



March 30, 2022

Women in China's Leadership

Sierra Janik, Policy Analyst, Security and Foreign Affairs

Daniel Blaugher, Research Assistant, Economics and Trade

Jonathan Ray, Director, Security and Foreign Affairs

Key Findings

- According to United Nations data from 2021, China's population comprises approximately 703.8 million females and 740.4 million males.¹ Although they represent roughly 48.7% of the population, women occupy less than 8% of senior leadership positions.*
- The absence of diversity is noteworthy given the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership's stated commitment to equal opportunity.²
- The absence of women in Party leadership parallels low female representation within the group of Chinese nationals holding leadership positions in international organizations. Of the 31 Chinese nationals serving in top leadership positions in key international organizations, only 4 are women.³ (For more on Chinese leadership in international organizations, see "[PRC Representation in International Organizations](#).")

Women in China's Party, State, and Military

Women make up almost half of China's 1.4 billion population.⁴ Of the approximately 92 million CCP members, there are about 28 million women or roughly 30% of the CCP's total.⁵ Women have limited representation and voice across the top echelons of China's political system.⁶ Historically, female representatives have rarely constituted more than 10% of the roughly 300-member CCP Central Committee.⁷ Only six women have ever served in the 25-member Politburo, and three of those were wives of other top leaders.⁸ No woman has ever served on the Politburo Standing Committee or held any of the top three positions in China's political system: CCP General Secretary, Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), and State President.⁹ Female representation in key government roles such as ministries and provincial governorships is also extremely low.¹⁰ The percentage of People's Liberation Army (PLA) servicemembers who are female is not publicly available, but China Military Online, an official publication of the PLA, estimated in 2015 that approximately 5% or less are women.¹¹ Currently, no women hold senior command or political commissar positions.¹² The highest rank a woman in the PLA has ever

* "Senior leadership" of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is defined in this report as the CCP Central Committee (including the General Secretary, other Politburo Standing Committee Members, other Politburo Members, and other Members and Alternate Members of the Central Committee). "Senior leadership" of the state is defined in this report as the State President, the State Council leadership (including the Premier, Vice Premiers, other State Councilors, and the Secretary General), and Ministers. "Senior leadership" of the military is defined in this report as the Central Military Commission (CMC) (including the CMC Chairman, CMC Vice Chairmen, and other CMC Members), plus the heads of the CMC's 15 major subordinate organizations.

achieved is Lieutenant General, with one woman promoted to Lieutenant General in 1993 and a second in 2010.*
13

PRC law on the protection of women’s rights states that “women shall enjoy equal rights with men in all aspects of political...life.”¹⁴ China has also espoused a commitment to “strengthen[ing] the work of training and selecting women cadres” and instituted quotas for female representation in certain positions in the CCP.¹⁵

Female Representation in China’s Leadership Positions

Table 1. Female Representation in Chinese Communist Party Leadership

Leadership Position	Total Positions	Positions Held by Women	Approximate Percentage
Politburo Standing Committee	7	0	-
Politburo	25	1	4%
Central Committee	371	30	8%
▪ Full Members	203	10	5%
▪ Alternate Members	168	20	12%
Central Military Commission	7	0	-
Central Commission for Discipline Inspection	133	9	7%
Provincial-Level Party Secretaries	31	1	3%
National Party Congress (19 th) [†]	2,280	550	24%
Chinese Communist Party	~92 million	~28 million	30%

Note: “Politburo Standing Committee” includes the General Secretary and six other Politburo Standing Committee Members. “Provincial-Level” administrative units of the PRC include 22 provinces, 5 autonomous regions, and 4 directly administered municipalities (e.g., Tianjin).

Source: Various.¹⁶

Table 2. Female Representation in Government Leadership

Leadership Position	Total Positions	Positions Held by Women	Approximate Percentage
State President	1	0	-
State Council Leaders	11	1	9%

* Xu Lili, who was promoted to the rank of Vice Admiral (Lieutenant General in the PLA Navy) at the Deputy Theater grade in 2010, was only the second female officer to achieve the rank of Lieutenant General across all services of the PLA. Nie Li, daughter of Marshal Nie Rongzhen, attained the rank of Lieutenant General in 1993. United States Department of Defense. Defense Intelligence Agency. Directory of PRC Military Personalities. Washington DC, 2010-2021; All China Women’s Federation, “The First Female Admiral of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Navy – Xu Lili” (中国人民解放军海军第一位女将军——徐莉莉), August 29, 2019. Translation. <https://web.archive.org/web/20220325160837/http://cnwomen.com.cn/2019/08/29/99170465.html>; “Nie Li, China’s First Female Lieutenant General” (聂力：中国第一位女中将军), *Motherland*, August 2, 2018. Translation. <https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:TQ3u7e1Swq4J:https://www.zgzzs.com.cn/index.php/Article/detail/id/21555.html+%&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us>; Elsa Kania, “Holding Up Half the Sky? (Party 1)—The Evolution of Women’s Roles in the PLA,” *China Brief*, October 4, 2016. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/57f4ef2e4.html>.

† Delegates to the CCP’s National Party Congress are voting members who are tasked with selecting the membership of the CCP Central Committee once every five years. The numbers provided represent delegates to the 19th National Party Congress, which convened in 2017 to select the current 19th Central Committee. Selection of delegates for the 20th National Party Congress, which will convene in fall of 2022, is currently underway with a target of 2,3000 total delegates. Cheng Li, “Preparation: Procedures and Selections for China’s 20th Party Congress,” *China US Focus*, February 20, 2022. <https://www.chinausfocus.com/Cheng-Li-on-Chinese-Leadership/preparation-procedures-and-selections-for-chinas-20th-party-congress>; Susan V. Lawrence and Mari Y. Lee, “China’s Political System in Charts: A Snapshot Before the 20th Party Congress,” *Congressional Research Service*, November 24, 2021, 28, 9. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46977>.

Ministers	26	0	-
Provincial-Level Governors	31	2	6%
National People's Congress (NPC)	2,953	739	25%
▪ NPC Chairman	1	0	-
▪ NPC Vice Chairmen	14	1	7%
▪ NPC Standing Committee	168	19	11%
Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)	2,158	440	20%
▪ CPPCC Chairman	1	0	-
▪ CPPCC Vice Chairmen	24	2	8%
▪ CPPCC Standing Committee	321	41	13%
Supreme People's Court	13	2	15%

Note: "State Council Leaders" includes the premier, four vice premiers, five state councilors, and the secretary general. "Provincial-Level" administrative units of the PRC include 22 provinces, 5 autonomous regions, and 4 directly administered municipalities (e.g., Tianjin).
Source: Various.¹⁷

Table 3. Female Representation in Military Leadership

Leadership Position	Total Positions	Positions Held by Women	Approximate Percentage
Central Military Commission (CMC)	7	0	-
▪ Heads of major offices, departments, commissions, bureaus, and agencies of the CMC*	15	0	-
Theater Commands			-
▪ Leaders	5	0	-
▪ Political Commissars	5	0	-
▪ Chiefs of Staff / Deputy Commanders	5	0	-
People's Liberation Army (PLA) Service Branches			
▪ Commanders	5	0	-
▪ Political Commissars	5	0	-

Note: "Central Military Commission" includes the CMC Chairman, two CMC Vice Chairmen, and four other CMC Members.
Source: United States Department of Defense. Defense Intelligence Agency. Directory of PRC Military Personalities. Washington DC, 2021.

* The CMC has 15 major subordinate organizations, which replaced the previous four general departments as part of the ongoing PLA reforms in 2016. They include the General Office, Joint Staff Department, Political Work Department, Logistics Support Department, Equipment Development Department, Training Management Department, National Defense Mobilization Department, Discipline Inspection Commission, Political and Legal Affairs Commission, Science and Technology Commission, Strategic Planning Office, Reform and Organization Office, International Military Cooperation Office, Audit Bureau, and Organ Affairs General Management Bureau. Joel Wuthnow and Philip C. Saunders, "Introduction," in Saunders et al., eds., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, National Defense University, February 22, 2019, 6-7.

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Endnotes

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- ⁴ UNData, “China,” *United Nations*, 2022. <http://data.un.org/en/iso/cn.html>.
- ⁵ Greg James, “Why There Are So Few Women in Chinese Politics,” *Sup China*, July 1, 2021. <https://supchina.com/2021/07/01/why-there-are-so-few-women-in-chinese-politics/>.
- ⁶ Greg James, “Why There Are So Few Women in Chinese Politics,” *Sup China*, July 1, 2021. <https://supchina.com/2021/07/01/why-there-are-so-few-women-in-chinese-politics/>.⁷ Valarie Tan, “Women Hold Up Half the Sky, But Men Rule the Party,” *Mercator Institute for China Studies*, June 3, 2021. <https://merics.org/en/short-analysis/women-hold-half-sky-men-rule-party>; Nis Grünberg, “Who is the CCP? China’s Communist Party in Infographics,” *Mercator Institute for China Studies*, March 16, 2021. <https://merics.org/de/kurzanalyse/who-ccp-chinas-communist-party-infographics>; Cheng Li, “Status of China’s Women Leaders on the Eve of the 19th Party Congress,” *Brookings Institute*, March 30, 2017. <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/status-of-chinas-women-leaders-on-the-eve-of-19th-party-congress/>.
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- ¹³ United States Department of Defense. Defense Intelligence Agency. Directory of PRC Military Personalities. Washington DC, 2010-2021; All China Women’s Federation, “The First Female Admiral of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Navy – Xu Lili” (中国人民解放军海军第一位女将军——徐莉莉), August 29, 2019. Translation. <https://web.archive.org/web/20220325160837/http://cnwomen.com.cn/2019/08/29/99170465.html>. “Nie Li, China’s First Female Lieutenant General” (聂力: 中国第一位女中将), *Motherland*, August 2, 2018. Translation. <https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:TQ3u7e1Swq4J:https://www.zgzs.com.cn/index.php/Article/detail/id/21555.html+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us>; Elsa Kania, “Holding Up Half the Sky? (Party 1)—The Evolution of Women’s Roles in the PLA,” *China Brief*, October 4, 2016. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/57f4ef2e4.html>.
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