



STATE OF THE GAME

BUILDING PACAF'S COMPETITIVE MINDSET

MARCH 2021

A LONG MARCH AHEAD FOR WOMEN IN CHINA

A look at the role of women in the PRC and PLA in honor of Women's History month

Chairman Mao Zedong famously declared “Women hold up half the sky.” While the collapse of the Qing dynasty in China signaled a break from traditions like polygamy and feet binding and created new opportunities for women outside the home, societal biases and the ramifications of Communist Party policies continue to impact women's progress today.

In keeping with the revolutionary ethos, Mao integrated large numbers of women into the Red Army that preceded today's People's Liberation Army (PLA). An [estimated](#) 3,000 women took part in the Long March in 1934-35 during the Chinese Civil War, and women composed up to a quarter of the military at the time of the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC). However, women were disproportionately pushed out of the PLA during demobilization following the war, and in the past several decades women have constituted five percent or less of the force.

Unfortunately, the reality of women's advancement in modern China hasn't met the hype of “holding up half of the sky,” with President Xi's government [failing](#) to ever appoint a woman to serve on the all-important Politburo Standing Committee.

Xi Said, She Said: How the Communist Party blamed Chinese women for the problem it created

The PRC's One Child Policy, [introduced](#) in 1979 and phased out in 2015, was implemented to curb the expanding Chinese population by imposing fines on families for having more than one child. Repeat offenders were subjected to forced abortion and sterilization (although now these abuses

are no longer inflicted on Han Chinese majority, they allegedly [continue](#) against the Uighur ethnic minority in western China). The policy slowed China's population growth but created significant social issues like gender-selective abortions. The subsequent [gender imbalance](#) also meant fewer females available for marriage. This imbalance plus the increasing numbers of successful, highly educated young women choosing to remain single and follow their careers has [exacerbated](#) the overage of men looking for wives. Bafflingly, the PRC government and society blame the women, their own citizens, for their social engineering failures — officially labelling them “[leftover women](#)” (sheng nu) — versus putting any blame on their governmental policies.



Women in the PLA: Only “beautiful scenery”?

While technically allowed to serve in combat units since the mid-1990s, a high proportion of women in the PLA are still [limited](#) to all-female sub-units or admin roles and are [subject](#) to onerous recruiting

restrictions. Although small, low-level female subunits seem to have female commanders and political officers, there are only rare instances of females leading mixed-gender units at higher levels.

Part of the PRC's motivation in easing restrictive policies is to give the [appearance](#) of being in step with or even ahead of other nations in integrating women into the force. Although some Chinese academics have pointed out that the changing nature of warfare allows women to contribute more equally and may even provide certain inherent advantages, actual integration is uneven and numerous examples of discrimination persist. For example, official media [praising](#) women's accomplishments in the military frequently characterize female officers and enlisted personnel in the barracks or on the battlefield as "[beautiful scenery](#)."

More glaringly, women recruits are [subjected](#) to a more rigorous and selective recruitment process than men, including requirements that are irrefutably based on gender stereotypes. In 2009, just a year before the PLA commissioned its first female fighter pilots, the force instituted a female-specific recruitment assessment, which included the criteria of having a "[talent](#)" or "special skill." In practice, this meant that women seeking to enlist in the PLA were required to perform in a "talent show," often involving a song or dance routine, for their recruiters. Although the latest female recruitment procedures don't explicitly include these requirements, there continues to be an [unspecified](#) "comprehensive quality assessment" that may serve as cover for gendered bias.



Aspiring PLA recruit performs a fan dance during a recruitment interview for female soldiers in Beijing in 2009. Source: China Daily.

DIVERSITY IS A KEY USAF COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

"The inclusion of women in all roles provides the U.S. Air Force a key competitive advantage. Our ability to prevail in strategic competition hinges on harnessing the full diversity of thought, experience, and talents all of our people bring to the fight; we don't leave anyone on the sidelines simply because of gender."

– Brig Gen Jennifer Short
PACAF Chief of Staff

The U.S. Air Force (USAF) and the U.S. military view our ability to provide opportunity to all servicemembers as a competitive advantage that sets us apart from authoritarian regimes. In contrast to the PLA's approach, the U.S. military seeks equal opportunity for women to serve alongside men in all career fields. For instance, USAF led the Department of Defense in the appointment of [Sheila Widnall](#) as the first female secretary of a U.S. military department in 1993, followed by former PACAF commander General [Lori Robinson](#) who became the first female four-star general officer to command a combatant command. This month, President Biden [nominated](#) USAF General [Jacqueline Van Ovost](#) to become commander of U.S. Transportation Command. If confirmed, she will be responsible for global transportation missions using both military and commercial assets.

This spring, PACAF is hosting the first Pacific Women, Peace, and Security Symposium. Participants will gather from around the world to engage in conversation about diversity, inclusion, and the meaningful participation of women in the armed forces. This symposium provides a unique opportunity for PACAF to share stories, learn from our partners, and promote a more inclusive future.



A monthly review of competition thoughts and activities from PACAF's

STRATEGIC
COMPETITION TEAM