

# China's Women Square Up to Political Challenge

By Ya Chen

**X**u Yan, mayor of Nantong City in East China's Jiangsu province is among more than 200 women mayors and vice-mayors in China's 500-odd cities.

"China probably has more women mayors than anywhere else in the world," says Zhang Ying, deputy secretary general of the Chinese Mayors' Society and vice mayor of Yulin City in the Guangxi Autonomous Region.

Zhang Ying says China's women mayors are generally younger and have higher education than their male counterparts, showing that voters seem to demand higher qualifications from women candidates. A recent survey showed 86 percent of 91 women mayor respondents to have graduated from college, in contrast to the fact that most illiterates in China are women.

This is because the feudal idea that men are superior to women is still dominant, says vice mayor Li Huifen of Tianjin municipality. Another factor may be the call by the national leadership in 1978 for the promotion of younger and better educated leaders. Most of the incumbent women mayors began their political careers after 1978.



One such official is Li Chuanfang. A graduate of the Chongqing Construction Engineering Institute in Southwest China, she is vice mayor in charge of urban construction in Shenzhen, China's first Special Economic Zone.

In her nine years in office, Li has turned Shenzhen from a small, bare town to a city of rising tower blocks and extravagant shopping centres that rival those of neighboring Hong Kong.

"China women, having been socially inferior to men for thousands of years – and this persists today – are better able to square up to adversity," says Li Yanhua, vice mayor of Dezhou City, Shandong province. Of the ups and downs of her 20 years in politics, she says, "I believe success will not come without upsets and tenacity."

Other troubles await women in political office. Not being given credit for one's achievements is what angers Wu Yi, now vice minister of the Foreign Economic Relations and Trade Ministry.

When she was elected vice mayor of Beijing in 1988, she was promptly rumoured to have married a high-ranking official, meaning it was the man's influence which led to her success. She was party secretary of the Beijing Yanshan Petrochemical corporation, China's largest petrochemical complex, before she ran for office.

"Why do they think a woman has to have some support from a man to be politically successful?" asks the vice minister who remains single.

If family burdens remain heavy for the employed woman, it is doubly so for a woman mayor who must not only be a competent

public administrator but also "a good wife and mother," points out Yang Qian, vice mayor of Langfang City in Hebei province. Yang Qian takes care of a crippled mother and her husband, an engineer who is not in good health.

Few can really be ideal in both roles, she says. "We just try our best."

So does Ruan Xueqing, vice mayor of Wuyishan City, Fujian province. She uses every "free" time to be with her husband and children, and does most of the household chores even when very tired. For her, a woman is not really successful "if she does not have a happy family."

Vice mayor Yan Aiying of Changzhi City, Shanxi province thinks women are hindered in their career climb by the personality trait of being "easily satisfied with the status quo." A survey of Shanxi's young and middle-aged women cadres shows that only 20 percent want to be promoted to

a higher position. Modesty is another handicap. "They do a lot of work, but say little," says Huang Qizao, deputy chairwoman of the All-China Women's Federation.

She also stresses that the number of women mayors is small compared with that of the men, which is about 3,000. Moreover, the responsibilities given them are "less challenging," such as culture, education and planning.

"So while women are encouraged to fight for themselves, the Beijing Women's Federation at all levels should give them a push and help them achieve higher goals" says Huang Qizao.

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## Feudal values continue to block women's greater political participation in China.

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