

# “Innocent Young Girls”: The Search for Female Provincial Leaders in China

Minglu Chen\*

## Abstract

There are few women among China’s local political leadership. Current scholarship on the topic co-locates women’s political participation with the representation of other marginalized social groups. In particular, it is argued that female politicians are simply tokenistic representatives of the marginalized: female, intellectual, ethnic minority and non-Communist Party members. An examination of those women who have served in provincial leadership positions over the last two terms suggests that such a characterization is misleading. Rather, the evidence indicates that women have been appointed on the same grounds as male leaders in terms of age, education, CCP membership and experience. Gender disparities in the selection of provincial leaders are in fact considerably more nuanced and can be traced to the lack of institutionalized policies and processes as well as women’s ongoing disadvantages in education, political networks and training.

**Keywords:** women; political participation; provincial leadership; Chinese Communist Party; elite recruitment

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Who are the female politicians who have made it to the top positions in China’s 31 provincial-level jurisdictions? When I recently put this question to a Chinese government official, he laughed and responded: “They are all ‘innocent young girls’” (*tamen dou shi “wu zhi shao nü”* 他们都是无知少女). Here, *wu* references a lack of affiliation with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (*wu dangpai* 无党派); *zhi* refers to intellectuals (*zhishi fenzi* 知识分子);<sup>1</sup> *shao* means ethnic minority (as in *shaoshu minzu* 少数民族); and *nü* 女 refers to their gender (female). When joined together, the four characters – *wuzhi shaonü* – also mean “innocent young girl” in Chinese. This homonym is so commonly used that a search of the term “*wuzhi shaonü*” on *baidu.com* (China’s most popular search engine) brings up a whole page of results linking to articles discussing the idea that in the Chinese party-state’s selection of female political leaders, a woman without Party membership but with an intellectual and ethnic minority background stands a better

\* The University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia. Email: [minglu.chen@sydney.edu.au](mailto:minglu.chen@sydney.edu.au).

1 “Intellectuals” has been an important category of the CCP’s social classification since its formation. However, over time, the party-state’s understanding of “intellectuals” has fluctuated, leaving its formal definition ambiguous. For a detailed discussion, see U 2019.

chance of promotion than a female without these characteristics. This narrative reveals the prejudice held by many that Chinese female and male politicians do not compete on equal grounds. While men are selected based on merit and performance, those rare appointments of women are nothing but a token gesture of the CCP's claims to advance the interests of marginalized groups. Thus, women's political achievements are not to be taken seriously.

Gender disparities in the contemporary era are widely observed in all aspects of political life regardless of the system of government, from party membership and election candidacy, to office-holding in state legislatures and senior political leadership. Scholars of women's political participation have highlighted cultural, social and institutional factors that hinder women's political careers. In many cultures, patriarchal and hierarchical attitudes and norms prevent women from entering public life.<sup>2</sup> Gendered social capital means that women cannot draw upon their networks to participate and advance in formal politics in the same way as do men.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, gender quotas, party ideology and the design of electoral systems are all institutional factors that can lead to unfavourable outcomes for women running for office.<sup>4</sup>

The political life of Chinese women shares many commonalities with those of their international sisters. But the one-party authoritarian system makes the Chinese case diverge from the conventional wisdom applied to democratic polities. On the one hand, since its establishment, the CCP has positioned itself as a safeguard of women's rights in all areas of life. On the other, it is not held to this commitment by inter-party competition or the need to appeal to constituencies. Therefore, despite the Chinese Constitution stating that "women in the People's Republic of China enjoy equal rights with men in all spheres of life" including political life,<sup>5</sup> and that the CCP itself promises to "attach great importance to the training and promotion of women cadres,"<sup>6</sup> women are significantly underrepresented in Chinese politics. In 2017, women accounted for 23.4 per cent of China's state legislators and 17.8 per cent of members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, the advisory organ of the party-state.<sup>7</sup> In 2016, only 25.7 per cent of the CCP's members were female.<sup>8</sup> By the end of 2017, only 26.5 per cent of the leadership positions in the party-state system were held by women.<sup>9</sup>

The literature on women's political participation in contemporary China invariably presents a rather gloomy picture.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, women are so scarce in

2 Rule and Zimmerman 1994; Norris and Inglehart 2001; Paxton and Kunovich 2003; Norris and Inglehart 2004.

3 Lowndes 2004.

4 Caul 1999; Matland 2005; Reynolds 1999; Kunovich and Paxton 2005; Lovenduski and Norris 2003; Gauja and Cross 2015.

5 NPC 2004.

6 National Congress of the CCP 2017.

7 Qiao, Hong 2017.

8 Cui 2017.

9 State Council Information Office of the PRC 2019.

10 Rosen 1995; Howell 2002; 2006; Edwards 2007.

the political leadership at all levels that they have been largely ignored by the large body of scholarship on China’s political elites and their career trajectories.<sup>11</sup> Those that do discuss gender in China’s elite politics agree that women play a very limited role but do not explore this issue any further.<sup>12</sup> However, women’s low numbers in the political leadership does not mean that they are absent from Chinese local politics. On the contrary, female politicians now hold positions as top leaders in each of China’s provincial jurisdictions. In a few cases, these important provincial positions have even served as stepping stones to higher positions of power. For instance, from the position of deputy mayor of Beijing, Wu Yi 吴仪 became deputy minister of foreign trade and economic cooperation in 1991 and later on was appointed minister and then deputy prime minister.<sup>13</sup>

The existence of widely observed gender disparities makes an analysis of the appointment of female leaders in China necessary. The literature does very little to explain the dynamics behind women’s advancement in the political arena against the background of declining Party ideology and state withdrawal. This paper starts by exploring the “innocent young girls” narrative. Is it indeed the case that China’s female and male political leaders are selected differently? If so, how do gender disparities unfold in the selection process? Do women actually have to be non-Party members, from ethnic minority backgrounds and intellectuals to be promoted into local leadership? Is it the case that the appointment of women leaders is nothing more than window-dressing where the Party-state pays lip service to upholding the rights of women and other minority and marginalized groups? In order to answer these questions, this paper first examines female provincial leaders’ partisan, intellectual and ethnic backgrounds and compares them with those of their male counterparts. It then moves on to explore gender status in the selection of China’s provincial leadership by looking into female (and male) politicians’ ages, education and work experiences. Finally, this paper highlights the significance of the Women’s Federation (WF) and the Communist Youth League (CYL) in female political elite recruitment in China. This research argues that women’s representation in provincial leadership is considerably more nuanced than simply a tokenistic act by the party-state. Instead, these women have been appointed on the same grounds as their male colleagues in terms of age, education, CCP membership and experience. Although there are elements of tokenism in the party-state’s search for female leaders, the differences are mostly owing to the lack of institutionalized policies and processes and women’s ongoing disadvantages in education, political networks and training.

Currently, in China’s 31 provincial-level jurisdictions (excluding Hong Kong and Macau), governors, deputy governors and members of the standing committees of the provincial CCP committees are elected by the provincial people’s

11 Goodman 1984; Li, Cheng, and Bachman 1989; Bo 1996; 2002; 2014; Hsu and Shao 2014.

12 Bo 1996; Landry 2003; Shih, Adolph and Liu 2012.

13 Chen, Minglu, and Cai 2019.

congresses and Party congresses every five years. The research for this paper is based on a dataset created by the author of all the men and women appointed as the result of the last two elections in each provincial jurisdiction, excluding those members of the CCP standing committees who are military figures. All the provincial governments were re-elected at the beginning of 2013 and 2018, while some of the provincial Party congresses elected their leaders in 2011 and 2016 and others in 2012 and 2017. These leadership transitions provide an excellent opportunity to understand the career mobility of senior female politicians and their avenue to political power in comparison with their male colleagues. The websites of the state-run *Economic Daily*<sup>14</sup> and *People's Daily*<sup>15</sup> publish resumés of China's provincial leaders, which have provided the major sources for this research. On the occasional case where these resumés are not detailed enough, other sources such as websites of ministries, provincial governments and provincial Party committees have also been consulted.

### The Myth of “Innocent Young Girls”

In a 1995 article by Stanley Rosen, a WF researcher provides a rather accurate explanation of the “innocent young girls” phenomenon:

When people choose a woman to be a leader at the upper levels of leadership, they often demand, or at least expect, that the candidate may combine in herself all the following qualifications: that she is not a member of the Chinese Communist Party, that she is an intellectual, that she is a member of a minority nationality or of some democratic party.<sup>16</sup>

Research on female public servants confirms this assumption.<sup>17</sup> When asked to reflect on the “innocent young girls” narrative, a county mayor and CCP outsider commented, “I reject this idea. This is an insult. Although my election has benefited from this favourable policy, I’m not incompetent. The policy has given me a chance to prove my abilities.”<sup>18</sup> Likewise, a candidate who had lost out in the competition for leadership positions stated, “I cannot help but feel disappointed. My abilities and experiences are both good, but my Communist Party membership has disadvantaged me. I believe the organization department’s practice of combining the qualifications of non-Party members and women is utterly unfair to female Communist Party members.”<sup>19</sup>

The Constitutions of both the People’s Republic of China and the Chinese Communist Party elaborate the party-state’s commitment to protect women’s equal rights in political representation and participation, but neither provides any concrete instructions on how women’s rights should be protected and

14 “Difang dang zheng lingdao renwu ku” (Database of local CCP and government leaders). *Ce.cn*, <http://district.ce.cn/zt/rwk/index.shtml>. Accessed 12 October 2021.

15 “Difang lingdao ziliao ku” (Database of local leaders). *People.cn*, <https://dzl.people.com.cn/dfzlk/front/firstPage.htm>. Accessed 12 October 2021.

16 Rosen 1995, 324.

17 Chen, Liqin 2011.

18 *Ibid.*, 51.

19 *Ibid.*, 52.

advanced.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women does not go any further than the rather general prescription that “the state ... must insist on the principle of gender equality in the appointment of cadres and to foster and promote female cadres as leadership members.”<sup>21</sup> The 2001 CCP Central Committee Organization Department’s “Opinions on further improving the work of training and selecting female cadres and recruiting female Party members” suggests that Party committees, governments, people’s congresses and people’s political consultative conferences in provincial and prefecture-level jurisdictions “should each have at least one female cadre in its leadership.”<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the Party Constitution suggests that the Party’s leadership recruitment should be based on knowledge and professionalism, with a particular emphasis on the training and selection of female cadres, cadres of ethnic minority background and cadres of non-CCP background for leadership positions.<sup>23</sup> These words are not accompanied by specific policies.

Similarly, the party-state proclaims the political rights of ethnic minority groups, intellectuals and non-CCP members, but this commitment has failed to turn into any institutionalized quota system. The Law on Regional Ethnic Autonomy only provides that “the chairperson of an autonomous region, the prefect of an autonomous prefecture and the head of an autonomous county shall be citizens of the ethnic group exercising regional autonomy in the area concerned.”<sup>24</sup> As to other posts in the governments of the autonomous regions, prefectures and counties, it only vaguely suggests that *appropriate numbers* of members of the ethnic group exercising regional autonomy and other ethnic groups should be appointed. Moreover, no policy document has discussed the formal principles and procedures of the appointment of officials from ethnic minority backgrounds in governments outside the autonomous regions or of intellectual and non-CCP backgrounds whatsoever. Conceivably, this has left ample space for interpretation.

The discourse on the “innocent young girls” falls within this very same context. There is an assumption that the lack of institutional rules and oversight undermines the political representation of marginalized groups. In local implementation, these various margins are combined into one, resulting in the complete dominance of male, Han and CCP-member officials from non-intellectual backgrounds.<sup>25</sup> The emphasis on women’s multiple minority and marginal backgrounds in the selection process indicates a downplaying of merits and performance. Once appointed, these women only play an ornamental rather than substantial role in governance. However, the only two pieces of scholarly

20 NPC 2004; National Congress of the CCP 2017.

21 NPC 1992.

22 CCP Central Committee Organization Department 2001.

23 National Congress of the CCP 2017.

24 NPC 2001

25 In this research, officials from a non-intellectual background are those who have not served in academic leadership positions. See the next section for a more detailed discussion.

Table 1: Number of Female Provincial Leaders

	Total No.	Females	Males
Governors and deputy governors (2013)	273	33 (12.1%)	240
Governors and deputy governors (2018)	276	31 (11.2%)	245
Members of CCP standing committee (2011/2012)	375*	36 (9.0%)	339
Members of CCP standing committee (2016/2017)	375*	34 (9.1%)	341
Total**	1,010	109 (10.8%)	874

Source:

Author.

Notes:

\*Excludes military figures; \*\*excludes repetition.

work that discuss this common assumption offer no statistical testing.<sup>26</sup> In order to gain a better understanding of the representation and underrepresentation of women and other marginalized groups in political leadership in China, this research addresses this lack by examining female (and male) provincial leaders' political party affiliation, ethnic backgrounds and experiences as intellectuals.

Table 1 provides an overview of women's representation in China's provincial leadership over two terms. In 2013, there were 33 (out of 274) female governors and deputy governors elected and, in 2018, the number was 31 (out of 278). Among the 2011/12 cohort of members of provincial CCP committee standing committees, 36 (out of 403) were women, and among the 2016/2017 cohort, the number is 34 (out of 376). Taking into account the overlapping of personnel,<sup>27</sup> about 10 per cent of these two terms of provincial leadership have been women (109 out of 1010).

As has been discussed previously, increasing the number of women leaders has not become a formal criterion of provincial CCP committees' and governments' performance evaluations. Therefore, as Table 2 indicates, in practice, the gender quota of "at least one female cadre" is often interpreted and implemented as "it is fine as long as there is one female cadre." In a few cases, more than one woman serves in the provincial government and/or CCP standing committee. And yet, at the same time, in 2013, Jilin elected a male-only government as did Sichuan in 2018, and in 2016, Xizang voted for a male-only CCP standing committee.

Table 3 provides a summary of the party affiliations of all provincial governors and deputy governors examined in this research. The samples of CCP standing committee members are excluded here, because by default they are CCP members, and personnel outside the Party only have access to leadership power through governmental positions. Out of the 506 provincial governors and deputy governors, 40 (7.9 per cent) are members of one of the eight minor political

26 Rosen 1995; Chen, Liqin 2011.

27 A person might have served two terms as governor/deputy governor, or member of a CCP standing committee, or held positions in both the government and the Party.

Table 2: Female Leaders in Provincial-level Governments and CCP Committees

Province	Government (2013)		Government (2018)		CCP Committee (2011/2012)		CCP Committee (2016/2017)	
	No. of leaders	No. of females	No. of leaders	No. of females	No. of leaders	No. of females	No. of leaders	No. of females
Beijing	10	1	10	1	13	1	12	1
Tianjin	9	1	9	1	13	1	12	1
Hebei	8	1	9	1	13	1	12	1
Shanxi	8	1	8	1	13	1	12	1
Neimenggu	9	1	9	2	13	1	12	2
Liaoning	9	1	9	1	13	2	12	1
Jilin	7	0	8	1	13	1	12	1
Heilongjiang	8	1	8	1	13	1	12	1
Shanghai	9	2	9	1	12	1	11	1
Jiangsu	9	1	9	1	13	3	12	2
Zhejiang	9	1	9	1	13	1	12	1
Anhui	8	2	8	1	13	1	12	1
Fujian	8	1	8	1	13	2	12	1
Jiangxi	8	2	8	1	13	1	12	1
Shandong	9	1	9	1	13	1	12	1
Henan	9	1	9	1	13	1	12	2
Hubei	8	1	8	1	13	1	12	1
Hunan	8	1	8	1	13	1	12	2
Guangdong	9	1	9	1	13	1	12	1
Guangxi	9	1	9	1	13	1	12	1
Hainan	7	1	8	1	12	1	12	1
Chongqing	9	1	9	1	13	1	12	1
Sichuan	9	1	9	0	12	1	12	1
Guizhou	9	1	9	1	13	2	12	1
Yunnan	9	1	9	1	13	1	12	1
Xizang	15	1	15	1	13	1	14	0

*Continued*

Table 2: **Continued**

Province	Government (2013)		Government (2018)		CCP Committee (2011/2012)		CCP Committee (2016/2017)	
	No. of leaders	No. of females	No. of leaders	No. of females	No. of leaders	No. of females	No. of leaders	No. of females
Shaanxi	8	1	7	1	12	1	12	1
Gansu	8	1	8	1	13	2	11	1
Qinghai	10	1	10	1	14	1	13	1
Ningxia	8	1	8	1	13	1	12	1
Xinjiang	10	1	11	1	15	1	14	1

Source:

Author.



Table 3: Provincial Leaders' Party Affiliation

	Female									Male										
	No.	CCP	CDL	CZGP	CDCA	CAPD	JS	RCCK	None	No.	CCP	CDL	CZGP	CDCA	CAPD	JS	RCCK	CPWDP	TDWGL	None
Governors (2013)	33	25	1	1	1	1	2		1	240	218	5	2	4	1	2	2	1		5
Governors (2018)	31	25	1	1		1		2	1	245	222	4	1	3		3	4	1	1	6
Total*	59	47	2	1	1	2	2	2	2	447	408	9	3	6	1	5	4	1	1	9

Source:

Author.

Note:

\* Repetition excluded.

parties.<sup>28</sup> When comparing the information on male and female governors and deputy governors, there exists a gendered dimension to accessing political power for non-CCP members: 17.5 per cent (10 out of 57) of the women are members of a minor political party, while the percentage for their male counterparts is only 6.7 per cent (30 out of 448). Notably, the eight minor political parties are not proportionally represented in China’s provincial leadership.

Since its very early days, the CCP has attached much importance to the co-option of intellectuals as a social group to “harness the knowledge and skills of these persons for economic development, educational growth, political propaganda, and other purposes of organization ... [as well as] to curb the harmful influence of these individuals on the revolutionary project [and to] rein in their ‘petty-bourgeois’ and ‘bourgeois’ approaches to life and politics.”<sup>29</sup> Over different periods, the CCP’s understanding of intellectuals has varied, leading to “fuzzy boundaries and unstable meanings” of this group, which have significant implications for political inclusion and exclusion.<sup>30</sup> Despite this confusion, the CCP has been explicit about what types of intellectuals should be recruited into formal state power in the contemporary era. The 2015 “Chinese Communist Party’s United Front work guidelines” specify that the CCP’s United Front work on the co-option of non-CCP member intellectuals should target academic leaders and those who have made significant contributions in important academic fields.<sup>31</sup> The guidelines help us to gain a better understanding of the party-state’s inclusion of intellectuals into the decision-making process. As [Table 4](#) indicates, adopting the same criteria that the CCP uses to guide its United Front work, this research has identified that 11 per cent (12 out of 109) of female provincial leaders have experience as intellectuals (i.e. academic leaders), with a similar percentage (9.0 per cent, 82 out of 911) among their male counterparts. In this regard, there is limited gender difference in male and female intellectuals’ access to political power.

The last piece in the picture of the “innocent young girl” is ethnicity. Are female politicians of ethnic minority background more likely than their male counterparts to be promoted to provincial leadership? The research results seem to suggest a positive answer. [Table 5](#) shows that 22 out of 109 (20 per cent) of these women

28 The eight minor political parties are the China Democratic League (CDL); the China Association of Promoting Democracy (CAPD); the China Democratic Construction Association (CDCA); the Revolutionary Committee of the Chinese Kuomintang (RCCK); the Chinese Peasants’ and Workers’ Democratic Party (CPWDP); the Jiusan Society (JS); the China Zhigong Party (CZGP); and the Taiwan Democratic Self-Government League (TDWGL).

29 U 2019, 12.

30 In different periods, the label of “intellectual” has been applied by the Party to “educated CCP leaders; educated party cadres; former workers or peasants who received formal education; novelists, playwrights, and other writers; scientists, professors and other experts; school teachers, artists, and other professional workers, clerical and other office workers; former state officials, Guomintang organizers, and military and police officers with academic qualifications; college students; senior high school graduates; junior high school graduates; and individuals with some junior high education” (U 2019, 162). For a detailed discussion of the intellectual classes, see Goldman 1981; Cheek 2015; U 2019.

31 CCP Politburo 2015.

Table 4: Provincial Leaders with Intellectual Backgrounds

	Female		Male	
	No.	Intellectuals	No.	Intellectuals
Governors and deputy governors (2013)	33	8 (24.2%)	240	31 (12.9%)
Governors and deputy governors (2018)	31	6 (19.4%)	245	38 (15.5%)
CCP standing committee members (2011/2012)	36	1 (2.8%)	339*	16 (4.7%)
CCP standing committee members (2016/2017)	34	3 (8.8%)	341	36 (10.6%)
Total**	109	14 (12.8%)	874	86 (9.8%)

Source:  
Author.

Notes:  
\*Excluding military figures; \*\*excluding repetition.

Table 5: Provincial Leaders’ Ethnicity

	Female		Male	
	No.	Ethnic minority	No.	Ethnic minority
Governors and deputy governors (2013)	33	8 (24.2%)	240	31 (12.9%)
Female governors and deputy governors (2018)	31	10 (32.3%)	245	30 (12.2%)
CCP standing committee members (2011/2012)	36	8 (22.2%)	339*	40 (11.8%)
CCP standing committee members (2016/2017)	34	10 (29.4%)	341	41 (12.0%)
Total**	109	22 (20.2%)	874	101 (11.6%)

Source:  
Author.

Notes:  
\*Excluding military figures; \*\*excluding repetition.

are from an ethnic minority background, which is almost twice as much as the percentage (11.2 per cent) for their male counterparts. But it is worth noting that the ethnic minority groups are not proportionally represented among the female (as well as the male) provincial leadership. Among the 22 women from an ethnic minority background, six are Hui 回, four are Mongol 蒙古, three are Tibetan 藏, two are Zhuang 壮, two are Bai 白, two are Manchu 满, one is Li 黎 and one is She 畲. The majority of the 55 ethnic minority groups are underrepresented or even unrepresented among the female provincial leadership. Obviously, the appointment of ethnic minority political leaders should not be taken as constituting the party-state’s commitment to promoting ethnic equality.

How visible are the “innocent young girls” in China’s provincial politics? Surprisingly, research indicates that the widespread assumption that different disadvantaged groups being combined as one gives way to the dominant male Han CCP-member politicians has been overly simplistic. When gender, political party affiliation, intellectuality and ethnicity are considered in conjunction, the “innocent young girl” phenomenon is a rarity in provincial leadership. Out of all the 109 female provincial leaders in question, only one combines all these features

and is not a CCP member but is an intellectual and from an ethnic minority background. Cao Xiaohong 曹小红 was elected deputy governor of Tianjin in 2013 and is Hui and a member of the China Zhigong Party (CZGP).<sup>32</sup> Cao is also a returned overseas scholar. In 1995, she obtained a PhD from Chiba University in Japan, majoring in micro-organisms. After that, Cao worked in a Japanese pharmaceutical company for three years before returning to Tianjin to take up a lecturer position at Tianjin University of Science and Technology, where she worked her way up to a senior academic leadership position. As president of Tianjin University of Science and Technology, Cao became the chairperson of the CZGP Tianjin Committee, deputy chair of the CZGP Central Committee, deputy chair of Tianjin People's Political Consultative Conference and eventually deputy governor of Tianjin. In this exceptional case, when gender intersects with political party affiliation, intellectuality and ethnicity, it produces favourable outcomes.

The near non-existence of “innocent young girls” in provincial politics does not mean that the practice of minimizing representation of marginalized groups does not exist, not least because out of the 109 female politicians in this study, 12 (10.9 per cent) are CCP outsiders, 12 (10.9 per cent) have an intellectual background and 23 (20.9 per cent) are members of an ethnic minority group. It is not uncommon to see the groups of non-Party-member personnel and intellectuals combined into one. Seven (5.4 per cent) of these women leaders are intellectuals and non-CCP members. But one needs to be cautious when labelling this as a completely gendered practice, as an impressive two-thirds (25 out of 37) of all the non-CCP men are intellectuals. On the one hand, it can be argued that owing to the lack of an enforcement mechanism, the party-state does attempt to combine quotas of gender, ethnicity, intellectuality or non-CCP affiliation, which in turn has created access to power for a very small and specific group of women who are indeed from an ethnic minority and intellectual background, and/or are not CCP members. On the other hand, while the practice of combining different quotas is inadequate to fully explain women's appointment in provincial politics, what are the Chinese party-state's key selection criteria in the search for female political leaders?

### Elite Women: Age and Education

The existence of gender inequality in the workplace in China is a well-established fact. Although Chinese women now widely participate in paid labour, they are not treated on an equal basis to men with the same background in terms of age and education. Women are less likely than men to receive an education.<sup>33</sup> They face age discrimination in the recruitment process.<sup>34</sup> And once employed,

32 Cao Xiaohong's CV is available at: [http://district.ce.cn/newarea/sddy/201801/29/t20180129\\_27958533\\_1.shtml](http://district.ce.cn/newarea/sddy/201801/29/t20180129_27958533_1.shtml). Accessed 12 October 2021.

33 Cooke 2005.

34 Cooke 2001.

they are promoted more slowly and have to retire at an earlier age: under normal circumstances men retire at 60 and women at 55.<sup>35</sup> When it comes to elite recruitment, do the same types of gender discrimination exist? Are senior female leaders disadvantaged by their age and education background on the way to the top of provincial leadership? Can age and education explain female representation (or rather underrepresentation) in positions of power?

In order to understand any possible age discrimination in the elite recruitment process, this research examines each individual provincial leader's age on appointment. The politicians are categorized into seven age groups: those appointed to leadership positions in the age ranges of 35–39, 40–44, 45–49, 50–54, 55–59, 60–64 and 65–69. Taking this perspective, it seems that there is less of an age difference among leading female provincial politicians. The oldest, Sun Chunlan 孙春兰, born in 1950, was 59 when she became Party secretary of Fujian.<sup>36</sup> The youngest, Xie Ru 谢茹, was born in 1968 and appointed deputy governor of Jiangxi in 2008, at the age of 40.<sup>37</sup> In contrast, male politicians covered a much larger age gap of 27 years: the oldest was Zhang Dejiang 张德江, born in 1946 and appointed Party secretary of Chongqing in 2012 at the age of 66<sup>38</sup>; and the youngest was Nur Bekri 努尔·白克力, born in 1961 and appointed as a member of the CCP standing committee of Xinjiang in 2000 at the age of 39.<sup>39</sup>

When the ages at appointment of male and female politicians are compared, the results are counter intuitive. As Table 6 shows, for almost every single cohort (the exceptions being provincial governors and deputy governors elected in 2018), women assumed leadership positions at a younger age than males. On average, women provincial leaders were appointed at the age of 52, while for men the average age on appointment was 52.2 years. Although the age difference between the two sexes is so slight that it is nearly negligible, the implication is significant. Women have to face many barriers in their career progression, an important aspect of which is discrimination in promotion. “[W]omen ... progress more slowly than men from the same entry point ... Statistics show that women fall behind men in their careers quite early ... Even when women find the right track to a management career, they still fail to be promoted as quickly or as frequently as men.”<sup>40</sup> The results of this study show that women provincial leaders are promoted to provincial leadership slightly earlier than their male counterparts. Despite the widely existing gender disparities, why are these women

35 Cooke 2001; 2005.

36 Sun Chunlan's CV is available at: [http://www.ce.cn/xwzx/gnsz/szyw/201803/19/t20180319\\_28532400.shtml](http://www.ce.cn/xwzx/gnsz/szyw/201803/19/t20180319_28532400.shtml). Accessed 12 October 2021.

37 Xie Ru's CV is available at: [http://m.ce.cn/bwzg/201801/26/t20180126\\_27924359.shtml](http://m.ce.cn/bwzg/201801/26/t20180126_27924359.shtml). Accessed 12 October 2021.

38 Zhang Dejiang's CV is available at: [http://www.ce.cn/xwzx/gnsz/szyw/201211/15/t20121115\\_23853015.shtml](http://www.ce.cn/xwzx/gnsz/szyw/201211/15/t20121115_23853015.shtml). Accessed 12 October 2021.

39 Nur Bekri's CV is available at: [http://www.ce.cn/ztpd/xwzt/rwkl/zyrm/201501/14/t20150114\\_4342861.shtml](http://www.ce.cn/ztpd/xwzt/rwkl/zyrm/201501/14/t20150114_4342861.shtml). Accessed 12 October 2021.

40 Cooke 2005, 120.

Table 6: Age of Provincial Leader at Appointment

Age	Female						Male								
	40–44	45–49	50–54	55–59	60–64	65-	Average Age	35–39	40–44	45–49	50–54	55–59	60–64	65-	Average Age
Governors and deputy governors (2013)	3	8	15	7	0	0	<b>50.8</b>	0	10	66	105	58	1	0	<b>51.5</b>
Female governors and deputy governors (2018)	0	2	12	17	0	0	<b>54.5</b>	0	1	23	127	90	4	0	<b>53.5</b>
CCP standing committee members (2011/2012)	2	15	14	5	0	0	<b>50.3</b>	1	21	102	126	78	9	2	<b>51.3</b>
CCP standing committee members (2016/2017)	0	6	20	8	0	0	<b>53.0</b>	0	5	42	183	97	14	0	<b>53.2*</b>
Total**	5	25	46	33			<b>52.0</b>	1	32	176	414	260	16	2	<b>52.2</b>

Source:  
Author.

Notes:  
\*Excluding military figures; \*\*excluding repetition.

appointed to provincial leadership at a younger age than men? There are two possible explanations that emerge from the cases examined here: these women’s CYL background and the fact that some men have served as leaders of other provinces before being appointed to the positions in question. The next section of this paper will explore these issues further by looking into female and male leaders’ previous experiences.

Current scholarship has revealed an increasingly meritocratic elite recruitment system within the party-state.<sup>41</sup> While political loyalty remains the foremost consideration, in contemporary China advancement in the political power hierarchy relies increasingly on talent and achievements, with higher education being one of the key cadre selection criteria. The elite recruitment system based on education has been formalized by “The regulations on the work of party-state cadre selection and appointment” (the Regulations, hereafter), which prescribe that a party-state cadre needs to have at least a junior college diploma to be able to serve in any leadership position. To be appointed to bureau director-level (*ting ju ji* 厅局级) or above, it is necessary to have at least an undergraduate degree or equivalent.<sup>42</sup> However, a few researchers have pointed out that while Chinese cadres have been incentivized to study at college and university, the role educational background plays in elite recruitment might have been overestimated, as better education qualifications do not guarantee better opportunities for promotion.<sup>43</sup>

Looking into the educational background of the provincial leaders, we can see that this is an extremely well-educated group, men and women alike. According to Table 7, except for two cases where the relevant information was unavailable, all these politicians have attained a higher education and an overwhelming 98.8 per cent meet the criteria set by the Regulations and hold at least a bachelor’s degree or equivalent. Statistics show that all 109 women have invariably obtained at least one higher degree. More than 85 per cent (93 out of 109) have a post-graduate education. As for male politicians, a few (7 out of 874, or 0.8 per cent) have only been to junior college and graduated without a degree; the rest all have obtained at least an undergraduate degree. Overall, the percentage of male politicians with a doctorate degree is higher than that for females (32.5 per cent versus 27.5 per cent), but a larger percentage of women have a master’s degree (57.8 per cent versus 49.5 per cent). These statistics show that higher education credentials matter for both sexes on an almost equal footing within the party-state’s elite recruitment process; however, existing gender inequality in access to education means that fewer women meet the recruitment criterion on education.<sup>44</sup>

41 Nathan 2003; Shambaugh 2008.

42 “Dangzheng lingdao ganbu xuanba renyong gongzuo tiaoli” (Regulations on the work of party-state cadre selection and appointment). *Sohu.com*, 22 March 2012, <http://news.sohu.com/20120322/n338578431.shtml>. Accessed 12 October 2021.

43 Bo 2002; 2014; Shih, Adolph and Liu 2012.

44 Li, Danke 2002.

Table 7: Academic Credentials of Provincial Leaders

	Female				Male					
	No.	Bachelor's	Master's	Doctorate	No.	Diploma	Bachelor's	Master's	Doctorate	N/A
Governors and deputy governors (2013)	33	2 (6.1%)	18 (54.5%)	13 (39.4%)	240	1 (0.4%)	38 (15.8%)	117 (48.8%)	84 (35%)	
Governors and deputy governors (2018)	31	5 (16.1%)	16 (51.6%)	10 (32.3%)	245	3 (1.2%)	38 (15.5%)	104 (42.4%)	99 (40.4%)	
CCP standing committee members (2011/2012)	36	6 (16.7%)	22 (61.1%)	8 (22.2%)	339*	3 (0.9%)	54 (15.9%)	187 (55.2%)	93 (27.4%)	2 (0.6%)
CCP standing committee members (2016/2017)	34	3 (8.8%)	19 (55.9%)	12 (35.3%)	341	1 (0.3%)	61 (17.9%)	164 (48.1%)	115 (33.7%)	
Total**	109	16 (14.7%)	63 (57.8%)	30 (27.5%)	874	7 (0.8%)	148 (16.9%)	433 (49.5%)	284 (32.5%)	2 (0.2%)

Source:

Author.

Notes:

\*Excluding military figures; \*\*excluding repetition.



Importantly, the fact that all provincial leaders of both sexes have been to college and the majority have obtained more than one degree seems to suggest that educational qualifications still play a very important role in local elite recruitment, which contradicts the findings of existing scholarship. Not all of these women and men had received higher education before entering senior local leadership. The data show that many of them pursued their highest degrees years after they had started their career in politics. The fact that they are willing to do so suggests that the risk that the pursuit of further education might interrupt their political career is outweighed by the potential benefits a degree brings in terms of increasing the opportunities for promotion in the future.

### Gendered Avenues to Power: The Women’s Federation and the Youth League

Given that the “innocent young girl” discourse fails to fully explain the party-state’s selection of female provincial leaders, then what factor(s) would better account for these women’s advance in local politics? An examination of their career trajectories has highlighted the significance of two mass organizations functioning as pathways to senior political power – the WF and the CYL – at both national and subnational levels.

Unsurprisingly, the data show that the WF is a gender-unique track to political power for female politicians. The All-China Women’s Federation Charter provides that “the WF at all levels should function as an important base for educating and transferring female cadres ... The WF should frequently recommend and transfer outstanding female cadres to all (governmental) departments, especially female cadres of ethnic minority backgrounds and young female cadres.”<sup>45</sup> In practice, the WF does serve as an important talent pool for the recruitment of female political leaders. As Table 8 shows, 15.6 per cent (17 out of 109) of all the female provincial leaders have had experience of working in the WF. For instance, Fu Caixiang 符彩香, deputy governor of Hainan at the time of writing, spent the majority of her career in public affairs in the WF.<sup>46</sup> After graduating from university, she worked briefly in a state-owned oil enterprise in Hainan before moving to the provincial WF in 1984, where she worked her way up from a general staff member to the chair. In 2018, from her position in the WF, she was promoted to the position of deputy governor of the province.

Another shared experience for many of these provincial leaders has been leadership positions within the CYL. The rise of political leaders with a CYL background in Chinese politics is so notable that they are regarded as a distinct political force, the “Youth League faction” (*tuanpai* 团派). Chien-wen Kou

45 The All-China Women’s Federation Charter, 2018, [https://www.women.org.cn/art/2018/11/4/art\\_946\\_159084.html](https://www.women.org.cn/art/2018/11/4/art_946_159084.html). Accessed 25 April 2022.

46 Fu Caixiang’s CV is available at: [http://district.ce.cn/newarea/sddy/201801/31/t20180131\\_27993556\\_7.shtml](http://district.ce.cn/newarea/sddy/201801/31/t20180131_27993556_7.shtml). Accessed 12 October 2021.

Table 8: Female Provincial Leaders with Women's Federation Background

	No.	Women's Federation Background
Governors and deputy governors (2013)	33	2 (6.1%)
Governors and deputy governors (2018)	31	5 (16.1%)
CCP standing committee members (2011/2012)	36	6 (16.7%)
CCP standing committee members (2016/2017)	34	5 (14.7%)
Total*	109	17 (15.6%)

Source:

Author.

Notes:

\*Excluding repetition.

provides a thorough explanation of the advantages enjoyed by CYL cadres in the selection of political leaders.<sup>47</sup> First, CYL affiliates often start their political careers at a much younger age than their non-CYL counterparts, which provides them with a significant age advantage, particularly since the party-state has now implemented a policy of cadre rejuvenation (*ganbu nianqing hua* 干部年轻化) to prioritize younger cadres in leadership recruitment. Second, the organizational structure of the CYL almost duplicates that of the party-state apparatus, which makes it a perfect training ground for political bureaucrats. Further, the CYL organizations provide these leaders with a country-wide political network. For these reasons, the CYL often functions as a fast track to political leadership, the most prominent examples being Hu Jintao 胡锦涛, the former president and general Party secretary, and Li Keqiang 李克强, the current premier.

Table 9 provides a summary of provincial leaders' CYL affiliations. While the results of this research confirm the significance of CYL affiliation in local leaders' career paths, they also highlight the gendered nature of this path. In both the provincial governments and the CCP standing committees, a much higher percentage of women than men have experience of holding leadership positions in the CYL at national or subnational levels (31.2 per cent versus 18.4 per cent). Considering the CYL's status as a fast track to political leadership, this may explain to a certain extent why the female provincial leaders in this research were appointed to their positions of power earlier and quicker than their male counterparts.

To illustrate, the CV of Wu Lan 乌兰, deputy Party secretary of Hunan, provides a perfect example of the CYL shortcut.<sup>48</sup> Born in Neimenggu in 1962, Wu began her career at the age of 16 in the CYL office of Baotou City in Neimenggu Autonomous Region. She quickly progressed and within ten years had worked as a general staff member, an office director, a department head and then the deputy chair of the CYL Baotou Committee. She was promoted to deputy chair of the Provincial CYL Committee of Neimenggu at the age of 26 and then was made

47 Kou 2014.

48 Wu Lan's CV is available at: [http://district.ce.cn/newarea/sddy/201611/21/t20161121\\_17973872\\_2.shtml](http://district.ce.cn/newarea/sddy/201611/21/t20161121_17973872_2.shtml). Accessed 12 October 2021.

Table 9: Provincial Leaders with Youth League Affiliation

	Female		Male	
	No.	Youth League affiliation	No.	Youth League affiliation
Governors and deputy governors (2013)	33	9 (27.3%)	240	37 (15.4%)
Governors and deputy governors (2018)	31	7 (22.6%)	246	34 (13.8%)
CCP standing committee members (2011/2012)	36	15 (44.1%)	339*	98 (28.9%)
CCP standing committee members (2016/2017)	34	12 (35.3%)	341	63 (18.5%)
Total**	109	34 (31.2%)	874	161 (18.4%)

Source:

Author.

Notes:

\*Excluding military figures; \*\*excluding repetition.

chair at the age of 34, from which position she moved into the mainstream CCP apparatus, serving as deputy Party secretary and then mayor in several prefecture-level jurisdictions. In 2003, at 41, Wu Lan was promoted to deputy governor of Neimenggu. Three years later, she also became deputy Party secretary. Since 2016, she has worked in Hunan at the same level.

Why, then, does the party-state favour those women leaders with CYL experience when choosing provincial leaders? A possible explanation might be the small size of the talent pool: women are less likely to hold managerial positions in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) or senior ministerial positions and are also less likely to be given interprovincial appointments. Holding various leadership posts tends to extend networks and lead to improved leadership skills for both sexes.<sup>49</sup> Thus, women’s underrepresentation in leadership roles in SOEs and ministries means that they are disadvantaged when it comes to political networking and training compared with their male counterparts. Senior managers of large SOEs have provided an important talent pool for the selection of local party-state leaders.<sup>50</sup> But, as Table 10 shows, such appointments are much more common among male than female provincial leaders. Overall, only 3.7 per cent of female politicians have experience as SOE managers, while the percentage for men is a much higher 11 per cent.

Existing scholarship also shows an increasing tendency of the central party-state to appoint officials from the various ministries and central agencies to important provincial leadership positions.<sup>51</sup> Statistical data suggest that the gender difference here is clear. While 23.1 per cent (208 out of 874) of all male leaders have been appointed from the central party-state apparatus, only 9.2 per cent (10 out of 109) of their female counterparts have such experience.

Likewise, female politicians are less likely to be given interprovincial appointments. Table 12 summarizes the number of female and male politicians who have

49 Zeng 2021.

50 Liou and Tsai 2014; Qiao, Liang 2017.

51 Yang, Zhang and Hu 2017; Xiang 2020.

Table 10: **Provincial Leaders with SOE Managerial Experience**

	Female		Male	
	No.	SOE experience	No.	SOE experience
Governors and deputy governors (2013)	33	0	240	35 (14.6%)
Governors and deputy governors (2018)	31	2 (6.5%)	246	37 (15.0%)
CCP standing committee members (2011/2012)	36	1 (2.8%)	339*	29 (8.6%)
CCP standing committee members (2016/2017)	34	1 (2.9%)	341	30 (8.8%)
Total**	109	4 (3.7%)	874	96 (11.0%)

Source:

Author.

Notes:

\*Excluding military figures; \*\*excluding repetition.

Table 11: **Provincial Leaders with Central Ministry and Agency Experience**

	Female		Male	
	No.	Central ministry / agency experience	No.	Central ministry / agency experience
Governors and deputy governors (2013)	33	2 (6.1%)	240	35 ((14.6%)
Governors and deputy governors (2018)	31	3 (9.7%)	246	52 (21.1%)
CCP standing committee members (2011/2012)	36	2 (5.6%)	339*	69 (20.3%)
CCP standing committee members (2016/2017)	34	4 (11.8%)	341	107 (31.4%)
Total**	109	10 (9.2%)	874	208 (23.1%)

Source:

Author.

Notes:

\*Excluding military figures; \*\*excluding repetition.

Table 12: **Interprovincial Appointments of Provincial Leaders**

	Female		Male	
	No.	Interprovincial appointments	No.	Interprovincial appointments
Governors and deputy governors (2013)	33	0	240	10 (4.2%)
Governors and deputy governors (2018)	31	0	246	17 (6.9%)
CCP standing committee members (2011/2012)	36	2 (5.6%)	339*	78 (23%)
CCP standing committee members (2016/2017)	34	7 (20.6%)	341	93 (27.3%)
Total**	109	9 (8.3%)	874	161 (18.4%)

Source:

Author.

Notes:

\*Excluding military figures; \*\*excluding repetition.

been transferred from leadership positions in another province to their current role. The figures clearly show that men are much more often considered for inter-provincial appointments than women (18.4 per cent versus 8.3 per cent). In the rare cases where women receive such appointments, it only happens for positions on the CCP standing committees and has only become common in recent years. The fact that nearly 20 per cent of the male politicians under examination have served as provincial leaders before they received their current appointments also partially explains their older age upon appointment.

## Conclusion

In his seminal 2002 book on China’s local elites, Zhiyue Bo describes a typical provincial leader as “a middle-aged man with many years of CCP membership, who serves outside his home province. His education is likely to be good, and he is mostly likely to be of Han origin.”<sup>52</sup> Then, what would a typical female provincial leader be like? The results presented here suggest that instead of being an “innocent young girl,” she is likely to be highly educated with a postgraduate degree, in her early 50s, a member of the Chinese Communist Party and from a Han ethnic background. Therefore, the hypothesis that women’s appointment in local political leadership is a tokenistic gesture by the party-state to uphold the rights of various marginalized groups by combining them as one does not fully explain the logic of the selection of China’s female provincial leaders. Instead, the same criteria apply for women as well as men: education, age, CCP membership and experience.

While arguing that female provincial leaders are appointed on the basis of merit and performance on a par with their male colleagues, this research does not intend to downplay gender inequality in China’s local leadership. Women’s underrepresentation in the political arena should be understood as the result of the lack of formal quota systems and implementation rules, as well as the fact that women are disadvantaged in education, political networks and training. Indeed, every province has women holding senior office as a result of the party-state’s suggestion that provincial governments and CCP committees should have *at least one* female leader. But, without any institutional rules and oversight, in local implementation this has often been interpreted as *only one* female leader. At the same time, we need to understand that the party-state’s emphasis on education, age, Party membership and specific experiences in local elite recruitment also largely explains women’s underrepresentation in senior leadership, as Chinese women are significantly disadvantaged in all of those aspects. To a certain degree, having experience as a senior academic leader or being a member of one of the minor political parties or ethnic minority groups might mitigate such disadvantages. However, it is important to note that this is the consequence of the

52 Bo 2002, 66.

CCP paying lip service to safeguarding the rights of various marginalized groups rather than a genuine effort to promote their political participation and representation.

This research highlights that leadership experience gained in the WF and the CYL is shared by many female provincial leaders. While the significance of the CYL in the training of China's future leaders has been identified in the existing scholarship, the fact that it is more beneficial to the political careers of women rather than those of men requires further examination. The WF also functions as an important source of China's female local leaders. At the same time, while the WF and the CYL can be regarded as somewhat gendered pathways to political leadership for female politicians, women are often not considered by the CCP centre in the rotation between leadership positions in SOEs and the party-state apparatus, for appointments from ministries and central agencies to provinces, as well as interprovincial appointments. Indeed, it is rare for women to have experience as senior managers of large SOEs or to hold ministerial positions.

This analysis has examined female provincial leaders' personal attributes with the aim of revealing not only the making of women politicians but also gender inequality in leadership and political representation. The results of this research suggest that while acknowledging gender inequality in local elite politics in China, we also need to be aware of the subtle nuances of female leaders' acceleration to local power.

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## Conflicts of interest

None.

## Biographical notes

Minglu CHEN is a senior lecturer in the department of government and international relations at the University of Sydney. Her research concentrates on the interaction between entrepreneurs and the state, and women's political participation.

**摘要：** 中国的地方政坛中鲜少有女性领导人。既有研究往往将这些女性视为其他边缘群体的代表以参与政治，并将其选拔条件简单归结为：女性、知识分子、少数民族和非党人士。本文通过检视最近两任中国省级行政区女性党政领导人，指出这样的理解并不正确。在实际选拔过程中，女性同男性领导人一样需要满足年龄、教育背景、党员身份和工作经验方面的条

件；而领导人选拔过程中的性别差异则主要由政策制度的缺失及女性教育、政治网络和经验的不足共同导致。

关键词：女；政治参与；省级行政区领导人；中国共产党；精英擢升

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