "women have seen significant strides in in the last century, with the end of foot binding, some might argue that more progress has been made in the last few decades [as an example], women's workforce participation rate in China is 74%, one of the highest in the world"<sup>9</sup>. And while it is true that women achieved a greater social status with the rise of communism, unfortunately, "Whilst communism pushed men and women to work together, China's traditional Confucianism, which berates "strong women," lingers"<sup>10</sup>.

Thus, while there have been strides towards progress for women in the economic, political, home, and societal areas, there is still an underlying refusal to recognize the benefits of women in leadership positions, women in the economy, and women's overall value to Chinese

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<sup>7</sup> Fulton, 36

<sup>8</sup> Attane, 4

<sup>9</sup> Burkitt 2013

<sup>10</sup> O'Sullivan 2012

society. Many Chinese people “hold that women should devote themselves to their family rather than career development. There is no denying that China is still a male-dominated society”<sup>11</sup>.

There have been some strides made for women’s rights. One of these key movements in the struggle for equality and in the emancipation of women is seen in the ratification of the United Nations International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1980<sup>12</sup>. This groundbreaking convention was a major step forward, and continues to hold China accountable to women in employment, politics, household, birth, health, and several other areas.

Chinese social progress does not indicate that women are regarded as equal in China’s male-dominated society. There are still strong traditional stereotypes “of the roles and duties of men and women within the family and society....and in 2004 the Chinese government recognised that ‘deep-seated inequalities continue to exist between regions regarding the status of women, traditional sexual stereotypes persist, the rights of women are ignored in many places, [and that] a great deal of work remains to be done to improve the situation of Chinese women if their equality with men is to become a reality’”<sup>13</sup>. A major societal shift must occur before the social practices, structures, norms, and culture will change<sup>14</sup>.

### **Women in Party Politics**

The Party has taken many steps to ensure women are represented in the political system through quotas and policy. However, “Since Chairman Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing, masterminded [at least supported and pushed for] the horrors of the Cultural Revolution, women have been eyed suspiciously by the Chinese Communist Party”<sup>15</sup>. There is a noticeable absence of women in high-ranking positions (as well as grassroots level positions), and there is less societal awareness of the necessity for female leadership. While “Chinese women have been playing an important role in many aspects of socio-economic activities...in recent decades overall women’s

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<sup>11</sup> Zeng 2014, 146

<sup>12</sup> Attane, 4

<sup>13</sup> Attane, 4

<sup>14</sup> Zeng, 144

<sup>15</sup> Moore 2013

political participation in China has not been significantly improved. The spindled shape of women's representation in the power structures will not support a sustainable improvement in women's political participation in China"<sup>16</sup>. Besides women's political participation being "far behind many other countries," women in Chinese politics have been represented mainly at the middle level in the National People's Congress (NPC), without much activity in higher or grassroots level government. A quota was set by the Party to ensure that 23% of the NPC were women. In 2012, there were 23% women in the NPC. However, in 2011 China was ranked 52 out of 188 countries in terms of political participation for women and, "if the percentage of women in the Standing Committee of NPCC would be applied (which is 16.6%), the international rank of women's participation in politics in China...would be ranked at 72nd" because the percentage of women holding "top profile positions in China is small"<sup>17</sup>. Further, the NPC is a decisionmaking body made up of nearly 3,000 members. The legislation for 23% of the seats for women amounts to only 699 women. This minimum requirement also becomes problematic when the minimum is "eventually interpreted in practice as the 'maximum'. To meet the 'minimum' becomes the only requirement necessary to fulfill in order to achieve the goal of women's participation"<sup>18</sup>. On another note, the NPC does not hold the most power in China. The most elite decisionmaking body in the Party is the Standing Committee of the Politburo (SCP), which no woman has ever been elected to<sup>19</sup>.

The lack of women in high-ranking government positions is further evidenced by the elections of 2013. When Liu Yandong was elected into the Politburo, not only was there "only one other woman [besides Liu Yandong] in China's 25-strong Politburo, Sun Chunlan," but, again, these women have not been elected to the SCP<sup>20</sup>. Additionally, while Liu Yandong's election to vice premier on the Politburo is certainly a major step forward, for many women it is also an unattainable goal. This is because Liu was born into "Communist party royalty, the

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<sup>16</sup> Zeng, 140

<sup>17</sup> Zeng, 145

<sup>18</sup> Zeng, 146

<sup>19</sup> Howell 2014

<sup>20</sup> Moore 2013

closed circle of senior officials who have carved up money and influence in China between them”<sup>21</sup>. It has also been proven that “higher socioeconomic status women [are] more politically engaged than lower socioeconomic status women”<sup>22</sup>. The barriers towards women attaining high ranking positions in politics (as well as in the economic sector) are not simply a cultural gender bias. In the Communist Party a person’s rank and status depends not only who they know (or who their family is), but also what positions they have held previously, the amount of money available to them, and the knowledge of which way they should lean when political conflicts arise. Most women will never have the opportunity to rise to a position because of their unfavorable standing in society when compared to men. Gender biases do come into play here as well because “cadres move up the government ranks on the recommendations of their superiors...in order to become a powerful official in China, you need to do a lot of banqueting and networking and heavy drinking of baijiu (Chinese rice liquor). In contrast, most women are expected to be at home, tending to their families outside of the office”<sup>23</sup>. Because of this double standard of women and men, the ascension to higher positions of leadership is extremely difficult. Socializing to ‘impress the boss’ does not necessarily work for women. There is a tendency for the women to be judged unfairly because they are out with colleagues instead of at home with their families. These challenges magnify the gender bias and increase the suspicious view of women leaders that Chinese society has cultivated and Confucian thinking has enforced.

Since the rise of Communism, Chinese women have made great strides politically and socially attaining leadership positions. However, they still have a long way to go. This is because “although the Communist parenthesis favoured the employment of women outside the home, it did not put an end to the social prejudices that place a lower value, professionally, on women’s skills than on those of men”<sup>24</sup>. With fewer women in high ranking Party positions as well as grassroots positions, leadership in China lacks the knowledge and awareness which female

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<sup>21</sup> BBC Beijing 2012

<sup>22</sup> Zeng, 144

<sup>23</sup> BBC Beijing 2012

<sup>24</sup> Attane, 5

leadership would normally provide. “To increase the political leadership participation of women, it is important to pay more attention to a range of issues, such as customs and trade regulations, graft, the gender gap in political empowerment, public spending on education, the economic viability of the country, access to electricity and the internet, political freedom and cultural variables like performance orientation, collectivism and power distance. Of them, the gender gap in political empowerment and the collectivism/cultural variable are more important”<sup>25</sup>. This insight and understanding is invaluable to the continued progress of the Party, especially in maintaining domestic and international legitimacy. “Getting women into politics and government is not just about occupying positions of leadership. Meaningful political participation requires a broader definition of politics, which extends beyond the institutional boundaries of the party-state to other domains of social and economic life”<sup>26</sup>.

### **Sex-Selective Abortion, Sex Ratios, and Security Implications**

The societal devaluation of women has led to disproportionate sex ratios in China. In fact, China is second only to India in disproportionate sex ratios. The CIA factbook shows that China’s sex ratio at birth for 2016 is 1.17<sup>27</sup>. This is interpreted as 117 males were born for every female. That is an incredibly high statistic. An average sex ratio is deemed to be at 105 boys to 100 girls<sup>28</sup>. As can be seen in the table below, there is only one statistic where women outnumber men in the scale - after the age of 65.

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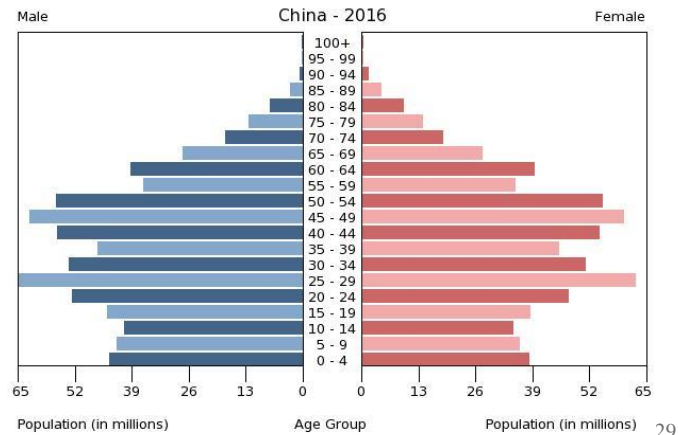
<sup>25</sup> Zeng,137

<sup>26</sup> Zeng,137

<sup>27</sup> CIA World Factbook 2016

<sup>28</sup> SEARO 2016





This skewed ratio is due to female infanticide and sex-selective abortion. China has a history of female infanticide and male preference (Attane); but sex-selective abortion, with the advent of ultrasound machines (it is technically illegal to use ultrasound to determine the gender of the child in order to abort girls), helps to bring about the same end result.

One of the main reasons boys are preferred over girls in China is because “men carry forward the ancestral line”<sup>30</sup>. This was further exacerbated with the One-Child Policy that the Party adopted in which couples could only have one child. During the time the policy was enacted, male children were usually favored since they not only carried on the family name, but were also expected to be able to care for parents when they were older, would be able to get a good job, were given a higher status in society, etc. This policy led to increased sex-selective abortions in China. China originally adopted the policy in the 70s/80s because of a misconception that a large working force would result. Unfortunately, “today 12 percent of China’s population is over age 60, with a paucity of young people to provide economic and social support. China’s working-age adults are unlikely to spark the hoped-for baby boom, because they include tens of millions of men who cannot find women to marry. There are 62 million “missing” women and girls in China from sex-selective abortion”<sup>31</sup>. The One-Child policy has since been relaxed in an effort by the Party to normalize the sex ratios, but, “even if

<sup>29</sup> CIA World Factbook 2016

<sup>30</sup> Hvistendahl 2015

<sup>31</sup> Hvistendahl 2015

the sex ratio at birth were to normalize tomorrow...fully 10 percent of working-age men in China would still lack a female counterpart in 2050”<sup>32</sup>.

Besides the obvious implications of a graying generation, a decline in population in the future, as well as a lack of eligible women for marriage-aged men, why is sex-selective abortion a negative practice? The main answer lies in the surplus of males in Chinese society. This population poses a potential security risk both domestically and internationally. Domestically there will be “a rise in demand for sex work, and trafficking networks” both sex trafficking as well as bride trafficking<sup>33</sup>. Men without women of their same age available to marry will look to younger generations or move to different countries to find a wife. Both the emigration from China or marrying the younger generation pose problems for Chinese society. Emigration removes one generation from their homeland. Marrying the younger generation creates a deficit of women for the next generation of women to marry which just exacerbates the problem. In some cases, women will be taken from or bribed away from their villages with promises of jobs in the cities. However, their village, they will be raped and beaten into submission and then taken to another village where there is a lack of marriageable women. There they are sold as a bride. These women do not know where they are and so they cannot leave. If they were able to escape, there is a distinct possibility that they would no longer be welcome back in their homes because they had been raped and forced into marriage. Tragically, this is not an uncommon occurrence, “from 1989 to 1990, over 10,000 women and children were rescued by the authorities”<sup>34</sup>.

Finally, and most importantly to China’s security, it has been shown that if there is an excess of men in one area, they will band together in aggressive seeking societies resulting in violence domestically or internationally<sup>35</sup>. Additionally, when there are fewer women in society due to sex-selective abortions and disproportionate sex ratios, there are “spike(s) in sex

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<sup>32</sup> Hvistendahl 2015

<sup>33</sup> UNFPA 2011

<sup>34</sup> Kristof and WuDunn 2009

<sup>35</sup> Hudson and denBoer 2004

trafficking and bride buying,” Because of this, the “excess men uninvolved in family life and less tethered to social institutions have contributed to government leaders’ fears of instability”<sup>36</sup>.

Another unfortunate result of sex-selective abortion is that women tend to be pressured socially to leave their jobs or education in order to marry young and work at their homes after they are married off <sup>37</sup>. This treatment of women is harmful for local women or individuals, but it is damaging for all of Chinese society. “The place given to women, measured by various indicators relating to education, employment, demography, and health, is a generally reliable indicator of the radical changes affecting society...[often] testifying to an unquestionable deterioration in certain aspects of their situation”<sup>38</sup>. China’s interaction with others in the international realm, and with its people domestically, is based off of legitimacy; and violent young men, combined with a lack of population control and human rights violations of Chinese women, all lead to an unstable society. Instability in the society and in the government is not only dangerous to the Party and its agenda, but could further devolve society and damage the vulnerable in society, namely the women, even more. This is a vicious cycle leading to lack of legitimacy for the Party in the eyes of its people.

### **Conclusion - The Need to Restore Legitimacy**

The major focus of the Party in terms of implement gender equality is to restore legitimacy in its female citizens. “Steps have been taken to address the negative impacts resulting from these gender imbalances and the shift away from equality. China has ratified the CEDAW and worked on various international initiatives to improve and promote the status of women. However, a more rigorous application of the laws that grant that improvement and equality is a first step towards restoring the legitimacy of the party in the eyes of women”<sup>39</sup>.

Another positive move forward in restoring the legitimacy of the Party involves government leadership. Women should attain and maintain leadership positions in the highest

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<sup>36</sup> Hvistendahl 2015

<sup>37</sup> UNFPA 2011

<sup>38</sup> Attane, 6

<sup>39</sup> Attane, 4

levels of the government. By giving women a platform to have a voice on matters that concern them and the nation, vast improvements could be made not only in political representation, but in health care, rural women's education, and efforts to combat the continued inequalities between men and women in their society. As of 2005, only 21% of Government, Party, and NGO leaders were women<sup>40</sup>. Promoting and supporting women in high-profile political positions will certainly "contribute to political gender equity"<sup>41</sup>. However, a true representation of women in government would come with involvement at a grassroots level<sup>42</sup>. Women representatives from grassroots groups would be instrumental to facilitating not only a political equality, but bringing about a return of equality in jobs, healthcare, birth, and respect in Chinese society.

It should be noted that positive strides have been made to restore the balance of sexes through the abolishment of China's One-child policy, and prohibiting "illegal gender testing and sex-selective abortions"<sup>43</sup>. Unfortunately, the continual push of the One-child policy led to China becoming "truly a single-child society" where most families choose to have only one child, usually desiring a boy<sup>44</sup>. The dissolution of the One-child policy and the reduction in sex-selective abortions will not immediately stabilize the imbalance in sex ratios or eliminate the cascade of consequences<sup>45</sup>. What must be done is not simply a quick fix, but a thorough overhaul of the Chinese mindset in regards to gender preference and status<sup>46</sup>.

Chinese women's status in society is directly linked to the legitimacy of the Party, and "the Chinese government quickly understood that the legitimacy of the country in the front ranks of world powers was dependent on its adherence to important international principles, notably those relating to the rights of women"<sup>47</sup>. It is essential that women in future Chinese generations be included in leadership positions at both higher and grassroots levels of government, that steps

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<sup>40</sup> Attane, 10

<sup>41</sup> Zeng, 142

<sup>42</sup> Zeng, 142

<sup>43</sup> Wong 2015

<sup>44</sup> Hvistendahl 2015

<sup>45</sup> Hudson and denBoer 2004

<sup>46</sup> Attane, 9

<sup>47</sup> Attane,7

be taken to stop sex-selective abortion and prohibit bride selling, and that the government and the people prioritize the need to resolve the issues of inequality between men and women. This cannot be done through short-term fixes such as meeting ineffective quotas or repealing damaging policies such as the One-child policy. “The one-child policy’s architects were not so concerned with the long term”<sup>48</sup>. The long-term effects resulting from these situations which produced a shortage of women and an excess of men created an environment negatively affecting national security and Party legitimacy. The most damaging effect is the lack of trust by the Chinese women in the Party. They do not believe the Party is supporting them because, “although there are, in theory, endless opportunities”, only a few women have been able to actually succeed at achieving equality<sup>49</sup>. To maintain legitimacy and security, the Party must recognize the increasing importance of women’s rights in China.

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<sup>48</sup> Hvistendahl 2015

<sup>49</sup> O’Sullivan 2012

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