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Women's Work: The Gendered Nature of Appointment Politics in Subnational China

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Abstract
While comparative research on gender and politics has produced a sizable literature on the appointment of women to cabinet positions in democracies, we know surprisingly little about appointment practices in authoritarian contexts at subnational levels. We address this gap with the resumés of 3,681 political appointees in subnational China (2003–2020). Our analysis reveals that subnational Chinese politics meets most of the criteria scholars put forward as being indicative of gendered institutions: (1) women and men's career patterns are different; (2) women are assigned to more feminine posts, while masculine posts provide more promotion opportunities; and (3) regarding backgrounds, women are younger, better educated and more likely to be ethnic minorities as a result of the implementation of tandem quotas. The findings advance the literature on gender and politics, showing that gender's effect on appointment transcends regime types and the dichotomy of national/subnational politics.

In October 2022, women in Chinese politics gained global attention when, for the first time in 25 years, the newly appointed Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) Politburo did not include a single woman. Headline-grabbing as it was, the gender imbalance at the highest level of Chinese politics is not a recent phenomenon. Since 1949, only six women have reached this apex of state power, and none of them has ever been part of the inner circle known as the Politburo Standing Committee.

In this article, we examine how gender influences Chinese politics down the political hierarchy. We focus on a specific grouping of executive positions at the subnational level (i.e. prefectures) to explore whether the gender imbalance observed in the Politburo starts at lower levels of the state and how it occurs. Since subnational executive positions often serve as a springboard to reach the upper echelons of

Chinese politics, closely analysing this level provides valuable insights into the role of gender in China's leadership pipeline.

Executives are powerful political actors, especially in parliamentary democracies and authoritarian regimes, where cabinets face limited checks and balances from legislatures (Kroeger and Kang 2022; Thomas 2018). Given the influential role of ministers and the predominance of men in these positions, the executive branch has long been perceived as a masculine institution (Barnes and O'Brien 2018). As of January 2023, women account for only 22.8% of ministers around the world (UN Women 2023). Nonetheless, there are signs of change. Several countries have achieved gender-balanced cabinets, including Spain, Finland and France, and there is a growing trend of appointing women to traditionally 'masculine' portfolios such as defence (Barnes and O'Brien 2018), finance (O'Brien et al. 2015) and chief executive positions (Thomas 2018).

Research on gender and politics in the executive branch has generated valuable insights into women's inclusion (Armstrong et al. 2022; Arriola and Johnson 2014; Bauer and Darkwah 2022), the portfolios they hold (Barnes and O'Brien 2018; Krook and O'Brien 2012), their career trajectories before and/or after serving in cabinets (Caminotti and Piscopo 2019; Kerevel 2019; Lee and McClean 2021) and the symbolic and substantive impact they have on women (Atchison 2015; Barnes and Taylor-Robinson 2018). However, much of this research has focused on cabinets in democracies. Conversely, studies on gender and politics in authoritarian regimes have addressed different issues, such as women's representation in legislatures and the state's adoption of gender-equality reforms as a legitimization strategy (Bauer and Burnet 2013; Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2022). To date, there have been only a few studies of women's experiences in the executive branch within electoral autocracies (Kroeger and Kang 2022). Our understanding of gender dynamics in the executive branch of single-party regimes or outright dictatorships remains limited.

In this article, we address this research gap and evaluate whether and how gender affects political appointments in subnational executive positions in authoritarian contexts. We do so by studying chief executive appointments in China, a single-party regime. China serves as an ideal case. Unlike liberal democracies, all chief executives in subnational China are appointed by the upper-level CCP and face minimal checks and balances, granting them significant discretion in policymaking. While subnational chief executives typically refer to the heads of government, such as governors, under the single-party rule of the CCP, the Party secretary (PS) and mayor jointly share governing responsibilities as dual chiefs. Given that their political roles are similar to those of subnational leaders in democracies, we refer to them as executives throughout this analysis. Gender quotas were adopted in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and all subnational governments need to appoint at least one woman to the (deputy) chief positions. With more women in powerful positions, a study of their appointments lays the groundwork for comparison of gender politics at subnational and national levels and across different regime types.

We draw our findings from a dataset recording all prefectural-level mayors and PSs between 2003 and 2020. Prefectural mayors/PSs hold significant power in Chinese politics. Prefectures, as per China's five-tier administrative hierarchy, have jurisdiction over all counties within their purview.[1] This grants them strong

control over counties' finance, education, healthcare, infrastructure and even appointments (Cao 2011). We also add the dimension of leadership change to compare the gender differences in appointment between the Hu Jintao (2003–2012) and Xi Jinping (2013–present) administrations.

Our analysis adopts the criteria used by feminist institutionalists to evaluate whether political appointments are gendered – when women have different backgrounds, follow different pathways to office and hold different portfolios (Barnes and Holman 2020; Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2009). Our findings confirm that executive appointments in subnational China exhibit gendered characteristics. Women follow a different career path and they are more likely to have held positions with fewer resources, including positions such as the chair of the Women's Federation. Interestingly, despite the gendered patterns in appointments, women serving as mayors/PSs have promising prospects: over half of them are promoted to the provincial government, and nearly a quarter ascend to the standing committee of the provincial CCP, which represents the most powerful position in provincial government and offers prospects for further promotion to central government. Upon closer examination, the difference also appears in appointees' ethnic backgrounds, revealing the CCP's attempt to meet 'tandem quotas' of gender and ethnic minorities by appointing minority women (Hughes 2011). Overall, women in these roles are younger than their male counterparts both in office and at every stage of their promotion, with an average gap of two years. While Xi's rise to power has gendered some aspects and narrowed some gaps, the underlying gendered nature of these appointments remains consistent across the two periods studied.

While our study is drawn from the Chinese case, the findings have broad theoretical and methodological implications. Theoretically, it fills a gap in comparative literature on gender and executive politics by expanding our understanding of the gendered nature of executive appointments beyond democracies to authoritarian states. It also engages with studies of Chinese politics, showing how the CCP's commitment to gender equity and its quota policy have failed to integrate women meaningfully into the inner circles of power so that Chinese politics remains largely gendered. Methodologically, we adapt Mona Lena Krook and Diana O'Brien's (2012) gender-coding scheme by coding over 6,000 political posts in China, enriching the toolkit of Chinese politics scholars and enabling a better and more gender-sensitive interpretation of Chinese politics.

Gender in executive appointments

Gender shapes politics. Through the perpetuation of the rules and norms subordinating females in politics, gender affects women's prospects for political advancement, contributing to what feminist institutionalists call 'gendered institutions' (Krook and Mackay 2011). Even formally gender-neutral rules are intertwined with gender norms, reproducing bias in recruitment and promotion. As a result, women are likely to take different pathways as they do not fit the masculine concept of leadership (Sjoberg 2009) and lack access to the resources to advance in politics that are more readily available to men (Bjarnegård 2013).

The executive branch is one such gendered institution. As the number of women in cabinets continues to increase, a large body of literature focuses on

understanding the gender dynamics surrounding their appointments and seeks to explain their inclusion (Armstrong et al. 2022; Arriola and Johnson 2014; Kroeger and Kang 2022), trace their career trajectories and explore whether they encounter glass ceilings (Caminotti and Piscopo 2019). The present study aligns with three strands of this literature and analyses the career patterns, portfolios and backgrounds of appointees – criteria commonly employed by scholars to evaluate if an institution is gendered.

Career patterns typically measure how executives enter office, advance and move between positions and across sectors. Despite women's increasing representation in government, their career patterns differ significantly from those of men. In many instances, women are less likely to be nominated, with executive roles often being reserved for men in practice (Caminotti and Piscopo 2019; Kerevel 2019). Moreover, the reasons for nominating women often vary from those for men, such as a response to rising corruption to project a 'clean' government (Armstrong et al. 2022) or during times of party crisis (Thomas 2018). They may also experience delays in entering public office due to childcare responsibilities and face a higher likelihood of discontinuing their career because they are more 'electorally vulnerable and … probably will not win their next election' (Lazarus et al. 2023: 106). As a result, women tend to stay in office for shorter periods than men (Fischer et al. 2012). For those women who are able to continue in politics, their career paths following the first appointment continue to be different from men's. Women often take considerably longer to receive influential portfolios, whereas men reach the top shortly after selection or without any prior appointments at all (Curtin et al. 2023; Kroeber and Hüffelmann 2022). Women may also have fewer opportunities for other appointments or changing posts (Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2009; Tremblay and Stockemer 2013).

Second, women are often (s)elected to perform 'women's work' due to the gendered division of labour (Goodwin et al. 2021; Heath et al. 2005). When appointed to cabinet posts or committees in legislatures, women tend to receive only posts covering traditionally female-oriented issues, such as education, health and youth (Goodwin et al. 2021; Krook and O'Brien 2012). Although there have been recent instances of women receiving more 'masculine' posts, like defence (Barnes and O'Brien 2018; Barnes and Taylor-Robinson 2018), such cases are rare, and the gendered division of labour persists at both the national (Kroeber and Hüffelmann 2022) and the subnational level (Tremblay and Stockemer 2013). The pattern is especially noticeable when women are new to the institution, but it is likely to diminish as women's representation increases, as evidenced by studies of five Arab parliaments and the case of Vietnam (Joshi and Thimothy 2019; Shalaby and Elimam 2020). The gendered division of labour has affected women's advancement. Compared with masculine posts, feminine portfolios are less effective as springboards for promotion (Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2009; Kroeber and Hüffelmann 2022). However, as noted by Jennifer Curtin et al. (2023), feminine posts decrease promotion prospects for women but increase promotion prospects for men.

Regarding backgrounds, research has yielded mixed results. While most political institutions continue to be male-dominated, affirmative measures such as gender quotas have brought about changes in the diversity landscape. For instance, gender

quotas have diversified the pool of legislators in Argentina by altering perceptions of 'qualified' politicians and existing recruitment networks (Barnes and Holman 2020). The implementation of gender quotas alongside ethnic quotas has been found to enhance within-group diversity, resulting in increased representation of minority women (Hughes 2011). However, studies also find that, regardless of their personal backgrounds, women's qualifications are the same as men's – Leslie Schwindt-Bayer's (2011: 2) study shows that 'women who win legislative office in Latin America do so by playing the traditional, male-defined, political game'. In certain cases, women need to outperform men to overcome their presumed lack of 'political capacity'. Certain factors therefore may prove to be more important for women than for men, including family ties (Baturo and Gray 2018), prior political experience (Lee and McClean 2021) and professional experience outside of politics (Arriola and Johnson 2014).

The case of China's prefectural executives

China's single-party regime features a distinctive cadre management system that sets it apart from both liberal democracies and electoral authoritarian regimes. In this system, heads of governments are appointed by the upper-level CCP rather than elected by citizens, and they are theoretically accountable only to the upper-level CCP. The government is led by two individuals: the mayor and the CCP's PS. While the separation between the Party and state remains the official line of the CCP, the PS outranks the mayor. A division of labour does exist, with the mayor taking charge of actual governing responsibilities, including the economy and education, while the PS is involved in Party work such as ideology and appointments (Edin 2003). These factors contribute to characterizing the PS as a chief executive rather than merely a party leader in liberal democracies, since they practically lead the government. Given the absence of elections to hold them accountable and the lack of effective checks and balances within the same level of government, they are the highest-ranking and most powerful figures at the local level, making research on their appointment particularly important.

Prefectural mayors and PSs are no exception. Prefectural governments occupy a position between provincial and county-level governments and have jurisdiction over all counties within China's layer-by-layer administrative hierarchy (Lu and Tsai 2021).[2] Counties are required to obtain the prefectural government's approval for various matters, including infrastructure, budgeting, social welfare and education. Most importantly, prefectural government decides county officials' appointment. Prefectural mayors/PSs are also strong contenders for provincial or even central-level posts. Through good performance or strong political connections (Shih et al. 2012), many have successfully risen to prominent positions from these two roles, including powerful CCP elites such as the current premier, Qiang Li.

Gender in executive appointments: career patterns, division of labour and backgrounds

Gender equity, or 'equality between men and women' in the Chinese phrase, has been and still is one of the CCP's ideological cornerstones (Evans 2021), and the CCP has actively promoted policies on women's representation (Chen 2022).

The quota that applies to the mayors/PSs originates from a 2001 policy guideline: the *Opinions for Women Cadres' Training and Promoting, and on Women Party Members' Recruitment*, which includes an 'at least one woman' quota for the appointment of (deputy) governor/PS positions of all subnational governments, a group of six to eight members.

Given the importance of chief executives, women's representation in these roles has significant implications. Scholars show that despite China's single-party rule, women in the country's policy machinery and female legislators do act for women, as exemplified by their successful efforts to lobby for the passage of China's first legislation against domestic violence (Jiang and Zhou 2022). However, women remain significantly underrepresented in Chinese politics (Howell 2006; Jacka and Sargeson 2015), especially in chief executive positions (Su 2006). Fang Lü's (2020) study of 230 women executives reveals a pyramid-shaped distribution, where the higher the position is, the less likely it is that a woman will occupy it. Often, women are depicted as token representatives of marginalized groups, appointed to satisfy the CCP's multiple quotas for ethnic minorities, non-CCP members, women and intellectuals (Chen 2022). Although scholars have challenged this stereotype by demonstrating that women's appointments are merit-based (Chen 2022), it is undeniable that women are more likely to receive less prestigious positions on their way up, at least within provincial executive roles (Su 2006).

Our study focuses on women at the prefectural level, who are potential candidates for provincial positions that prior studies have analysed. We structure our hypotheses following the framework used in comparative literature. Regarding career patterns, we examine executives' mobility across administration levels, departments and jurisdictions and assess whether women encounter a glass ceiling after leaving office. In the name of cadre training, the CCP frequently rotates cadres, resulting in vertical, horizontal and regional mobility patterns (Jiang et al. 2023). Mobility is the precondition for promotion and is codified in the Party's cadre managing document, *Work Regulations for the Promotion and Appointment of Leading Party and Government Cadres*. High mobility level often signals the chosen cadre's promotion in the future (Jia and Xu 2020). However, previous work suggests that women are less mobile than men (Lü 2020) because most of the rotation happens before cadres' first major promotion, typically around the age of 35, coinciding with most Chinese women's peak reproductive and childcare-heavy years (Lü 2020). As such, we hypothesize that women in politics are less mobile than men on all three dimensions.

Regarding portfolio allocation, previous research has indicated that traditionally masculine departments – for example, the Department of Propaganda, Development and Reform Commission – generate significant political capital (Wong and Zeng 2018). Chinese women tend to be appointed to the opposite ends – those traditionally associated with femininity (Su 2006). Instead of challenging the gendered practices, the state institutionalizes them: 'departments such as education, culture, health, and social welfare should make women the priority candidate' (Organization Department 2001). Such an arrangement is labelled as 'protective measures' because women are presumedly not 'qualified' (Howell 2006), and their mere presence in politics is already a breakthrough. As such, we

hypothesize that women are more likely to follow the Party-prescribed feminine path. This hypothesis is also linked to career patterns. If women are more inclined to follow the feminine path, we assume they are also more likely to encounter a glass ceiling after leaving their positions.

Our hypotheses for backgrounds examine appointees' age, education, ethnicity and Party membership. Regarding age, while some find women's careers advance more slowly than men's due to childcare responsibilities (Cooke 2001), studies from Argentina suggest the opposite (Franceschet and Piscopo 2014). In China, for cadres below the rank of 'county-managed cadres', men retire at 60 and women at 55.[3] Given the difference, women's careers will need to progress faster than men's to make it. Therefore, we anticipate that women are younger than men on average when appointed.

Another biographic hypothesis originates from the CCP's quota policy. The gender quota is not the CCP's only diversity consideration: appointment guidelines include a vague requirement suggesting that 'appropriate numbers' of ethnic minorities and non-CCP members should be appointed' (Chen 2022: 5). As previous literature has suggested, 'minority women's dual identities benefit them precisely because their inclusion allows majority men to retain the maximum amount of seats' (Hughes 2011: 607). Decision-makers in China have been observed using one appointment to double- or triple-dip different quota requirements, generating the myth that female politicians in China are non-CCP ethnic minorities (Chen 2022). Therefore, our last two hypotheses on backgrounds are that women are more likely to be non-CCP members and ethnic minorities.

Lastly, we compare appointments during the Hu (2003–2012) and Xi (2013–present) administrations. Xi's rule is characterized by power concentration and tightened control (Chan et al. 2021; Teets and Almen 2018). A tighter political climate, as noted by Tiffany Barnes and Diana O'Brien (2018: 358), does not bode well for women, as 'leaders … are unlikely to look beyond their largely male inner circles'. The stereotype that women are more 'compassionate and compromising leaders' (Barnes and O'Brien 2018: 358) is also incompatible with the increasingly combative rhetoric in Xi's speeches and policies (Pei 2022). In fact, the newly elected Politburo of the 20th CCP Congress does not include any women. Therefore, we hypothesize that the gender gaps in appointments will deepen further during Xi's tenure.

Data and methods

We analyse resumés of all prefectural mayors and PSs who served in China's 412 prefectures between 2003 and 2020, totalling 1,987 mayors and 1,694 PSs.[4] The analysis of mobility adopts Genia Kostka and Xiaofan Yu's (2015) scoring strategy and calculates the vertical, horizontal and regional scores. The vertical score ranges from 1 to 5, with one unit reflecting the cadre's experience at one level of government. The horizontal score assigns one point to each unique department where the cadre has worked. We calculate two versions of the regional score, one by the province and another by the prefecture, capturing the cadres' mobility across provinces/prefectures. Each move counts as one point.

The analysis of the portfolio follows two steps. First, we adapted Krook and O'Brien's (2012) coding scheme to code 6,410 posts as masculine, neutral or feminine (see Table A1 in the Supplementary Material). For posts beyond their codebook, we referred to Krook and O'Brien's (2012: 844) double definition – whether the portfolios 'touched on concerns tied to the public/private sphere … and have been historically associated with men/women'. For instance, we coded most CCP departments, including the Propaganda and Organization Department, as masculine because they are located within the core of Chinese politics and have traditionally been headed by men.

We then calculate the gender score of the cadres' career path by multiplying the length of time (years as unit) of each masculine position by 3, neutral by 2 and feminine by 1. We added the values and divided them by the total number of years of the cadres' career. For reference, if a mayor served 10 years in masculine positions, five years in neutral positions and seven years in feminine positions, the resulting equation was:

$$(3 \times 10 + 2 \times 5 + 1 \times 7)/22 = 2.14$$

Finally, we classified appointments under the Hu and Xi administrations. Notably, 51 mayors and 98 PSs have worked across both administrations. As the unit of analysis is the *appointment* rather than the *person*, we allow double counting, and the classification is based on the starting date of each appointment.

Results

Career patterns: tenure, progress and mobility

To evaluate whether cadres' career patterns are gendered, we examine the average length of the mayors'/PSs' tenure, career progress and mobility. Overall, both mayors' and PSs' average tenure is short, and neither group serves out the mandated five years in full (see Table 1). While there is a small gender gap, it is statistically insignificant. In the mayor group, women serve 3.05 years and men serve 3.1 years. The PS group shows a slightly longer tenure and a wider gender gap – with women averaging 3.03 and men 3.29 years – although insignificant.

A more significant difference appears in career progress. For both groups, women's careers progress faster, and the gap persists at every step as they climb the political ranks.[5] On average, women are promoted about two years earlier than men in both groups, and all gaps are significant. Interestingly, the gap narrows at the division-head level in both groups, making the age difference less than one year. However, women soon catch up, with the gap enlarging again to more than one year at the (deputy) bureau director levels.

The findings have two implications. First, in line with Baoqing Pang et al.'s (2018) conclusion that political elites in China are 'sprinters' who barely serve out even one mandated five-year term to reach the top, we show women are even faster 'sprinters' than men. One of the reasons is the discriminatory retirement age requirements, forcing women to beat men to get ahead before having to retire five years ahead of them. Second, women slow down between 29 and 34 as the

Table 1. Career Patterns: Tenure Length, Career Progress and Mobility (2003–2020)

	Mayor		Party secretary	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Total number	1,852	135	1,606	88
Tenure length (years)	3.10	3.05	3.29	3.03
Age at different stages of political career				
Deputy division head	31.00	29.69	30.71	28.82
Division head	34.83	34.00	34.28	33.31
Deputy bureau director	40.30	38.16	39.38	37.29
Bureau director	47.10	45.36	46.08	44.46
Mobility score				
Vertical mobility	2.46	2.37	2.57	2.61
Horizontal mobility	6.52	5.79	6.99	6.89
Regional mobility across provinces	1.95	1.83	2.03	2.02
Regional mobility across prefectures	3.25	3.24	3.67	3.76

difference between the two groups shrinks, overlapping with their most childcare-heavy years – Chinese women's average reproductive age is 29 (Lü 2020).

We also show that mayors/PSs are highly mobile. In contrast to Maria Escobar-Lemmon and Michelle Taylor-Robinson's (2009) findings that most ministers in Latin American countries do not switch posts, Chinese executives move constantly. Within the mayor group, gender difference appears in cadres' horizontal mobility, with women serving on average in one fewer post than men ($p < 0.01$). Although the difference in vertical and cross-jurisdictional mobility is insignificant, women's disadvantage persists. However, the gender difference disappears in the PS group. Moreover, women are vertically and regionally even more mobile than men, suggesting that women in higher-ranked positions might be more similar than different from men.

With the significant gender difference in Chinese mayors' career progress and their horizontal mobility, it is safe to say that the mayor position meets the first criterion to be considered as gendered. While women PSs' careers also advance significantly faster than men, the absence of difference in mobility and tenure makes the PS position less gendered. The reason might be that the PS position has authority over mayors, who are mostly men. Given this, combined with the fact that much fewer women made it to the PS position, it is unsurprising that their career patterns are more like those of men.

Division of labour in politics

The analysis of the mayors'/PSs' portfolios involves three steps. We first evaluate whether an individual's career route is overall masculine, neutral or feminine. We then classify the type of cadres based on where they have spent most of their

Table 2. Gender Score and Gender Type of Cadres by Prior Experience (2003–2020)

	Mayor		Party secretary	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Gender score	2.57	2.15	2.60	2.39
Distribution by gender Type				
Masculine type (%)	80.63	56.11	83.88	72.04
Neutral type (%)	9.20	10.80	6.81	5.34
Feminine type (%)	10.17	33.09	9.31	22.58

time. For instance, if a mayor has worked seven years in masculine positions, five years in neutral positions and eight years in feminine positions, the mayor is a feminine type. Lastly, we also identify the specific portfolios from which women are excluded/included based on where they have worked the longest.[6]

Overall, women have significantly lower gender scores than men in both groups (see Table 2). Within mayors, the average gender score is 2.57 for men and 2.15 for women ($p < 0.01$). The same holds for the PS group, where there is a significant gender gap ($p < 0.01$). Interestingly, despite women having a lower gender score, their average score is still above the 'neutral' score and is closer to the 'masculine' than the 'feminine' end. This suggests that while women are holding more feminine posts than men, masculine posts are more effective springboards for the mayor/PS positions – both men and women have been on a masculine route on their way up. This is particularly true for the higher-ranked PS positions, with PSs' gender scores being much higher than mayors'.

We also differentiate cadres based on the posts where they worked the longest.[7] The findings further support the gendered division of labour. Within the mayor group, over 80% of male mayors can be categorized as the masculine type, while only 56% of female mayors are masculine. By comparison, the feminine type of cadres makes up a significantly larger share of female mayors than of male mayors (33% vs 10%). The PS group reveals a slightly smaller gap, with 84% of male PSs masculine and 72% of female PSs masculine. In line with the analysis of gender scores, this analysis also shows the PS position requires more masculine work experience: female PSs are more likely than female mayors to be of the masculine type.

Lastly, we also analyse the specific portfolios they have held. We found that while there is considerable overlap among the core portfolios held by men and women, and women are not entirely excluded from all the powerful masculine portfolios, there are differences in the distribution of these portfolios along the gender axis (see Figure 1). First, a significantly larger proportion of women build their careers in feminine departments, such as the Youth League (32% female vs 14% male mayors) and the Women's Federation (4% female mayors vs zero men). Conversely, women are underrepresented in masculine posts, including the General Office for the State (28% male vs 16% female mayors) and the CCP (7.2% men vs 1.4% women). The disparity extends to economy-related units,
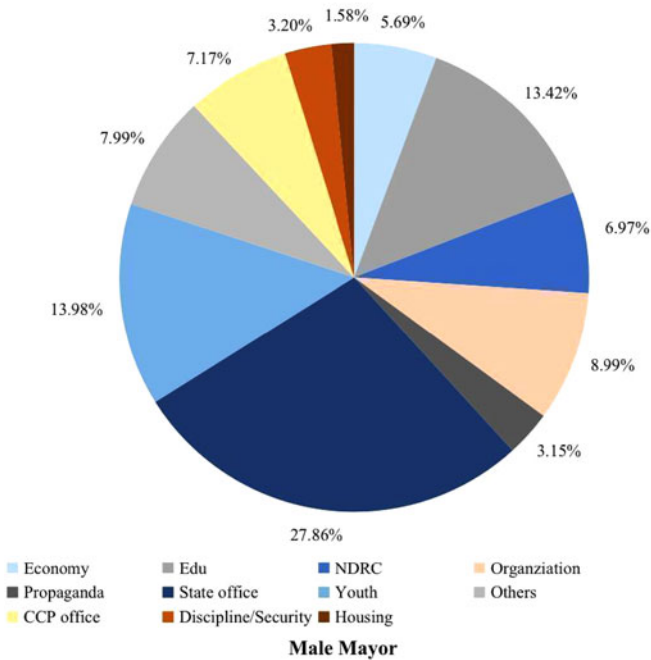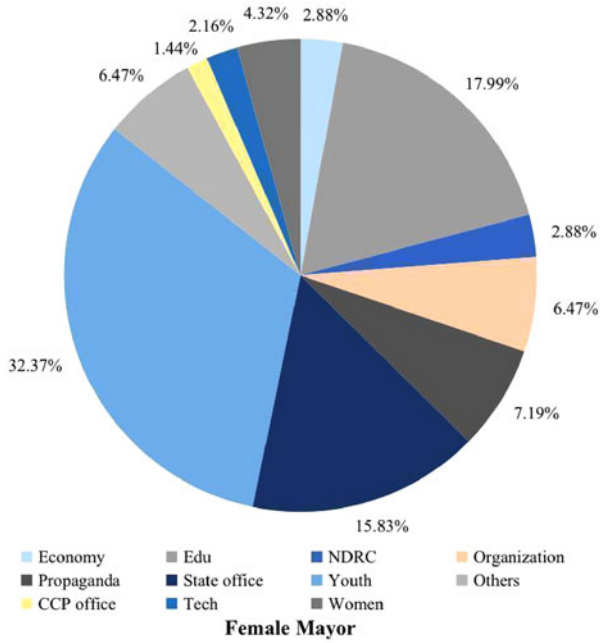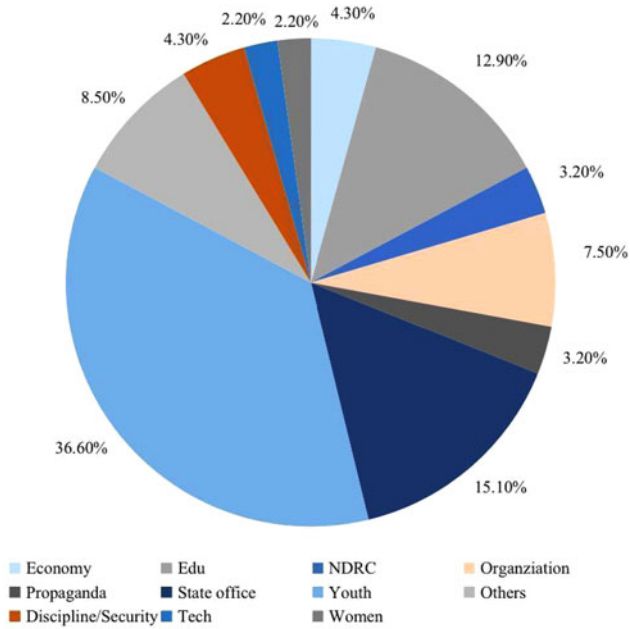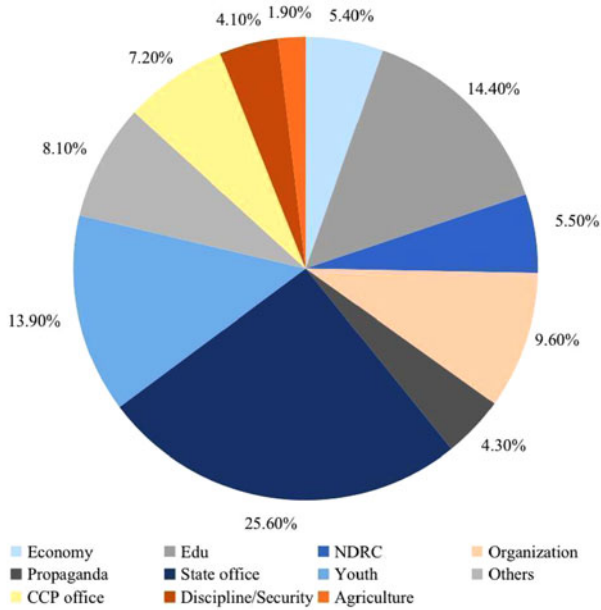
Figure 1. Proportion of Mayors/PSs with Experience in Different Portfolios

Female PS

Male PS

Figure 1. (*Continued.*)

such as the Development and Reform Commission (7% male vs 2.9% female mayors) and the Finance Bureau (5.7% male vs 2.9% female mayors). Second, consistent with our findings on a narrower gender gap within the PS group, while a similar gender difference appears as in the mayor group, more women PSs originate from masculine posts, including those related to security and the economy.

The findings support our hypothesis on a gendered division of labour in Chinese politics. Notably, both positions require highly masculine work experience. Yet, within the masculine route, women take a more feminine path; they have a lower gender score, there are more feminine-type female mayors/PSs and they are underrepresented in masculine posts, including the General Office and economy-related units.

Backgrounds: age, ethnicity, party membership and education

We first confirm the age difference and show that women have a shorter political career: Women are one year younger than men in the mayor group ($p < 0.01$) and two years younger in the PS group ($p = 0.01$) (see Table 3). They are 47 and 49 years old on average when receiving the appointments of mayor or PS, respectively, while men are aged around 48 and 51, respectively. There are also differences in education. In general, 5% more women in the mayor group have a postgraduate degree. The differences in the PS group are even more revealing, as the gap widens to 10%.

Our data further analyses cadres' ethnicity. The results show that minority women do benefit from the tandem quotas combining gender and ethnicity. Some 20% of women mayors are minorities, while the number for men is 13%. However, there is no meaningful difference in the PS group. The same does not hold for the non-CCP quota though – male PSs are relatively more likely to be non-CCP members. Therefore, our findings both confirm and differ from Minglu Chen's (2022) analysis of provincial-level leaders, which concluded women are more likely to be minorities and non-CCP members. In prefectures, gender dynamics only appear in the access to leadership positions for ethnic minorities.

Table 3. Backgrounds: Age, Ethnicity, Party Membership and Education (2003–2020)

	Mayor		Party secretary	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Age	48.73	47.39	51.02	49.00
Ethnic minority (%)	13.00	20.07	8.00	9.10
Non-CCP member (%)	8.30	7.40	8.60	4.50
Education level				
Master's and doctoral (%)	80.29	85.19	77.09	87.50
Bachelor's (%)	15.93	14.07	18.93	12.50
Associate and high school (%)	2.27	0.00	2.12	0.00

Table 4. Mobility and Gender Scores Based on Ethnic Background

	Mayor		Party secretary	
	Han	Minority	Han	Minority
Mobility score				
Vertical mobility	2.45	2.49	2.58	2.59
Horizontal mobility	6.43	6.77	7.00	7.10
Regional mobility across provinces	1.96	1.78	2.04	1.90
Regional mobility across prefectures	3.30	2.96	3.69	3.54
Gender score	2.55	2.50	2.59	2.57

However, ethnic background seems to have no impact on cadres' careers (see Table 4). The mobility and gender scores of minority mayors/PSs are no different from those of the Han cadres (i.e. the ethnic majority), except for mayors' cross-provincial mobility ($p < 0.01$). We also examined the careers of all minority women and found no discernible differences in terms of gender score compared with that between women overall (2.15 vs 2.12). Minority women are also more represented in feminine departments, including the Youth League (17%) and Education (18%). However, similar to Han women, minority women are not entirely excluded from masculine portfolios, with almost 15% of them originating from the State Office, and 21% from CCP-related departments. On the other hand, minority women mayors seem to have a higher mobility level on all three dimensions, scoring 2.68, 6.24 and 1.96 on vertical, horizontal and cross-provincial mobility, respectively. The same difference is also observed within women PSs.

In sum, the analysis partially supports our hypotheses and indicates the gender barriers for women. Overall, women are younger, better-educated and more likely to be ethnic minorities. While ethnic cadres (both men and women) exhibit similar mobility patterns and portfolio distributions to their Han counterparts, minority women display greater mobility than women mayors/PSs in general. However, minority women and Han women hold similarly feminine portfolios. Finally, women do not benefit from being non-CCP members. If anything, they are more disadvantaged by being so.

Preserving gender differences under the new leadership?

This section evaluates the impact of leadership change by comparing the above measurements across the Hu and Xi administrations, allowing for the identification of how Xi's rule specifically impacts women in Chinese politics.

With a few exceptions, we first show the continuity of existing gender differences (see Table 5). First, women's careers still progress faster and the gender gap in mobility remains. Second, the gendered division of labour also persists. Women's gender scores are still significantly lower than men's, and there are far more feminine-type women. Finally, there continue to be differences in their ages, and women mayors are more likely to be minorities.

Table 5. Women and Men Mayors/PSs in the Hu and Xi Administrations

	Mayor				Party secretary			
	2003–2012		2013–2020		2003–2012		2013–2020	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Tenure length (years)	3.45	3.20	2.41	2.72	3.79	3.42	2.34	2.61
Age at different stages of political career								
Deputy division head	30.95	29.48	31.03	29.88	30.74	28.90	30.62	28.83
Division head	34.44	32.95	35.26	35.09	34.17	32.83	34.33	33.80
Deputy bureau director	39.40	36.73	41.27	39.7	38.96	37.14	39.66	37.38
Bureau director	45.80	44.12	48.49	46.69	45.04	44.08	46.97	44.64
Mobility score								
Vertical mobility	2.47	2.49	2.44	2.22	2.64	2.79	2.50	2.48
Horizontal mobility	6.28	5.63	6.82	5.97	6.76	7.07	7.25	6.75
Regional mobility across provinces	1.93	1.79	1.97	1.87	2.04	2.17	2.02	1.90
Regional mobility across prefectures	3.17	3.24	3.34	3.25	3.59	3.81	3.76	3.73
Gender score	2.54	2.14	2.61	2.17	2.6	2.40	2.62	2.37
Distribution by gender type								
Masculine type (%)	79.74	52.05	81.70	60.61	83.76	76.19	84.02	68.63
Neutral type (%)	9.20	10.96	9.20	10.60	6.13	7.14	7.55	3.92
Feminine type (%)	11.06	36.99	9.09	28.79	10.11	16.67	8.44	27.46
Age	47.65	46.65	50.04	48.22	49.84	49.21	52.34	50.63

(*Continued*)

Table 5. (*Continued.*)

	Mayor				Party secretary			
	2003–2012		2013–2020		2003–2012		2013–2020	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Ethnic minority (%)	13.00	23.90	12.00	16.90	8.00	5.00	7.00	12.20
Non-CCP member (%)	9.60	8.40	6.80	6.20	9.10	5.00	8.00	4.10
Education level								
Master's and doctoral (%)	75.98	83.10	86.11	87.69	73.68	87.50	81.85	87.76
Bachelor's (%)	18.18	15.49	12.83	12.31	20.60	12.50	16.42	12.24
Associate and high school (%)	3.73	0.00	0.35	0.00	3.36	0.00	0.62	0.00

Table 6. Women's Career Development after the Mayor/PS Position

	Provincial head (%)	Deputy provincial head (%)	Provincial CCP standing committee member (%)	Chairperson of provincial Women's Federation (%)	Prefectural PS (%)	Rank promotion (%)
Women mayors	1.86	22.36	18.63	3.11	50.93	44.72
Women PSs	1.85	22.93	25.93	3.70	N/A	63.89

However, a nuanced analysis reveals that Xi's rule has brought about changes, although not entirely consistent with our hypothesis that the gender gap is exacerbated with the rise of strongman politics. Instead, we observe that gender gaps widen within the PS group while narrowing within mayors. The previous era saw a group of women PSs more similar than different from men: they were more mobile and less likely to be minorities. Under Xi, women PSs become increasingly like the stereotypical 'women cadres': lower mobility, more minorities and more feminine type. In other words, the new leadership has been *gendering* women PSs by treating them 'based on perceived gender' (Sjoberg 2009: 155). The opposite change happens within the mayors. First, the feminine type of women mayors' share drops by 10% and the masculine type increases by 10%. Second, the age difference during their first two stages of promotion becomes insignificant. Finally, minority women's share has dropped by 7%.

Our study reveals that the impact of Xi's rule is uneven, with women mayors moving closer to the baseline of men's careers, while women PSs experience a shift in the opposite direction. It is worth noting that since most mayors are potential candidates for PS, these findings may indicate an overall narrower gender gap but with women aligning more closely with men than the reverse. That is, the tightened rule does not imply that decision-makers no longer 'look beyond their largely male inner circles' (Barnes and O'Brien 2018: 358). Instead, they are selecting individuals from an increasingly homogeneous group that lacks diversity in terms of portfolio, age and ethnicity while maintaining a consistent number of women. However, despite the variations between the two groups and the reduced gender gap observed within mayors, the gender gaps have not disappeared. Women mayors/PSs still follow distinct career trajectories – that is, faster, more feminine and with higher educational backgrounds.

Do women encounter a glass ceiling?

Are the mayor/PS positions springboards or glass ceilings for women? The two positions have been proven to be effective stepping stones to higher-ranked positions at the provincial or even the national level.[8] However, given the difficulty women face in reaching these positions, can they still hope to attain higher positions? Or do they encounter a glass ceiling, as the literature has suggested (e.g. Caminotti and Piscopo 2019; Kerevel 2019), when they leave office? To answer this question, we went through all women mayors'/PSs' career records after leaving office and identified them as not ceilinged if they were promoted: (1) to the (deputy) provincial head position; (2) to the CCP's provincial standing committee, which is the powerhouse of a province and has authority over every level of government within the province; (3) within the political ranks in general; or (4) for mayors, to be the prefectural PS. We consider them as ceilinged if they were moved directly to the Women's Federation or the Political Consultative Conference, the stereotypical 'retirement houses' for powerful women politicians in China.

Contrary to what has been suggested, the findings tell quite an optimistic story (see Table 6). Half female mayors subsequently received a promotion, with about 24% making it to the provincial (deputy) chief position, and 19% into the

provincial CCP standing committee. Chances for promotion are even higher for women PSs, with 64% of them being promoted; 26% eventually break into the provincial CCP standing committee. Considering that the number of provincial CCP standing committee members typically ranges between 11 and 13, this rate is quite impressive. Our findings also challenge the notion that women politicians are predominantly assigned to the Women's Federation, despite some noteworthy precedents (e.g. Muhua Chen, who was assigned to the Women's Federation after serving as the second female vice-premier of China). In fact, less than 4% of women mayors/PSs have worked for the Women's Federation after leaving the office.

Discussion and conclusion

Executive positions have always been more difficult for women to attain than legislatures. The appointment of women, especially to powerful portfolios like defence and finance (Armstrong et al. 2022; Barnes and Taylor-Robinson 2018), has garnered increasing scholarly attention, along with the growing representation of women in cabinets worldwide (Krook and O'Brien 2012). Analyses of women appointees in Latin America, Africa and Asian democracies have identified disparities in career progressions and qualifications between men and women (Arriola and Johnson 2014; Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2009; Lee and McClean 2021), highlighting the presence of glass ceilings and the gendered nature of executive positions (Kerevel 2019).

Our research engages with this literature and both reaffirms and challenges prevailing theories, pointing to an overall gendered appointment landscape in Chinese politics, yet with nuances that deviate from the existing literature. First, much like their sister politicians in other countries, Chinese women politicians' careers differ from men's in career pattern, portfolio and background: women mayors' and PSs' careers progress faster than men's; women mayors' mobilities are lower than men's; division of labour is also seen, with women following a more feminine pathway; finally, women mayors are more likely to be a minority and better educated. However, Chinese women also exhibit significant similarities to their male counterparts in areas that are crucial to the CCP's appointment decisions. First, their tenure length is equally short, which often means the cadre is on a 'fast track' (Pang et al. 2018). Second, non-CCP women do not hold an advantage. Third, fewer gender differences have been detected in the more powerful PS positions.

The mixed patterns of mayor/PS appointments present a pyramidal shape, with the narrowest gender gaps observed at the highest strata. This can be explained by several factors. First, as masculine positions tend to have a more positive effect on promotion, it is expected that individuals occupying higher-ranked positions would have a more masculine background. Second, it could be attributable to the sheer number of women PSs: there are twice as many women mayors as women PSs. For such a small group of women, they can only be politically exceptional, meaning they are playing 'the male-defined, political game' and fully committed to the CCP (Schwindt-Bayer 2011). This finding also explains why women do not seem to encounter a glass ceiling after leaving office, particularly among the more powerful PSs – once women become 'one of them', their gender becomes less relevant or even advantageous under the CCP's gender quota policy that requires at least

one woman in the provincial leadership positions. Considering the small number of women mayors/PSs in each province (i.e. a very small candidate pool for this quota), it is only natural that they become the top candidate.

This research provides valuable insights for researchers of gender and politics and authoritarian politics. First, it sheds light on similar gender dynamics in subnational governments within authoritarian regimes. While previous studies have begun examining gender dynamics in executive branch politics in authoritarian regimes, the focus has primarily been on the national level (e.g. Barnes and O'Brien 2018; Kroeger and Kang 2022). By providing a local perspective, our study expands the existing research and shows that gendered dynamics are prevalent not only in national politics but also in local governance and may be even more pronounced there. In so doing, we also pave the way for future research on China's national-level politics, as subnational leadership positions serve as significant stepping stones towards higher positions of power.

This study also highlights the potential impact of women's representation in the executive branch. Existing literature shows that women ministers in democracies, leveraging their role in drafting policy, have successfully advocated for policies promoting women's rights and protecting the environment (Atchison 2015; Atchison and Down 2019). However, research on authoritarian regimes, where the executive branch wields substantial authority in policymaking, remains scarce. In parallel, studies on authoritarian legislatures have noted that despite the perception of these bodies as mere rubber stamps, women legislators have devised various strategies to advance women's interests (Bauer and Burnet 2013; Jiang and Zhou 2022). As such, it will be interesting to explore whether female executives in authoritarian regimes also champion pro-women policies. Consequently, our study highlights the potential for future research projects examining how career trajectories and gender shape women's policy preferences within authoritarian regimes. Such projects will also expand our understanding of the diverse mechanisms women utilize to act for women.

Finally, our study provides a more gender-sensitive examination of Chinese politics and points out the exclusionary effect of its promotion rules on women. Scholars of Chinese politics have studied the promotion of the CCP cadres extensively, generating a wide array of theories explaining officials' promotion: networks with political elites (Shih et al. 2012), high mobility (Jia and Xu 2020) or experience in important departments (Wong and Zeng 2018). However, while some work included gender as an independent variable and tested its impact on promotion (Shih et al. 2012; Su 2006), we still do not know exactly where and how women's and men's political careers diverge – that is, the underlying mechanism of the causal effect. Our findings might partially provide an answer as to how women's underrepresentation happens: most often tied to low-prestige portfolios, they tend to have a more difficult time accessing political resources (i.e. feminine posts) and accumulating the type of political experience preferred by the CCP (i.e. they have a lower mobility level). This, in turn, prevents them from building the powerful networks needed for promotion. While our findings are drawn from women who have 'made it', the sample functions as a 'least likely case' for such a conclusion: if women in our dataset, who are more powerful than most women cadres, are still failing to break into the traditional promotion tracks, it will be even more difficult for others.

Notes

1 The five levels of government consist of national, provincial, prefectural, county and township government. In our study, we focus on 412 prefectural units across 31 provincial units.

2 Exceptions include province-administered counties, which fall outside the jurisdiction of the prefectural government.

3 Women above a certain rank can continue working until 60.

4 Multiple data sources have been used. For cadres who served between 2003 and 2015, we used Jiang's (2018) Chinese Political Elite Database and updated it to include the cadre's most recent position before 31 December 2020. For the rest of them, we sourced the data from either the Local Officials' Dataset on Renmingwang or Baidu Baike.

5 The CCP's cadre management system includes 10 'administrative ranks' ranging from top to bottom: full and deputy state leader (国), full and deputy minister (部), full and deputy bureau director (厅), full and deputy division head (处) and full and deputy section head (科). Deputy level also counts as a rank. Each political post corresponds to a specific rank. For instance, prefectural head is classified at the rank of full bureau director, and county head at the rank of full division head.

6 With nearly 7,000 work units in our dataset, it is impractical to calculate the type of cadres based on all of them. Instead, we ranked the work units based on frequency and selected the top 11 work units when calculating the cadre type.

7 To showcase what different types of cadre career trajectories look like, we provide examples of both feminine and masculine category: Jumei Wang, the former mayor of Nanyang prefecture, for the feminine type and Pengfei Yi from Huaihua prefecture, for the masculine type. Wang started her career at the Women's Federation of Changge county, Xuchang prefecture in 1972, and she worked her way up inside the Women's Federation to reach the provincial-level Women's Federation in 1987. To further enhance her governing capacity, upper-level authority rotated her back to the counties for more generalist positions, the deputy PS of Mianchi county in 1987 and then the mayor of Yima county in 1989. The four years she spent working in the counties marked the first time Wang ever served in masculine positions. After 'training' in the counties and building up the kind of well-rounded generalist profile, Wang was promoted back to the provincial Women's Federation – this time, as deputy chairperson of the federation. Three years later, she became deputy PS of Nanyang prefecture, and after another four years, mayor of Nanyang. Compared with Wang's feminine route within the Women's Federation, Yi's career trajectory is much more masculine. Yi started his career at the provincial level in 1983 at one of the most powerful departments, the Development and Reform Commission. He was rotated several times within the commission, from the finance office to the office of agriculture. He then served as the deputy head of the commission for eight years until 2008, when he was appointed mayor of Huaihua prefecture. Throughout his entire political career, Yi has never worked in a feminine post.

8 Examples include the current president, Xi, who was once the PS of Fuzhou city, and Yiqin Shen, one of the two female provincial heads/PSs as of 2021, who served as mayor of Tongren city.

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