

A New Chinese First Lady: Is There Systematic Development?

by

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

By examining the personal characters and political performances of leaders and their spouses in both China and the U.S. during the last quarter century, my thesis addresses the question of whether the First Ladyship in China has become a more important position and is attracting more attention from the public. It also considers similarities and differences with First Ladies that in the U.S. My argument is that although there have been certain changes of the role of China's First Ladies in recent years, they are largely not due to a systematic change in political institutions but rather depend on the First Ladies' background and the relationship with the husbands, especially in Peng Liyuan's case. Through investigating Peng Liyuan's background and performances as the current First Lady, my thesis also aims to reveal what to expect from the First Ladies of China in the future.

Dedication

To my dearest grandpa. May he rest in peace.

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1. Introduction

“The failure of political scientists and historians to consider the political role of first ladies neglects the role of a key player in the president’s inner circle.”¹ History has recorded many first ladies, from different times, and different countries, who shed influence on national affairs directly or indirectly. Throughout their lives, we can explore how they played their roles as First Ladies and where their positions are in the presidency.

1.1 A New First Lady in China

Unlike most of the First Ladies in the history of People’s Republic of China who were standing behind their husbands and always remained silent, the current First Lady, Peng Liyuan, President Xi Jinping’s wife, has become a well-known public figure after Xi took office in 2013. She has delivered public speeches at home and abroad, including a speech in English at the United Nations on the education to women and children. She also accompanied President Xi during many foreign visits, to introduce the Chinese culture to the countries they visited as well as to meet with the local people and to advocate for public enterprises such as fighting against HIV.

Though in many countries, it is common for First Ladies to be involved in social events and politics, in China, on the contrary, it is rarely seen. The common appearance of a typical Chinese First Lady is that they, such as Peng Liyuan’s last two predecessors, Mrs. Hu and Mrs.

¹ Karen O’Connor, Bernadette Nye and Laura Van Assendelft, *Wives in the White House: The political influence of first ladies*, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Summer, 1996.

Jiang, were standing beside their husbands and smiling but were otherwise like the presidents' shadow, when visiting foreign countries.

However, Peng Liyuan, as famous folk singer and the president of the People's Liberation Army Academy of Art and thus has already lived in spotlight for years, differs greatly from her predecessors. She has long been used to appearing as a public figure. That may be one reason why the media is so interested in every event she attends as the First Lady. They call the way she dresses, speaks, and behaves, as "Liyuan Style".

After seeing a different First Lady, both the mass media and scholars pay close attention to the "Liyuan Style" phenomenon. Many of them are excited about the new First Lady. They talk about her taste in clothes, her elegance, and the stories of the couple. Beyond the superficial aspects, some scholars are investigating the difference of the ways different countries see their First Ladies and the reasons underlying it. For example, some scholars notice that the U.S. media focuses more on a First Lady's policy position and her influence in politics than the Chinese media. Considering the history and the successful practice U.S. First Ladyship enjoys, the comparison between U.S. First Ladies and Chinese First Ladies becomes the one people would like to do comparative research.

Although Chinese scholars hold different attitudes towards the different aspects of this topic, they have some idea in common: most of them optimistically see the new First Lady as a symbol of systematic development in Chinese leadership and are expecting for more active First Ladies in the future. Whereas I hold the opposite opinion, "Liyuan Style" is largely a special

phenomenon based on her relationship with President Xi and a special position she has stood as a celebrity.

1.2 Who is First Lady?

When speaking of a First Lady, people usually refer to the wife of a head of state, who can be a president, a chairman, or a prime minister. However, there are some exceptions. When a head of state is single or his wife is unable to fulfill the responsibilities which are expected from her, then a female family member, such as the leader's daughter, niece, daughter-in-law, or even a female close friend may serve as the First Lady. For example, in the Thomas Jefferson administration, Martha Jefferson Randolph, President Jefferson's daughter, and Dolley Madison, whose husband was then the Secretary of State, both served as First Ladies because Jefferson's wife had passed away.

In very few cases, since the way people define marriage has been changed recently, a First Lady can also be a same-sex partner, such as the former Iceland Prime Minister Johanna Sigurdardottir's wife Jónína Leósdóttir. In other circumstances there is no First Lady because the spouse of a head of state is a man. The husband of the Chancellor of Germany, Joachim Sauer, is called "the First Gentleman" by the media. If Hillary Clinton proves victory after the sword is sheathed, the American people will have a First Gentleman for the first time, and interestingly, who also used to be a president once. Since no such cases in China or the U.S. occurred during the past quarter century, this thesis will only talk about First Ladies who are wives of male leaders.

2. Systematic Development or Not?

Since in China, a politically active First Lady is rarely seen, it will be difficult and also unconvincing to tell whether the recent change is a product of systematic development in political institutions, if we only focus on Chinese First Ladyship experience. To make the argument more solid, I believe it is necessary to analyze how the First Ladyship in another country in the same period, the U.S., where the First Ladyship has long been an important issue in the views of the public, which will help us have a more fair judgement on Chinese First Ladyship. Ideally, after the following section, we can draw a clear picture of a U.S. First Ladyship: how do people define a “successful” First Lady? What people would expect from a First Lady? What makes a First Lady stand where she is?

Though a First Ladyship is inevitably influenced by its own political system and political culture, it is neither “power sharing”, nor “co-presidency”, but a kind of soft power, the essence of which is more or less like each other. So when we choose a comparison, we do not have to pick the First Ladyship of a country which shares similar political convention with China. In this case, the author chooses the U.S. First Ladyship as comparison due to its long-history experience and mature running mode.

After making analysis based on the comparison, I hope to have an answer for the following questions: How much prominence does the First Lady have, both in the U.S. and China? Specifically, how, and in what ways, does a First Lady shed influence on policy arena, including domestic public policy and foreign policy? Does a First Lady influence the public

image of her country internationally and how? How do we define the success of a First Lady and the First Ladyship, merely being a good “Lady” or an active (forgive me to use the word) “co-President”, or in other case, maintaining a balance in the middle?

2.1.1 The U.S. First Ladyship

In the U.S., the term “First Lady” was firstly used in Dolly Madison’s eulogy, in which the President Taylor referred to her as “our first lady for a half century”¹ the conception of which then became popular in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century.

As the spouse of the most powerful man in the nation, a First Lady naturally attracts much attention domestically and abroad. People may have to look up on the Internet when asked ‘Who is the current Vice President’, but the First Lady’s face would come up to their minds immediately when heard of her name. Till now, the Vice President Joe Biden’s Facebook profile page has 870,000 ‘like’s while Michelle Obama’s Facebook profile page has more than fourteen million ‘like’s.

Being loved by the camera, a First Lady has always been the media’s target. Fashion magazines see a First Lady as their “eye candy”, talk about her clothes and bags, and make comments on her taste. Jacqueline Kennedy’s Chanel suits and her elegant French style gained her much compliments, while Laura Bush, though also a graceful lady, brought criticism to herself because the media suspected that the taxpayers were paying for her luxury designer

¹ Found in Smithsonian Institution’s First Ladies Exhibit at the Museum of American History.

clothes. Not only a hot topic by her own people, when a First Lady visits abroad, no matter alone or with her husband, she can always easily hit the headlines in the local newspapers.

However, a First Lady is far more than a fashion icon. The First Ladyship has a long history in the United States. The first duty falling upon a First Lady is maintaining and promoting the American style of the White House it is. In addition to the decoration of the White House, a First Lady serves as the hostess of the state dinners, social parties and important political receptions. From Mrs. Washington welcoming ordinary people to Executive Mansion to have dinner, to Dolly Madison establishing political networks through her “dove parties”², First Ladies help presidents build image and gain loyalty.

Besides making a political influence through their social skills, some First Ladies were directly involved in politics. Mrs. Johnson was called “my dearest running-mate” by President Johnson. Someone criticized Mrs. Carter with anger that “I voted for Carter, not his wife!”³ Eleanor Roosevelt, her enthusiasm in social events fighting for human rights and her active role in policy-making during the Franklin Roosevelt administration impressed generations.

Before the twentieth century, a First Lady could hide behind her husband, to cater for the people’s expectation of “being a good wife and a good mother”. However, ever since, even the most traditional First Lady has to learn how to be a public figure and how to deal with politics and media, especially “First Lady of the World”, Eleanor Roosevelt, who “cast such a

² C.S. Anthony, *First Ladies: The Saga of the Presidents’ Spouses and Their Power, 1789-1961*. New York: William Morrow, 1990.

³ Washington Star, A11, 3 August, 1979

long shadow that even her most traditional successors have felt pressured to be more active than they wished”⁴.

A salient example later was Hillary Clinton, a woman who was so successful in her own career and so ambitious that her husband included her in his presidential campaign slogan “Buy one, get one free”. According to a close observer, only five of eighteen First Ladies remained outside the Presidents’ political circle during the twentieth century⁵. Passively or actively, a First Lady is part of the Washington City politics.

Interestingly, though a First Lady is one of the most notable people close to a President, the social and political influence employed by the First Ladyship is still uncertain and ambiguous, which thus has sometimes been easily underestimated or ignored. One reason is that the First Lady holds no executive power, and there are no constitutional or legal provisions with respect to the duties of the First Ladyship that she can formally follow. The prominence of the First Ladyship is a mix of traditional practices and the agreement between Mr. and Mrs. President, sometimes also influenced by the contemporary political atmosphere. The willingness and capability of First Lady herself of course also play as a crucial factor in characterizing her potential role.

In addition to the lack of clear institutional arrangement, the relevant scholarship regarding the First Ladyship has also been relatively lacking compared with that on the

⁴ Gil Troy, Mr. and Mrs. President? The Rise and Fall of the Co-Presidency. *The Social Science Journal*, Volume 37, Number 4, 2000.

⁵ Allida M. Black, The Modern First Lady and Public Policy: From Edith Wilson through Hillary Rodham Clinton, *OAH Magazine of History*, Spring, 2001.

Presidency. Indeed, the nature of the “prominence ingredients” leads to the difficulty of telling what a First Lady can and cannot do, and of judging how to define a “successful” First Lady. However, we are living a life where individuals, especially public figures have nowhere to hide. Their thoughts and deeds will easily make influence or impact on people. Under such circumstance, the First Lady is inevitably more influential and powerful in social issues, which also calls for more studies on it.

Although in such underplayed position like other female issues, the First Ladyship in the U.S. is still largely a good example that First Ladies in other countries can learn from. After Lady Martha Washington appeared on the stage, First Ladies, as well as their husbands, have been together creating a unique tradition of the U.S. First Ladyship, meanwhile each one of who contributed to exploring the prominence of U.S. First Ladyship in her own way.

2.1.2 Method

In this thesis, I will investigate whether the First Ladies of America tried to instill their own ideas and thoughts into politics arena and if yes, how did they do that, if not, how they acted as supporting partners, during last thirty years, that is to say, from Nancy Reagan to the current First Lady Michelle Obama. In terms of each First Lady, the author will identify important issues she involved in, which include chairing task forces, traveling internationally, championing social causes, hitting campaign trails, and so on.

Specifically, the author would use the questions (variables) such as, what is the staff number of the East Wing? How many public speeches a First Lady gave per year? How does a

First Lady's agenda look like? Did a First Lady initiate or participate in organizations? Did she directly involve in policy decision setting?so on to try to measure the public attention of a First Lady.

Additionally, the author will select a representative issue of a First Lady, and examine how she employed influence through the issue, for example, Mrs. Reagan and her "Just say no" project, Mrs. Clinton and her most famous and controversial Medicare project, to gain a more insightful view of the First Ladyship.

Furthermore, I intend to explore the development of the U.S. First Ladyship during the period, by comparing the roles these First Ladies have played, how they similar to as well as different from each other, to try to give answers to the questions listed at the beginning of the second section of this paper.

2.1.3 From Nancy Reagan to Michelle Obama

Nancy Reagan, the "supporting actress"

Nancy Reagan entered the White House in a negative tone by ordering expensive china using private funds and quickly earned herself a title "Queen Nancy". According to a comment from National First Ladies' Library, "The combination of the redecorating, new china set.....in addition to her attendance at the royal wedding of Prince Charles and Princess Diana of England in 1981, and her acceptance of free clothing from designers led to the creation of a

public relations dilemma.”⁶ She seemed not experienced in telling when is a good timing, to do these things when the nation experienced economic recession and naturally people’s dissatisfaction.

But Mrs. Reagan soon realized her mistakes and the potential impact on her husband’s reputation, she revised her behavior and then served as her husband’s “protector”. “She used her weekly lunches with George Will to defend presidential conduct and attack presidential critics.”⁷ After the horrible attempted assassination in 1981, Mrs. Reagan felt protective of her husband, she “made it her concern to know his schedule: in what public venues would he be speaking, before what groups, at what time, as well as with whom he would be privately meeting.”⁸

Nancy Reagan’s most important project was “Just say no”, which aimed to promote drug education and prevent young people from using serious drugs. She not only traveled across the country to champion her project, but also organized a conference in the White House inviting First Ladies from other countries to protect children and young people from drug abuse along with her. She also became the first First Lady to address a United Nations Assembly on anti-drug abuse and drug trafficking. At last, President Reagan signed a drug enforcement bill into law which Nancy Reagan considered as her “personal victory”⁹.

⁶ “First Lady Biography: Nancy Reagan”, *National First Ladies Library*. Retrieved 8 March, 2016.

⁷ Black, The modern first lady and public policy.

⁸ “First Lady Biography: Nancy Reagan”, *National First Ladies Library*. Retrieved 8 March, 2016.

⁹ Ibid.

She did make influence on the politics, not for her own, but for her husband. She suggested her husband to build personal relationship with Soviet Union leader Mikhail Gorbachev, while according to herself, it was because “it made no sense to her that the two leaders were not at least in open dialogue with one another”¹⁰. She did champion the “Just say no” project, but the initiative became her husband’s after she convinced him to do so. No evidence indicates that Nancy Reagan did what she did to make her own good, and what she wanted was her husband’s success and well-being.

Nancy Reagan, was a reliable “supporting actress” around her husband during the Reagan administration. According to James G. Benze, Jr, in his book *Nancy Reagan: On the White House Stage*, he concluded, “The first lady scripted various aspects of specific policies, but with her husband’s presidency but never in her own interest. She was concerned not with specific policies, but with her husband’s political success. She decided what was best for President Reagan’s image, his reelection, and ultimately his legacy, and then convinced the president, often with the help of others, to heed her advice.”¹¹

Barbara Bush, Committed to her family

As a daughter of a publisher, Barbara Bush loved reading from her childhood and her most popular project as a First Lady is also about it: family literacy. She committed much efforts

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ James G. Benze, Jr, *Nancy Reagan: On the White House Stage*, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005, p140.

to eliminate illiteracy, served on literacy committees and chaired many reading organizations, and eventually she helped develop the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy.¹²

She met President Bush when she was very young (16 years old), and engaged before she went to college. Although the freshman college year “opened her perceptions about the world”, she also admitted that “her attention was not on academics but on her fiancé”¹³ in that war time. So she dropped out of college and soon got married to George Bush when she was twenty years old.

From her before-marriage life it can be seen that she is kind of person who would focus on her husband and children. After their marriage, she undertook responsibilities such as taking care of children, housekeeping and other things what a traditional housewife would do. Sometimes, she also did volunteer work in their community. Their two-year-old daughter Robin’s death, upset her so much that in her later life Mrs. Bush paid attention to the children who suffered from the same disease. She seldom expressed her own opinion in the public. In George Bush’s campaign, she “also avoided discussion of political issues and controversy throughout the campaign, claiming she did not know enough to discuss anything except to repeat and defend her husband's views.”¹⁴ Barbara Bush has been a traditional good wife and good mother for her lifetime.

¹² Lamar Brantley. Barbara Bush as a Role Model, *Rolemodel*. Retrieved 8 March, 2016.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20090228205608/http://rolemodel.net/barbarabush.cfm>

¹³ "First Lady Biography: Barbara Bush", *National First Ladies Library*. Retrieved 14 March, 2016.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Hillary Clinton, Into Politics

Hillary Clinton, as the First Lady from 1993-2001, also alumni of Wellesley College and Yale Law school, was one of the most active first ladies maybe around the world. She made history by becoming the first First Lady to hold a postgraduate degree, to have her own professional career up to the time of entering the White House¹⁵, to have an office in the West Wing, to win an elected office, and to run for president of the United States of America.

Mrs. Clinton's interest of politics can be traced back to her high school times when she and her friends collected evidence of electoral fraud in Chicago¹⁶. She volunteered and interned to campaign in high school for Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater and then in college for Governor Nelson Rockefeller and the latter became a turning point that she left the Republican Party thereafter.

Hillary Clinton cares about public affairs long before she came into the White House. In college, she advocated for anti-war and anti-racism programs. In Yale, she worked in Yale Child Study Center when studying law and after she got her J.D, she spent one year on children and medicine at that center. In her early Arkansas period before her husband became the governor there, she used to serve in several public affairs positions. In 1977, Rodham cofounded Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families and in the same year was appointed by President Carter to the board of directors of the Legal Services Corporation.

¹⁵ Hillary Rodham Clinton, *PBS*, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/biography/clinton-hillary/>

¹⁶ Hillary Clinton, *Living History*, Scribner, 1st edition, 19 April, 2004, p16-17.

As the first lady of Arkansas, Mrs. Clinton served as chair of the Arkansas Educational Standards Committee in 1983, on the boards of the Arkansas Children's Hospital Legal Services (1988–1992) and the Children's Defense Fund (1986–1992) and other positions serving the legal rights of women, children and minority groups. The legal practice experience as a lawyer and in public affairs, in addition to her academic background, made president convinced that she was capable of chairing the Task Force Clinton Health Care Plan.

Besides, Hillary Clinton had other accomplishments in initiating campaigns and projects as the First Lady, which included State Children's Health Insurance Program, Foster Care Independence Act, Adoption and Safe Families Act and so on. She devoting herself to public policy arena benefited a lot of people, gained her many supporters yet also brought controversy never been seen before. Opponents satirized the president couple as "co-presidents" and called them "Billary". Hillary Clinton tried to lower her profile but the criticism continued. The turning point was President Clinton's sexual scandal that after she claimed that she supported her husband, her approval ratings jumped up around 10% according to the Gallup data and hit her highest since she came into the White House.

Nevertheless, Hillary Clinton did not become a "First Lady model" that her successors feel pressured to follow her path. Judging from her experience, her achievements (or controversy) was mainly due to her own intelligence, enthusiasm and energy of politics, and the support from Bill Clinton.

Michelle Obama, A role model

Mrs. Obama is the first African-American first lady in the history of the United States. Like Hillary Clinton, Michelle Obama also holds Ivy League degrees, bachelor degree from Princeton and her J.D from Harvard, and also a successful lawyer before she went to the Washington city.

Table 1: The Number of Speeches & Remarks by Michelle Obama and Hillary Clinton

Name \ Year	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Michelle Obama ¹	66	86	98	176	76	106	78
Hillary Clinton ²	10	22	21	7	31	71	86	7

Note: (N) stands for the year in her husband's tenure.

1: The records come from the white house official website, "Speeches & Remarks"¹⁷, from President Obama took office till 26 March, 2016.

2: The records come from the white house, "Speeches by the First Lady"¹⁸, from President Clinton took office in 1993 till 2001.

¹⁷ Speeches & Remarks, the white house website, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-and-remarks>, latest time retrieved 26 March, 2016.

¹⁸ Speeches by the First Lady, the white house, http://clinton3.nara.gov/WH/EOP/First_Lady/html/general-index.html, latest time retrieved 24 March, 2016.

The White House records indicate two facts during the two Obama Administrations, the first one is the numbers of events, award luncheons, meetings the First Lady attended were relatively stable per year. Yes, from the table 1, we can see that in 2012, 2014, 2016 Michelle Obama had much more or much less speeches and remarks records than other years. The 2016 record can be excluded because it only contains 3 months (from January to present). In 2012, more than 50% speeches and remarks were presidential campaign involved, and in 2014, several remarks were the First Lady Obama endorsing democratic candidates in 2014 gubernatorial campaigns across the country. The second is Michelle Obama has remained a high exposure to the mass media. Her records of speeches and remarks are even more than Hillary Clinton (see table 1) who is famous for her involvement in public affairs.

The events Michelle Obama appeared include the following categories: hosting state dinners, advocating for her own projects, hitting campaign trails, attending political conventions, taking part in shows and awards luncheons, participating in workshops and delivering holiday messages.

Table 2: Initiatives of Michelle Obama

Initiatives	Year	Founder(s)	Content	Category
Let's Move!	2010	Michelle Obama	Focused on giving parents the support they need to make healthier choices for their kids.	Children/ Health
Joining Forces	2011	Michelle Obama Dr. Jill Biden	Works hand in hand with the public and private sector to ensure that service members, veterans, and their families have the tools they need to succeed through their lives.	Veterans/ Family
Reach Higher	2014	Michelle Obama	An effort to inspire young people across America to take charge of their future by completing their education past high school.	Education
Let Girls Learn	2015	Michelle Obama President Obama	Helps girls around the world go to school and stay in school.	Women/ Education



Figure 1 Mrs. Obama advocated for her initiative

Neither “aggressive” as Hillary Clinton, nor “traditional” as Barbara Bush, the current First Lady has become a real role model. From her remarks on the white house website, we can tell that she has remained a high exposure to the mass media and is focusing on women, healthy life style, anti-poverty and education which are her main four initiatives’ themes (see table 2).

Unlike Clinton’s “dominating” her initiatives and programs, Michelle Obama is more like an advocator that, using her friend’s words, “she sees part of her leadership role as being a good example and role model to others across the country” and “this is something that she

found important to her family,” Ms. Frye said, “She wanted to take that message to a broader community”¹⁹.

2.2.1 Chinese First Ladyship

Comparatively, in some countries, the First Ladyship is still novelty, in our case, Chinese First Lady. The Chinese people used to have an elegant First Lady, Mrs. Chiang (Chiang Kai-shek’s wife), who not only was Mr. Chiang’s personal advisor, but also helped him build good relationship between Chiang’s government and western countries using her fluent English and social skills. The most famous case was her speech in front of the U.S. Congress to gain support from the United States to help Chinese people fight Japanese fascists, which I assume many Chinese would know of.

However, after that, most of the First Ladies in China remained silent. Usually, all the Chinese people can know of about their First Lady from the media is merely a sentence “Chairman visits X country accompanied by his wife”. During the first six decades of the history of P. R. China, there were only two exceptions. One positive exception is Mrs. Deng, who were her husband’s lifetime personal secretary and then a consultant in the executive office of Central Military Commission of PRC. The author will talk more about Mrs. Deng, her role as First Lady and as consultant, in the following content. The other exception is Qing Jiang (Chairman Mao’s wife) who, unfortunately, left Chinese people bad memories due to her role in

¹⁹ Christina Bellantoni, Michelle Obama setting in as a role model, *The Washington Times*, 10 April, 2009. <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/apr/10/michelle-obama-settling-in-as-a-role-model/>

the Cultural Revolution, which invoked the Chinese elites and ordinary people's long-history emotion of antipathy and exclusion towards women engaging in politics.

Till recently, it seems that the situation is changing. Peng Liyuan, Chairman Xi's wife, a nationwide known singer, distinguishes herself from most of her predecessors about whom you could only know their names, education backgrounds and so on from the media, by publicly involving in different kinds of social events and official foreign visits, as well as giving speeches in other countries and in front of international community. Madam Peng has been seen as the most high-profile First Lady since 1970's.

Nevertheless, the Chinese First Lady is very careful. Lady Peng did not engage in any issues which would be considered not suited to her feminine and mother-like character. Since she was already known by people as a singer, many of the events she took were on music education. Besides, the media could capture her advocating for children's and women's rights. In one word, she participated in not-controversial-at-all issues, which is similar to most of other First Ladies, yet also a little different from them due to China's special political environment.

Whenever she accompanied Chairman Xi to visit abroad, Lady Peng would discuss with her couture designer in advance repeatedly on how to dress decently and what kind of color or style would show respect to the local culture. Additionally, she only wore Chinese designer's clothes, only took Chinese designer's bags and Chinese brand smartphone.

Inspired by the new phenomena of "Liyuan Style", some Chinese scholars began to study the First Ladyship in China. Though most of the works focused on fashion part or

cultural communication, the author believe it is time to explore the possibility of Chinese First Ladies making more social and political influence, referring to the U.S. experience.

2.2.2 Method

For Chinese First Ladies, the period would be the same, from 1980's till now, during which China witnessed four First Ladies, Lin Zhuo (1978-1989), Mrs. Jiang (1989-2002), Mrs. Hu (2002-2012) and Liyuan Peng (2012-). Mrs. Jiang and Mrs. Hu seldom exposed to the public thus the information about them is much less than people would have expected. Then, the focus will be on Lin Zhuo and Liyuan Peng.

There is one thing about Zhuo Lin should be clarified in advance. She had been occupied several government positions for her lifetime, including as consultant for Central Military Commission of the People's Republic of China, during which she engaged in lots of important national affairs and gained good reputation acknowledged by her colleagues, but the author will not talk about her political influence infused by her as a senior officer of the government because that was about her own career as a politician, not a First Lady. At that time, many wives of political leaders worked in the army during the World War II and then the Chinese Civil War, and after the liberation, they continued to work at the government. Lin Zhuo was only one of them.

In terms of Liyuan Peng, the method the author uses to study her is a little bit different from U.S. First Ladies. Although she has publicly engaged in many social events and political affairs, and there are tons of information about her, very like the U.S. First Ladies in that way,

the unique media culture in China decides that what we see through the press is highly biased. Just raise two things as an example: few Chinese people know that Liyuan Peng had attended a special performance after the Tiananmen Square Massacre and sang a song titled “The most beloved people” to the troops²⁰. We can imagine that if a western president candidate’s wife has performed on a stage like that, he would less likely have a chance to be elected. When I searched key words 彭丽媛, 演讲, which means “Peng Liyuan, Speeches” on Baidu, a main search engine in China, there showed “some results cannot be shown due to regulation”, which was hard to believe and I wondered “why is that even ‘sensitive’”?

In China, when you search “Liyuan Peng” on the Internet, all the results showed are positive, as well as in academics. Therefore, I was very careful when collecting data regarding Liyuan Peng, only selecting fact-based data in Chinese news, for example, when and where she gave a speech. In addition, the author also collected information on Liyuan Peng’s earlier life when she was not First Lady to better understand how she become a different First Lady. Due to the biased news, it may helpful to know how she described her life as Xi’s wife (then Xi was a high-ranked political leader but not president), her attitude towards politics and so on.

²⁰ Tom Sykes, China Scrubs Tiananmen Square From Its First Lady’s Past, *The Daily Beast*, 10.21.15.
<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/10/21/china-scrubs-tiananmen-square-from-its-first-lady-s-past.html>

2.2.3 The Case of Peng Liyuan

A Famous Singer

Peng Liyuan, born on 1962, has been a popular Chinese folk singer since 1980's that almost everybody knows her name for her two-decade performing in China's New Year's Gala which is the most watched television program, until her husband's emerge as the frontrunner in early 21st century. Some critics point out that her songs were welcomed by people because it lacked variety in entertainment in earlier times, and her "propaganda songs" of pleasing the Communist Party would not be so popular if she entered the music world in this day and age.

That's maybe true, but she does have gained good reputation among Chinese people through her music career. Besides state-run shows, she has visited many places across the country to sing to people. When she and her colleagues from "Heart-to-Heart art troupe" visited Shangqiu, Henan Province in 1990's, tens of thousands of people came from their homes to watch their performance²¹, more audience than nowadays popular singer, such as Taylor Swift, and it was one of the many popular performances Madame Peng has experienced.

Not an independent singer, Madame Peng is a civilian staff of China's PLA and holds an equivalent rank of Major General and also the dean of People's Liberation Army Academic of Art. Many of her famous songs are about soldiers and her 2007 album's title is My Soldier Brothers. As a member in the army, she along with her colleagues visited many frontier border stations to give performances. Even though a station had only a few soldiers, Peng and her

²¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TWT0gv1m3Y>

colleagues would not sing carelessly, thus, she has also gained much respect and admire from the army.

As a member of the PCC

She also used to serve as a member of 8th-11th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference from 1992 until her husband assumed power, during which she made proposals on education in rural areas, helping children who had HIVs, youth's mental health in internet era and so on²². She gave speeches in these four conferences and advocated for more attention on youth and education.

Charity work at home and abroad

Since 2006, Madam Peng switched her focus from her music career to charitable activities. She has filmed several public service advertising themed in caring for children who suffered from HIVs and advocated for public attention and support for these children. As in Image 2, the little boy with Madame Peng, was abandoned when he was very little by his parents and had been living in a sty with pigs. Peng has given him much love, paid for his school fees and maintained a longtime mother-son relationship till now. The ad impressed many Chinese people.

²² 政协委员彭丽媛：三次提案为了孩子，《钱江晚报》，retrieved on 9 March, 2016.
http://qjwb.zjol.com.cn/html/2011-07/04/content_940688.htm?div=-1



Figure 2 Madame Peng and an Aids-orphan

Before and during the First Lady period, she has been serving as ambassadors and envoy in different organizations, as showed in Table 3. From the Table 3, we can see that Madame Peng has been focusing on tackling social issues such as gender equality, Aids-orphans, youth health and education, in one word, through which Peng helps promote public goods as well as build her image of a loving and responsible public figure and the First Lady.

Table 3: Madame Peng's Duties

Title	In Office	Organization	Work Contents
Goodwill Ambassador for Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS	3 rd June, 2011-	WHO	Raise international attention on these two diseases; advocate for stronger action to ensure those in need can access prevention, care and treatment services.
Special Envoy for the Advancement of Girls' and Women's Education	27 th March, 2014-	UNESCO	Empower girls and women through quality education; fight inequalities in education.
Goodwill Ambassador for Tobacco Control	October 2009-	Chinese Association on Tobacco Control	Unite extensively with local tobacco control organizations and voluntary workers of all sectors for participating and promoting the national tobacco control activities.
Goodwill Ambassador of "For the Future"	2004-	The committee juvenile crime	Participate in campaigns of preventing juvenile crim.

A "traditional" woman and Xi's admirer

Before she became the First Lady, she was high-profile as well as, ironically low-profile. For the former, that is because you can see her performance in every important state-run shows and I believe every Chinese older than 20 can sing at least one of her songs; for the latter, she never participated in commercial ads and seldom took interviews. In the few interviews, her humble voice and soldier-like qualities made a good impression on the audience. Her

motherhood character and commitment to her family also gained her many supporters. She said in a talk show that she enjoyed cooking at home, bargaining at markets and housekeeping²³.

At meanwhile, Madame Peng sees her husband as her own idol. In a 1999 interview in Hong Kong, when asked “Does your husband feel pressured to have a celebrity like you as his wife? (at that time, Peng was really famous while few people knew Xi’s name)”, she seemed a little surprised and said, “Not at all. He is way better than me, and I have admired him since we married”²⁴. And she admitted that though her career was successful, she considered herself as a very traditional woman and a “little woman” in front of her husband.

The Chinese leader loves his wife in his own way. In an interview when he was still the governor of Zhejiang Province, he admitted that he gave Peng a long-time phone call at least once a day²⁵. In a hilarious, widespread video, President Xi began waving his hand after catching his wife’s severe look to tell him to do so²⁶.

As a confidante

Besides her charity work, Madame Peng devoted herself to a “full-time career” as President Xi’s confidante. In China, the most discussed and focused on speeches and remarks of Madame Peng is listed below in Table 4.

²³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w_Eq-_mnkcY

²⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TWT00gv1m3Y>

²⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yWzluYJacvc>

²⁶ Sarah Carty, Now We Know Who Really Runs China, *Daily Mail*, 12 November, 2014.

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2832346/Now-know-REALLY-runs-China-Lady-Peng-Liyuan-tell-husband-Chinese-leader-Xi-Jinping-wave-crowd-one-stern-look.html>

Table 4: The most famous Speeches & Remarks of Madam Peng as the First Lady

Time	Location	Event	Note
23 rd March, 2013	Moscow, Russia	Visited a local orphanage.	President Xi's first foreign visit after took office.
21 st March, 2014	Beijing, etc, China	Met with Michelle Obama and accompanied her family take a 4 day tour.	Michelle Obama's first trip to China
27 th March, 2014	Paris, France	Nominated as the Special Envoy for the Advancement of Girls' and Women's Education	
11 st November, 2014	Beijing, China	Advocated for a better world for disabled people along with other leaders' wives.	The 22 nd Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Economic Leaders' Meeting
26 th September, 2015	New York, USA	Gave two speeches on education for women and girls at U.N.	Speeches in English.
5 th December, 2015	Johannesburg, South Africa	Delivered speech that China will consistently support African countries in fighting Aids.	Johannesburg Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation.
December, 2015	Harare, Zimbabwe	Visited the orphanage created by the First Lady of Zimbabwe.	

We can tell from Table 4 that the most followed news about Madame Peng after she came into Zhongnanhai (中南海) is regarding regional or international affairs. From media's perspective, considering the news censorship in China, it is safe to say that the mass media in China pays more attention, if it is not "all attention", to First Lady's overseas activities, thereby the current function of the First Ladyship is more of a "international name card of China".

2.3 Discussion

In the U.S. case, during the past four decades, each First Lady contributed to her husband, her family and the nation, in her own way, some focused on family, some engaged in social causes and some got more interest in politics. There is no sign that the First Ladies are becoming more and more politically involved or otherwise. The First Ladyship is a kind of convention with visible as well as invisible boundaries within which First Ladies take responsibilities and fulfill duties. A few of them may stand out in some aspects, but only with their special characteristics and capabilities, the support from presidents plus maybe the push from special events. The First Ladyship can be seen as an extension of the presidency, yet in no cases "co-presidency".

In China, "The image of the Communist Party used to be very dull and the leaders behaved like robots as a part of the state machine with no personal charm at all", said Li Yinhe, a sociologist at the Beijing-based think-tank the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and "Peng Liyuan is expected to bring something different to the leadership"²⁷.

Madame Peng has been a public figure for a long time, and she is not just a normal welcomed public figure, but one serves in the army and used to be a member of political consultative conference, which in other words, she knows how to deal with the public and the mass media to promote her own and the couple and the Communist Party's positive image, such advantages few people would have.

²⁷ Peng Liyuan: Folk singer who became China's first lady, *BBC News*, 5 June, 2013. Retrieved on 18 March, 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-20321610>

Around the world, China's rise has brought both positive and negative influences. Some people are impressed with the development of Chinese economy, while other are outrageously saying "Chinese are stealing our jobs" or criticizing its lacking of free speech in China, bad human rights situation and so on. Also, not all Chinese are happy with their country's accomplishment. Some of them are disappointed with the huge gap between the rich and the poor. Others' feelings are more complicated that they, maybe we can call them "patriots", are still trapped in old time feelings of shame when China was weak and invaded or sanctioned by other countries, thus believe is not strong enough. And interestingly, Madame Peng can please all of these four categories of people, at least in some aspects.

Madame Peng's elegant and loving image eases the bad impression some people hold towards China that they see a charity-devoted First Lady who can speak English breaking the stereotype of Chinese leadership and even as a symbol of change in political environment. According to Hood, a celebrity studies scholar, "Now Peng is not simply a celebrity, but a player in redefining China's modernity and moral character, and is thus a player in helping address a crisis of CCP credibility. It is here where Peng is potentially of the most use to the state, as many netizen comments about Peng's moral fortitude and untainted background reflect"²⁸.

²⁸ Johanna Hood, Peng Liyuan's humanitarianism: morality, politics and eyeing the present and past, *Celebrity Studies*, Volume 6, Issue 4, 2015.

The Chinese people who are disappointed with the Party or the government, overlapped with minority groups, may find comfort in Peng's feminine and mother-like qualities since she is advocating for eliminating injustice and inequality which makes them believe the First Lady is caring about them. And Chinese who believe our country is still not strong enough and being bullied by western countries, are proudly to see our beautiful First Lady appearing on the international stage and they claim that Peng is winning honor for her country. After Peng's first time visiting abroad, a lot of headlines used the word 扬眉吐气 (a feeling of pride and exaltation). Madame Peng's selection of local brands smartphones, designer clothes was catering for that kind of pride, too.

However, Peng is an example with unique experience and qualities that make others difficult to follow. Some people comparing Madam Peng with former French First Lady Carla Bruni which if I may say, is far from reality. Maybe they share something in common that they are all celebrities and all have good taste in clothes, but that would be all. If Peng was just a famous singer, she would not be able to get support from the public and the elites with such a high-profile.

The whole political environment has not changed. Short time after Xi took office, lots of his current (and potential) political enemies were swiped through a big national anti-corruption movement. Many young people feel more and more disappointed with government's censorship and Internet block. Take this year's New Year's Gala as an example. It contained too many singing and dancing performances which catered for Communist Party and after the

show, there were naturally much criticism in netizen comments. Soon, many of the comments were “automatically” deleted and the representative of Ministry of Culture sent a weibo (like tweet) that “it is not allowed to criticize the New Year’s Gala” which is deleted by now.

To the extent that only woman like Peng Liyuan can serve as a successful First Lady in China, the First Lady phenomenon is sarcastically not what people expect to be a turning point of Chinese First Ladyship. The phenomenon is the product of Peng’s own characteristics and it coincidentally satisfies the need for many people. She is an exceptional case in the history and the near future.

3. Two First Ladies before the revolution: Eleanor Roosevelt and Madame Chiang

In this section, I will draw some comparisons with particularly prominent first ladies in the two nations outside of this period, especially Eleanor Roosevelt in the US and Madam Chiang in China, before the revolution. This will provide evidence to test a hypothesis different from mine, which is that it is not the systematic development of the position of the first lady over time, such as through steadily increasing media coverage and consequent steadily increasing expectations about the first lady, but rather a few cases of particularly important first ladies, and their husbands have stood out as special relationships, just as, say, Hillary and Bill Clinton had a different and more equally prominent relationship with political leadership and the public than, say George and Barbara Bush.

3.1 Madame Chiang

Mayling Soong, also known as Madame Chiang, was born in a privileged family in the early 20th century in China that when most of the Chinese people were illiterate, especially women, she was very well-educated— she had a bachelor degree from Wellesley College with major in English literature and minor in philosophy. Her father Charlie Soong, entered the U.S. at age 15 and then attended Trinity College (now Duke University) with friend's help and he was Duke's first Chinese alumni. Mayling's siblings, were all sent to the U.S. by their father to get education at a very young age. After spending most of her childhood and youth in the

States, she admitted to her close friend Emma Mills that “The only thing Chinese about me is my face”¹.

Soong’s beauty, her family’s wealth and close bond with the U.S. were the first reasons Chiang Kai-shek wanted to pursue Mayling Soong. To persuade Mayling’s mother who did not approve the marriage, he promised to divorce with his wife and convert to Soong’s religion to become a Methodist. The future history proves that Chiang’s decision was more than right. Madame Chiang brought China changes in many aspects and helped him search overseas support during the World War II and Chinese Civil War with the Communist Party.

In the Republic of China (ROC), Mayling was appointed by her husband to take a position in Legislative Yuan from 1930-1932, Secretary-General of the Chinese Aeronautical Affairs Commission from 1936-1938 and became a member of the Central Executive Committee of the Chinese Nationalist Party in 1945. She initiated the so-called “New Life Movement” with Chiang, to resurrect Chinese traditional culture and morality, mixed with Christianity, to rebuild Chinese people’s pride towards its history and the nation. She also cared about “warphans” and built schools for orphans of soldiers.

During the World War II, Mayling served as Chiang’s personal advisor and his English translator. In 1943, she went to the States and delivered a speech in front of both Houses of the U.S. Congress². In the speech, she expressed her appreciation to the U.S. in fighting the

¹ Thomas A. DeLong, *Madame Chiang Kai-shek and Miss Emma Mills*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2007, p6.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dn5ldOrrDGE>

aggressors, and also stated the great importance of anti-Japanese Nazi in winning the anti-Fascism war, asking American people not to only focusing on Hitler and European battlefield³. Madame Chiang's elegant speech was skillfully addressed that she made Congressmen believe that supporting her home country was for their own good, which may thank to her English literature background and diplomacy skills.

3.2 Eleanor Roosevelt

Eleanor Roosevelt and Hillary Clinton, maybe the two most studied First Ladies, though inevitably controversial, they left treasured legacy through their work in politics. Eleanor Roosevelt is a special First Lady, not only because she is the longest-serving First Lady, but the time she lived in, that during her husband's tenure, she experienced the Great Depression, the development of civil rights, the World War II, and her husband's illness, from which Eleanor Roosevelt emerged, became a role model for women and fought for human rights as an energetic activist.

Influenced by her headmistress Marie Souvestre who was a feminist when she was young and motivated by her early times volunteering work among the poor minority groups, Eleanor Roosevelt's interest in helping others, especially women and people who suffered from social injustice, began to grow. Just a decade before she came into the White House, women's right of vote was approved by the 19th Amendment. And on the eve of World War II, the

³ Soong Mei-ling, Address to the U.S. House of Representatives, *American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank*. Retrieved on 29 March, 2016. <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/soongmaylingspeechtocongress.htm>

segregation of women's and men's roles was still powerful and would be powerfully revealed during the war when women took on industrial labor and filled "men's jobs" in factories producing war material⁴.

Realizing she can bring changes to a better world, Eleanor Roosevelt became an activist for civil rights. She was one of the only voices in the Roosevelt White House insisting that benefits be equally extended to Americans of all races⁵. In 1935, to address the unemployment, she created the National Youth Administration to help the nation's youth to get education and work opportunities. Eleanor Roosevelt was able to break with the antiquated ideology about women's traditional roles and move into leadership position"⁶.

During the FDR Administration, the First Lady was a pioneer in many aspects, including writing columns on newspapers, inviting only female journalists to her own media conference to contest the discrimination women journalists confronted in other places and so on that anyone knows the history would be impressed. However, Eleanor made clear that she was not advancing her own influence in policy circles.....she was furthering the goals of her husband which was an extension of his administration⁷.

⁴ Ruth Milkman, Redefining "women's work": The sexual division of labor in the auto industry during World War II, *Feminist Studies*, 8 (2), 337, Summer, 1982.

⁵ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The home front in World War II*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994, p162.

⁶ S. Irene Matz and Donald L. Stelluto, First Ladies: Leading Their Way, *Journal of Leadership, Accountability and Ethics* Vol. 12(3), 2015.

⁷ Mildred W. Abramowitz, Eleanor Roosevelt and the National Youth Administration, 1935-1943: An extension of the presidency, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 14 (4), 1984, p569.

3.3 Discussion

From 1930s to 1940s, the power of mass media was much weaker than now, however, a few First Ladies from different backgrounds stood out, while in the past few decades when public figures feel more pressured than before to expose to the public, there are still low-profile and very “traditional” First Ladies. Thereby, it is more challenging to serve as a First Lady than ever because on one hand, public figures have to face more pressure, yet on the other hand, and the unspoken fact does not change that “First Ladies are more vulnerable to the shifting popular winds, as they lack most of the political, official, and partisan anchors and insulation presidents enjoy”⁸.

⁸ Gil Troy, *Mr. and Mrs. President?*

4. Why they differ from each other and what Chinese First Ladies can learn from the U.S.'s

In conclusion, I believe the recent change of the role of Chinese First Lady is largely due to Peng Liyuan's background as a celebrity as well as a soldier, and the relationship between the President couple, rather than a systematic development in the political institutions in China. Madame Peng, as talked above, a famous folk singer, having good reputation among the public and serving in the army for her life, is the perfect person to be a First Lady in China whom the ruling class can trust and also need to redefine both the Chinese leadership image domestically and in the international community. Due to Peng's special experience and qualities, it is less possible to expect for a Peng-like successor.

However, she still explores the prominence of the Chinese First Ladyship, by deeply involved in charity work, introducing Chinese culture during her foreign visits, and shedding influence on social causes such as education, women and youth issues, which the First Ladies in the future can follow. Specifically, First Ladies as models of women and mothers, where they stand on investing in children's education and promoting gender equality, encourage others to accomplish.

At last, the author wants to remind readers to think about the "why issue". Why do Chinese people were not used to see, a First Lady in the past (even hated to see an active First Lady like Jiang Qing) while admire a First Lady now? Can Eastern history answer the question? In Europe, when talking about queens, we can think of Queen Anne from the House of Stuart,

Queen Victoria from the House of Hanover, Catherine the Great from Russia and so on, that they inherited their father's, brother's, or husband's title to take charge of the nation while in the five thousand years history of China, there was only one Queen, in Tang Dynasty, who illegally took the power, and maybe that is why her remarkable leadership was not valued by people until the twentieth century.

In several western countries, although after male, female royal member had the legitimate right of inheritance. On the contrary, in China women engaging in politics was seen as a signal of catastrophe. In each dynasty of the ancient times, there was always a same rule in the ruling class: no women, including all the royal family members, Emperor's wives, mother, and sisters, can talk about national affairs, otherwise, the woman who broke the rule, and her family would face the worst punishment.

In modern times, the history witnessed a powerful First Lady Jiang Qing, the fourth wife of Chairman Mao, also one of the culprits of the Cultural Revolution, during which she abused her power derived from her husband and committed serious persecution, even crimes against political leaders, intellectuals who were against her. After the death of Chairman Mao, her legitimacy was gone too and she and her "gang of four" were removed out of the leadership. The bad memories scare many ordinary people, as well as the ruling class. They tend to see a First Lady sharing power as a sign of recalling past memories: the former treat it as the herald of the cult of personality and the later treat it as encroachment of their own power.

Compared with developed countries, women's power in China is still weak. During a woman's whole life, she has to deal with discrimination in her family, her workplace, and the society. In many places of middle and Midwest of China, the usual expectation of a girl is to take care of her little brother(s), marry a man as a virgin, and bring up her child. She need not to excel in scientific subjects at school, she does not have to realize her own value and she will not be judged as a successful woman by others if she did not marry a "good husband", no matter how much she accomplished in her professional career. Most women used to see politics as men's game, as a result, women in politics is kind of weird. Of course, it is inappropriate to simplify a complicated issue within a few words. What I want to point out is that where women stand is an angle, through it we can further consider the role of a First Lady, not only seeing her as a woman but a woman in this specific culture.

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