

**Peng Liyuan: China's First Lady in Diplomacy**  
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## **1. Introduction**

In March 2014, Michelle Obama, First Lady of the United States, made a formal visit to China. During her stay, she was warmly welcomed by China's First Lady, Peng Liyuan. The meeting of the two First Ladies received much attention from the mainstream media around the world, such as CNN, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, the *Guardian* and *Xinhua*. It was a historic moment in which the First Ladies of the two superpowers internationally demonstrated their status as representatives of each country in line with the strategic U.S.-Sino relationship. This demonstrated the increasingly important role of First Ladies as diplomats in international scenes.

Considering that First Ladyship cannot be separated from presidency, it is not too surprising that First Ladies have partially shared some of the roles presidents have played. A president is a personified symbol of a country and holds the collective administrative and governmental representation generally within a democratic electoral system; the term is often used by dictatorships too. In a democracy, a president is elected by the nation, represents the constituents, and is evaluated by the result of campaigns and elections. Therefore, a president is also a "chief diplomat" who represents the country's interests in international issues, while "foreign policy is shared with Congress and the president makes treaties with the advice and consent of the Senate" in the United States (Pfiffner and Davidson 2005, 2). As the spouse of a president, First Ladies have also served diplomatic roles, either by accompanying the president during official state visits, welcoming foreign summits, or by being the presidential envoy or ambassador (Watson 2000, 91).

In the U.S., defining the successful roles of First Ladies has long been controversial due to the absence of clear guidelines in the Constitution. Most of all, as she is not elected, the First Lady has faced criticism when she seemed to be over-active in politics. Finding her own balance between the traditional role as wife and an expanded role in the public realm has often been challenging. However, the U.S. First Ladies continued to extend their roles, and their high visibility in the international sphere occurred frequently along the long history of the U.S. First Ladyship since Martha Washington in 1789. Michelle Obama's international visit without President Obama this year was not the first case, as shown in Rosalynn Carter's trip to Latin America and Hillary Clinton's tour of South Asia.

On the other hand, Chinese leaders are not elected by the general public but are rubber-stamped by the National People's Congress (NPC), which used to make the Chinese presidency not hold any direct accountability to constituents. However, since Socialist China introduced its economic reform led by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s, it has attained capitalist characteristics and become involved in the international economy. And the Chinese public has become much more aware of the inside and the outside worlds through online channels, and developed communication technologies. Despite continuous censorship and the government's control, these changes have made Chinese leadership unable to ignore the domestic and international public opinion. When Xi Jinping took the office in March 2013, he made great efforts to soothe the Chinese public's fury about the increasing polarization between the rich and the poor by calling for a renewed campaign against corruption, and unexpectedly visiting a traditional Beijing steamed bun shop as a friendly gesture to average citizens.

With this trend, Chinese leadership is now more sensitive to maintaining a good reputation and meeting the expectations of the public. And this makes China's president and First Lady more likely to respond to the general public. With regard to the recent visit of Michelle Obama, Li Yinhe, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, said, "Peng Liyuan invited Michelle Obama in her own name to visit China; this is the first time. It makes China look like a representative government system. It has a more political flavor (Thompson and Wan 2013)." The more the international standing of China increases and becomes an important part of securing domestic political stability, the more influence and meaning the First Lady as a political symbol will have. Therefore, even with their different political systems, both the U.S. and China allow their First Ladies to be recognized as critical and symbolic political figures of their countries in a diplomatic way.

Peng Liyuan is at the center of this phenomenon in China. She has been called the "first" First Lady of China, because she is the new type of political wife who succeeded in a popular and conspicuous international debut by accompanying Xi Jinping on trips abroad and participating in advocacy activities. This is a totally different trajectory from the previous wives of Chinese leaders after Jiang Qing, Mao Zedong's last wife. Thanks to Peng Liyuan's pre-marriage career as a famous singer, her domestic popularity was already tremendous, which boosts her influence in advocacy and publicity across China.

As shown by the most recent First Ladies of the U.S. and China, it seems that their roles have stepped forward to a broader domain. Especially for China, Peng Liyuan's moves are forming a modern precedent of Chinese First Ladyship. Even though Peng did not need to go through campaigning and elections, as China is not a democracy, her First Lady role has improved diplomatic status so that it can help promote not only the international standing of China but also the domestic public's satisfaction toward their leadership. Therefore, it is meaningful to explore Peng Liyuan's First Ladyship in order to understand modern Chinese leadership, by categorizing role types developed in the U.S. and analyzing these with Peng Liyuan's case, with focus on her international visibility. This could further cast implications of the possible roles and constraints of Peng Liyuan as China's First Lady in its domestic and international politics.

## **2. First Ladyship of the U.S. and China**

### *2.1 First Ladyship of the United States*

The First Lady of the U.S. is constrained by a federal anti-nepotism law. However, Section 105 of the White House Personnel Act of 1978 formally authorized the First Ladyship in gender-neutral language, explicitly acknowledging the president's spouse as contributing to the presidency and the government, by being "designated" instead of being hired, appointed, or nominated (Borrelli 2011, 20). This designation has imposed the First Lady with the status as a "representative" together with her president-husband, mostly as a national hostess in accordance with the traditional perception of the gender role. Therefore, the First Lady in the U.S. has held the responsibility to communicate with the people during her husband's presidency.

The spectrum of roles that U.S. First Ladies have achieved has been researched and discussed by several scholars. MaryAnne Borrelli categorized the roles of the First Lady into three types. According to her, the First Lady can be a "symbolic representative" through management of White House events, "descriptive representative" as a role model for women, and "substantive representative" by holding appointive or honorary posts, lobbying state and national legislatures, or mobilizing far-flung issue networks such as economic development, social justice, health-care insurance reform, human rights, or childhood nutrition (Borrelli 2011, 13).

Robert Watson tried to analyze the U.S. First Ladies both vertically and horizontally. He vertically identified the six distinct generations of the American First Ladyship: from Martha Washington to Dolley Madison (1789-1817) as “the queenly First Lady,” from Elizabeth Monroe to Eliza McCardle Johnson (1817-1869) as a “constant hostess,” from Julia Grant to Ida Saxton McKinley (1869-1901) as “undergoing major cultural changes,” from Edith Roosevelt to Bess Truman (1901-1945) as “the modern First Lady,” from Mamie Eisenhower to Pat Nixon (1945-1974) as “an attractive, dutiful hostess,” and from Betty Ford to Laura Bush (1975-2009) as “the president’s political partner” (HowStuffWorks n.d.). He also horizontally suggested types of First Ladies according to “the degree of partnership existing in the presidential marriage”: full partner, partial partner, behind-the-scene partner, partner in marriage, and non-partner (Watson 2000, 138).

The general finding of scholarship is that First Ladies could not be free from the traditional gender role. As an unelected wife of the president, almost all First Ladies have faced dilemmas in defining their roles. It was disclosed by public opinion polls that “the public remains uncertain as to the exact roles and responsibilities desired of First Ladies; paradoxically, the result is that First Ladies are criticized if they are either too active or too passive” (Watson and Eksterowicz 2003, 10). Therefore, in reality, the roles of First Lady have been defined by various factors including her own personal belief or character, U.S. political partisanship, gender norm, and historical situations.

The [Table 1] below looks into the fourteen modern First Ladies of the U.S., from Lou Hoover to Michelle Obama, in order to facilitate comparative analysis with the recent rise of Peng Liyuan as the modern Chinese First Lady. They are arranged in order in consideration of their period, partisanship, focus of interest, positions, and activities they held. The contents were completed through careful selections from a variety of resources including MaryAnne Borrelli’s *The Politics of the President’s Wife*, Betty Boyd Caroli’s *First Ladies: From Martha Washington to Michelle Obama*, Robert Watson’s and Anthony J. Eksterowicz’s *The Presidential Companion: Readings on the First Ladies*, and *The First Ladies of the United States of America*, published by the White House Historical Association.

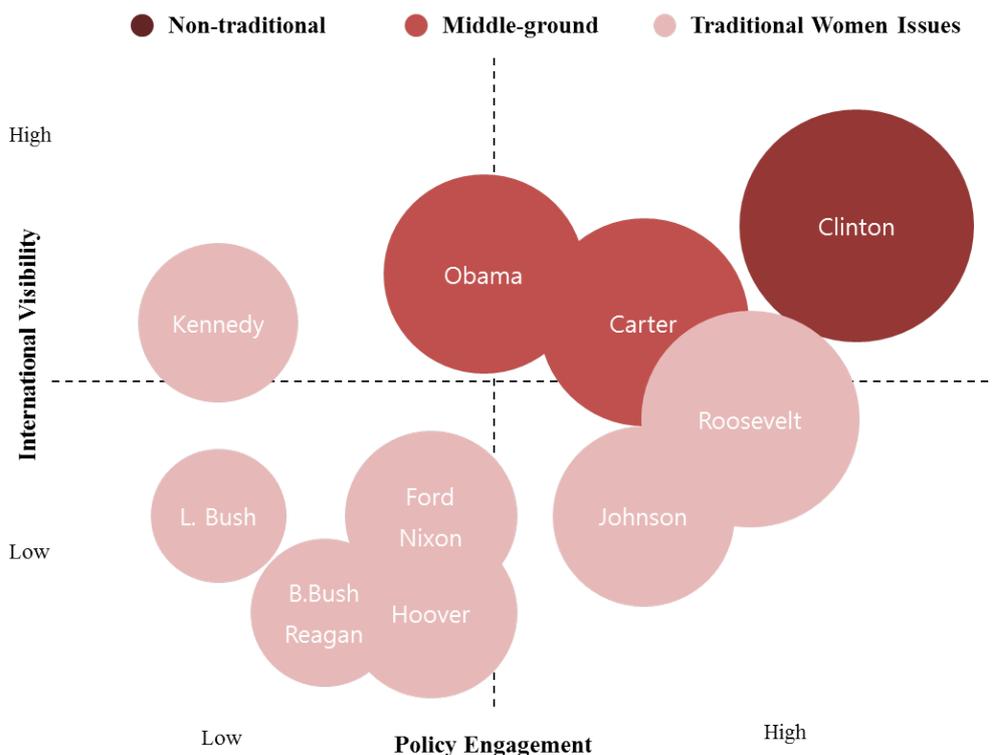
[Table 1] Modern First Ladies in U.S. History (1929-2014)

Name	Period	Party	Focus	Positions / Activities
Lou Hoover	1929-1933	R	Children, Women, Leadership Development	Hostess of reception open to the public on New Year's Day
Eleanor Roosevelt	1933-1945	D	Social Policy, Social Justice	Women's City Club League of Women Voters Women's Division of the New York Democratic State Committee Passage of protective labor legislation for women and children Assistant Director in the Office of Civilian Defense
Bess Truman	1945-1953	D	Not evident	Lobbied the president to increase funding for medical research
Mamie Eisenhower	1953-1961	R	Not evident	Not evident
Jacqueline Kennedy	1961-1963	D	Non-governmental	Forged public-private partnerships Restoration of White House for historic significance Foreign Trips. Popularity of her Fashion
Lady Bird Johnson	1963-1969	D	Environment, Civil Rights	First president's wife with a 'press secretary' Highway Beautification Act Advocate of the Head Start program First solo whistle-stop tour to promote the Civil Rights Act
Pat Nixon	1969-1974	R	Volunteerism, Children	Improved north-south dialogues internationally Member of the Committee on Employment of the Handicapped Issued Thanksgiving meals to marginalized citizens
Betty Ford	1974-1977	R	Civil Rights, Women	Lobbied for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment and for presidential appointments for women
Rosalynn Carter	1977-1981	D	Mental Health, Public Health	Honorary chair of the President's Commission on Mental Health Solo Travel to Latin America

Nancy Reagan	1981-1989	R	Drug Issue, Arts	Conducted a public and media campaign 'Just Say No' against drug abuse Renovation of the White House A Forum for young artists 'In Performance at the White House'
Barbara Bush	1989-1993	R	Adult Literacy	Funded and facilitated a series of literacy programs
Hillary Clinton	1993-2001	D	Children, Education, Health, Women, International Relations	Chair of the Task Force on National Health Care Reform Speech before the 4 <sup>th</sup> World Conference on Women in Beijing
Laura Bush	2001-2009	R	Reading, Child Mentoring, Women	Hosted a conference on child development to pass a bill for reading readiness programs and educational programs Honorary Ambassador for Literacy of the UNESCO
Michelle Obama	2009-Present	D	Mentoring, Childhood Health, LGBT Issues	Mom-in-Chief Let's Move campaign to prevent Children obesity

With the contents of [Table 1] taken into account, [Graph 1] has been shaped in terms of overall visibility, extent of agendas beyond traditional women issues, engagement in the policy process, and international visibility. The bigger the size of the circle, the more visible the role of the First Lady is in general. The darker the color of the circle, the more non-traditional issues the First Lady has taken as her focused interests. The right part of the graph means that the First Ladies are more engaged in putting their initiatives into the real policy process. The upper part of the graph demonstrates the First Ladies who broadened their roles to the international domain beyond domestic issues with higher visibility. The reason that the analysis focuses on international visibility is to facilitate the comparison between U.S. First Ladies and Peng Liyuan, whose recent rise is more related to international standing. Bess Truman and Mamie Eisenhower were excluded as their focuses of interests were not clear enough to be analyzed together.

[Graph 1] Role-Types of the U.S. First Ladies



Positioning, size, and color of the First Ladies in the graph are determined based on the contents of [Table 1] and additional resources such as First Ladies Study by the Siena Research Institute in collaboration with C-Span and The White House Historical Association (The Siena Research Institute n.d.). The graph is to visually suggest the pre-existing types of roles that the U.S. First Ladies have achieved, instead of numerically testifying their absolute gains in First Ladyship. The graph suggests a tendency that the First Lady who is more engaged in policy and highly visible in the international domain, also extends her role to non-traditional issues. The typical example is Hillary Clinton. Laura Bush is at the other end of the graph with non-policy and domestic focus, and comparatively less visibility, grounded in traditional womens’ issues. Michelle Obama shows her highly visible international standing, while keeping the middle ground issues with the balance of policy engagement. The result is quite interesting in that there is no certain chronological pattern.

## 2.2 First Ladyship of China

In and out of China, Peng Liyuan is called the “first” First Lady. This is because her high visibility as First Lady of China is a significant difference from the predecessors who were almost invisible or maintained silence in public. The low profiles of Chinese First Ladies

became typical after “the 1970s downfall of Jiang Qing, Mao Zedong’s last wife and widely-loathed member of the radical Gang of Four blamed for many of the excesses of the Cultural Revolution” (AFP 2012). Jiang Qing was a very politically active and controversial wife. She served as Mao’s personal secretary in the 1940s and head of the Film Section of the CCP Propaganda Department in the 1950s, later being appointed Deputy Director of the Central Cultural Revolution Group as well as a member of the Politburo in 1969; she lost support and justification for her political activities when Mao died in 1976, and was arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment (Landsberger 2008).

After experiencing and watching the undesirable end of a strongly political wife of the Communist Chinese leader, the subsequent wives of Chinese political figures chose to stay behind the scenes. Zhuo Lin, wife of Deng Xiaoping, often accompanied her husband on foreign trips of but stayed mostly mute; Jiang Zemin's wife, Wang Yeping, kept an even lower profile mainly because of health problems; Liu Yongqing, Hu Jintao's wife, also remained silent and was rarely photographed in public (French 2013). This is why there were few examples for Peng Liyuan to view as a role model of her First Ladyship in the history of the communist People’s Republic of China. The possible precedents of the recent role of Peng Liyuan as the modern Chinese First Lady can be traced back to Wang Guangmei, wife of Liu Shaoqi, and Soong Mei Ling, wife of Chiang Kai-Shek.

Liu Shaoqi became President of the PRC in 1959, completing his presidency in 1968 when he was expelled during the Cultural Revolution. Wang Guangmei was married to Liu Shaoqi already in 1945, and was later “widely known in China as its beautiful, articulate, sophisticated First Lady” (Barboza 2006). Wang was different from Jiang Qing in that she quite successfully balanced her role as First Lady. She was a secretary of Liu and a member of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Executive Committee of the All-China Women’s Federation during her First Ladyship: after she was released from prison in 1979, she became Director of the Foreign Affairs Bureau of the Chinese Academy of Social Science, a deputy to the NPC, and a member of the CPPCC National Committee (Wang Guangmei n.d.). She also followed Liu when travelling abroad on state visits to Afghanistan, Burma, Pakistan, and Indonesia in the early 1960s: she was sophisticated in her manner based on her knowledge of French, Russian, and English, as well as her career as an “interpreter during efforts by George C. Marshall to negotiate a truce between the Nationalist government and the Communist rebels” (Barboza 2006).

Similarly but more internationally, Madame Chiang is considered one of the 20th-century's greatest First Ladies, who was American-educated and from a wealthy and privileged family, and was the highly public face of China during the Sino-Japanese War with one of the world's most stylish and fashionable manners; "she appeared on the cover of Time magazine no less than three times" (French 2013). She was the wife of Chiang Kai-Shek, the leader of the Kuomintang (KMT) who retreated to Taiwan during Chinese civil war. She did not stay in the comfort zone of public silence or traditional women's issues. She initiated the New Life Movement (新生活運動); she was a member of the Legislative Yuan from 1930 to 1932 as well as Secretary-General of the Chinese Aeronautical Affairs Commission from 1936 to 1938, and a member of the Central Executive Committee of the KMT in 1945; she made several tours to the U.S. to lobby support for the Nationalists' war effort as well (Cultural China n.d.).

Since the separation, the PRC (China) and the ROC (Taiwan) have remained as separate political entities of a socialist dictatorship and a democracy. Therefore, Peng Liyuan, who is a First Lady of the PRC, still has difficulty in freely following the exact role of Soong Mei Ling. However, the modernized PRC after its economic reform and steady integration into an international order has opened a similar stage for their political figures to that of democracies. With its fast economic growth, China has experienced increasing interaction with other countries, especially with the U.S. as the two major powers of the world. In this sense, Soong Mei Ling's politically active but internationally and domestically popular status leaves implications for Peng Liyuan. Also, the case of Wang Guang-mei, who well served her First Ladyship before the chaotic Cultural Revolution, sheds some lights on the possible positive roles that First Lady of the PRC can achieve.

Despite the presence of Wang and Soong, the difference in specifying Peng Liyuan's First Ladyship lies in the gap of over 40 years between hers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the others' in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During those lost years of Chinese First Ladies, China experienced great changes in its economy and interactions with international society. At the same time, it witnessed the increasingly active public opinions of its own people while dealing with surfacing problems such as separatist movements, corruption, food safety, and environmental issues. And as mentioned above, the Chinese leadership, specifically Xi Jinping and Peng Liyuan, seems to perceive the importance of public opinion.

This is why Peng Liyuan's First Ladyship is new, compared to the previous Chinese First Ladies who were more taciturn, and even different from Wang's and Soong's. Even though Peng Liyuan may pursue the similar success of Wang and Soong in being called a sophisticated and articulate First Lady, her practices in accomplishing this goal has exposed much more internationally visible paths. More interestingly, the high international visibility of Peng Liyuan seems to have effectively influenced mainland Chinese in fortifying the positive assimilation of citizens toward their leaders. This can be interpreted as Chinese leadership trying to engage the domestic public by its increased international standing. The introvert approach is divergent from the extrovert one of the U.S. First Ladies who were actively visible on the international scene, such as Kennedy, Carter, Clinton, and Obama in [Graph 1]. The high international visibility of the four First Ladies of the U.S. was closer to expanding their foundations in domestic politics to the international sphere and actually reaching out to the foreign public. To understand this difference behind Peng's new type of modern First Ladyship is pivotal in comprehending the changing strategy and approach of the Chinese leadership.

### **3. Case of Peng Liyuan**

#### *3.1 Type of China's First Ladyship*

Peng Liyuan has led herself to an extended role of the Chinese First Ladyship. The roles she has achieved can be analyzed with regard to the four elements that were covered in [Graph 1] above.

First, she has extended her role into an international domain in many ways. Accompanying Xi Jinping on his international trips is the most evident case where the role is presented. Even though she is not the first who took a trip abroad as First Lady in China's history, the level of the foreign media's attention on her presence and the great welcoming from the visited countries are beyond those toward the previous political wives of China. Especially her stylish manner and polished fashion were enough to impress both the domestic and foreign public during her international visits. The press coverage of Peng Liyuan on Xi Jinping's first trip abroad as China's leader in March 2013 was "almost universally fawning": in London, The Telegraph talked of "the 'Kate Middleton effect' of China's new first lady" and Spain's El País dubbed her "La Mejor Modelo para China (The Best Model for China)" (Moore and Schache 2013).

Peng Liyuan accompanied Xi on the first foreign trip to Russia, Tanzania, South Africa, and Republic of Congo in March 2013, the second trip to Latin America and the Caribbean in May 2013, the third trip to the U.S. in June 2013, the fourth trip to Southeast Asia in October 2013, and the recent trips to the EU in March 2014 and to South Korea in July 2014. During her tours, Peng Liyuan has shown her refined manner of building relations with the counterparts of the other countries and participated in various programs through specific visits. For example, in Russia, she visited a Moscow boarding school for orphans and children estranged from their parents, saying she represents thousands of mothers in China; in Tanzania, she had a separate talk with the Tanzanian First Lady Salma Kikwete at the Women and Development Foundation, donating sewing machines, school bags, and other articles (China.org.cn 2013). Most of her activities have been photographed and posted through Chinese media such as China Daily or Xinhua. The details of her activities during the official state visits can be found in [Table 2] below.

[Table 2] Official State Visits of Peng Liyuan

Date	Country	Activities	Theme
March 2013	Russia	· Visit a boarding school for orphans & children	Education Children
	Tanzania	· A separate talk with the Tanzanian First Lady at the Women and Development Foundation	Women
	South Africa	· Visit a local music school in Durban · Visit a Zulu cultural village and enjoy local performance	Culture
	Republic of Congo	· Attend opening ceremonies of Marien Ngouabi University library and the China- Congo Friendship Hospital · Visit an orphanage in Brazzaville and meet the children especially infected with HIV	Education Children Health
May 2013	Trinidad and Tobago	· Visit a charity that assists children with intellectual disabilities · Perform together with local artists at the national performing arts center	Children Culture
	Costa Rica	· Visit the National Children's Hospital · Visit a coffee farm in Costa Rica	Children Trade
	Mexico	· Visit the Federico Gomez Children's Hospital with	Children

		Mexican First Lady · Visit Mexican broadcaster Televisa	Culture
June 2013	The U.S.	· Visit California's Palm Springs Art Museum	Culture
October 2013	Indonesia	· Visit a photo exhibition showing the history of friendly China-Indonesia exchange and cooperation	Culture
	Malaysia	· Attend a special food show with Malaysian First Lady · Visit Malaysian National Theatre	Culture
March 2014	The Netherlands	· Name a newly cultivated type of tulip as "Cathay" which is the old name of China in Holland	Culture
	France	· Named UNESCO envoy for women and girls · Visit an exhibition at the French-Chinese institute of Lyon	Education Women
	Germany	· Watch a friendly match between German and Chinese youth soccer teams in Berlin	Culture
	Belgium	· Visit the Musical Instruments Museum (MIM) and the Sax 200 exhibition · Attend an inauguration ceremony for a panda pavilion at Paira Daiza zoo	Culture
July 2014	South Korea	· Visit cultural relics including Changdeok Palace	Culture

Her international standing is recognized by her diverse advocacy roles as well. Even before she became First Lady in 2013, she was a volunteer for the government's work on AIDS in 2006, an ambassador for tobacco control in 2009, and has been a WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS since 2011. She also met Bill Gates and attended an anti-smoking campaign ahead of the 25<sup>th</sup> World No-Tobacco Day in Beijing in 2012. Most recently on March 27<sup>th</sup> 2014, she was named by UNESCO as a special envoy for the Advancement of Girls' and Women's Education during her visit to Paris (UNGEI 2014). This type of advocacy role cannot find a precedent in the history of the PRC's First Ladies. Therefore, Peng Liyuan seems to have clearly enhanced her First Ladyship from a domestic to an international level with a similar pattern of several U.S. First Ladies: Jacqueline Kennedy, who had international appeal with her classy fashion and charming manners, and Rosalynn Carter, Hillary Clinton, and Michelle Obama, who held international roles through foreign trips and various advocacy activities.

Even with the high-profile advocacy roles, however, Peng Liyuan's engagement in the actual policy process is quite difficult to evaluate as compelling. It is known that before her First Ladyship launched in 2013, her personal involvement in advocacy work played an important role in raising the profile of HIV/AIDS prevention and care among the provincial leaders in China, as proven by her submission of the "Proposal for Strengthening Psychological Care for AIDS Orphans" at the CPPCC (Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference) session in 2008; "as a devout Buddhist, Peng also allegedly persuaded Xi (then party secretary of Zhejiang Province) to organize a World Buddhist Conference in 2006" (Huang 2014).

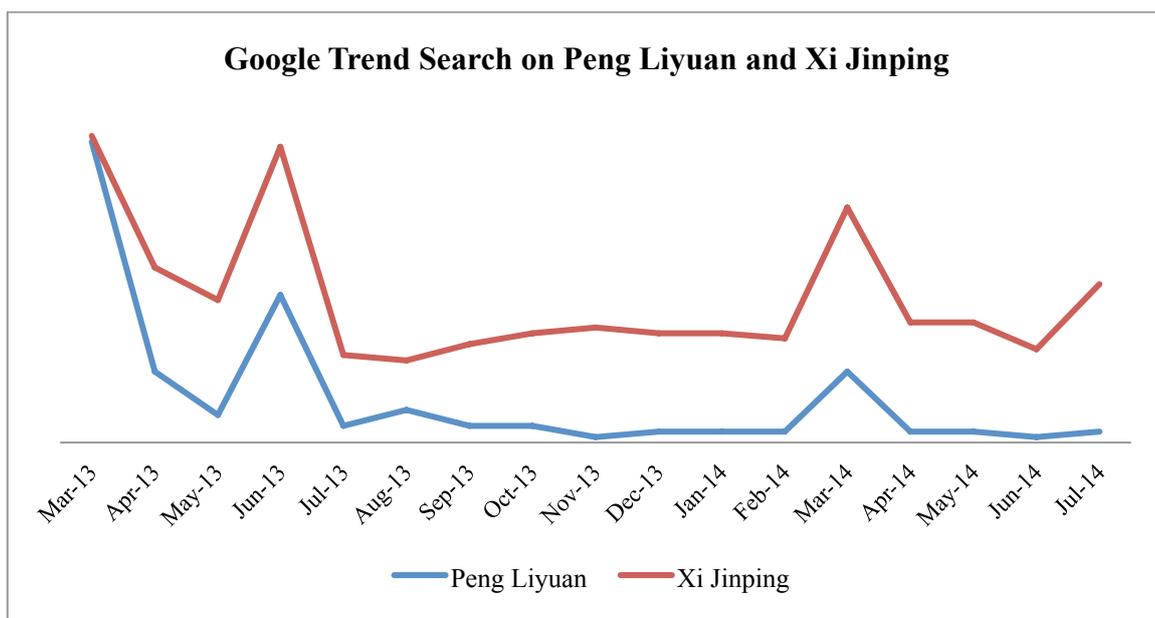
But since she formally started her First Lady role in 2013, it has been hard to notice any further substantive results in the policy-making process that was supported or influenced by her. This is mainly because she holds no official position besides her membership in CPPCC, which is not influential enough to practically contribute to policy decisions of the Chinese leadership, compared to the Politburo membership held by Jiang Qing in the past. Nonetheless, there can be broader policy-engaging activities in her First Ladyship ahead, considering that it has been only a year since she took her position as First Lady. For the time being, Peng Liyuan's role can be described as leaning to non-policy areas, similar to U.S. First Ladies such as Jacqueline Kennedy, Nancy Reagan, Laura Bush or Michelle Obama.

In terms of the extent of exploring non-traditional issues, Peng Liyuan is mostly staying in the traditional realm that is considered women's issues: especially arts, education, children, women, and health. With the expertise established through her career as a singer for over 20 years, she is now Dean of the People's Liberation Army Art Academy, showing her involvement in the art field. The programs she participated in during her foreign trips as shown in [Table 2] have also mainly emphasized education, culture, children, and women's issues. In 2005 CPPCC's session, she mentioned the educational program for children at the countryside and her strong dedication to support it (SINA 2013). The recent appointment as a special envoy of UNESCO manifests this focus of her interest as well.

Peng Liyuan's role as First Lady is greatly visible in that her debut and activities are comparatively much more recognized by both domestic and international audiences. Abroad, she was ranked as one of the world's most powerful women in 2013 by Time

Magazine, right next to Beyoncé and Hillary Clinton. She was also named in Vanity Fair’s 2013 International Best Dressed List as a fashion icon. Google keyword trend analytics shows international users’ interest in Peng Liyuan over time since the inauguration of Xi Jinping, based on news headlines as described in the [Figure 1] below.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the pattern of numbers about Peng coincides almost exactly with those about Xi Jinping, which implies that her First Ladyship has successfully cooperated with Xi Jinping’s presidency. Also, the numbers increased when there were state visits of Xi and Peng as shown in March and from May to July of 2013 as well as March and July of 2014.

[Figure 1] Google Trend Search on Peng Liyuan and Xi Jinping

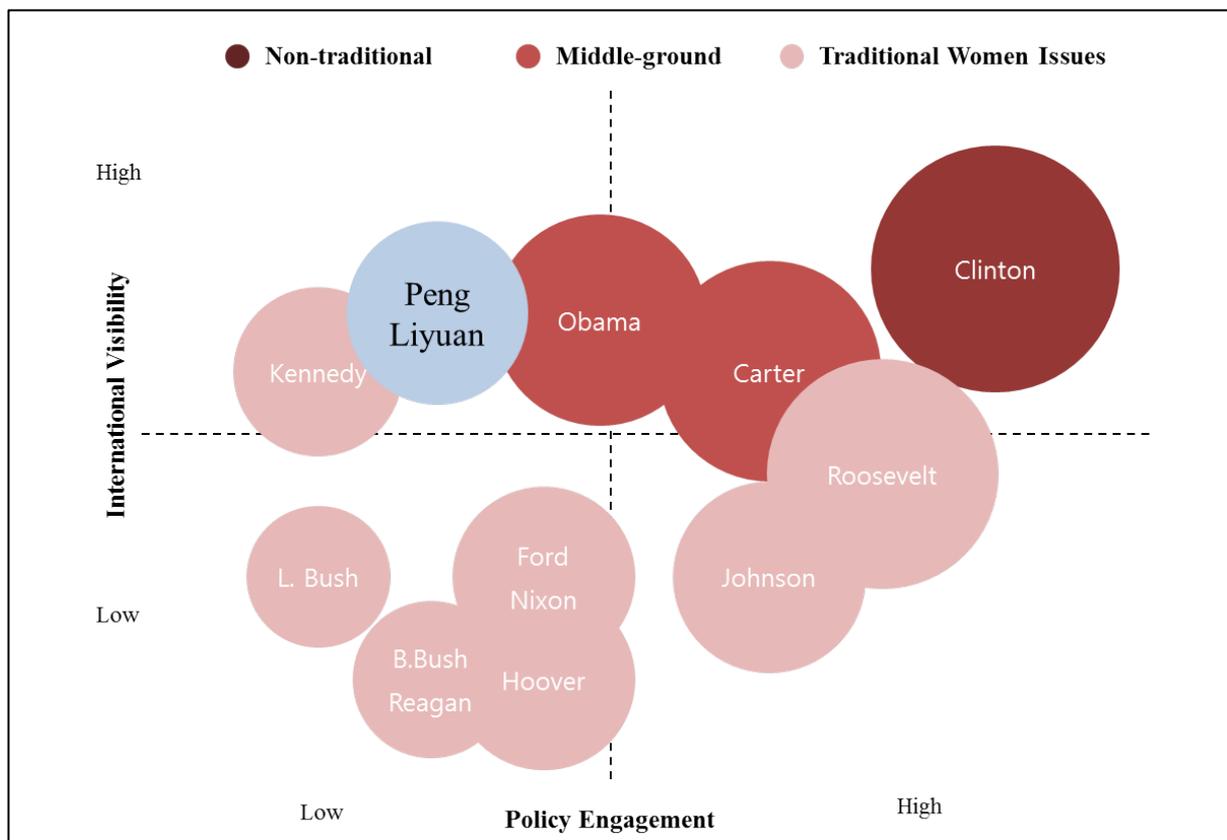


In China, when she traveled with her husband earlier in 2013 to Russia, “her name became one of the most commonly searched terms on Weibo” (Riviera 2013). Also, “Peng's photo-ops have received prime coverage in the Chinese state media, from trying out drums in Trinidad and Tobago to holding the hands of a girl in a wheelchair in the National Children's Hospital of Costa Rica” (Ng 2014) during her third overseas trip with Xi Jinping. The media censorship of China, of course, controls the distribution of content relevant to First Lady Peng Liyuan. This was shown in the cases of banning the use of her name for imitated clothing products of her fashion or prohibiting the domestic online distribution of a photo that captured Peng Liyuan taking pictures with an iPhone during her visit to Mexico.

<sup>1</sup> Google Trends. August 12, 2014. <http://www.google.com/trends/explore#q=peng%20liyuan%2C%20xi%20jinping&cmpt=q> (accessed August 12, 2014)

But this specific censorship can be deemed as an attempt by the Chinese government to push a coordinated message, rather than an effort to totally diminish the visibility of its First Lady. The purpose seems to be aimed at handling the quality of her visibility so that it resonates with the CCP’s interest and expectation, not the quantity of her visibility.

[Graph 2] Positioning the Role Type of Peng Liyuan



In conclusion, Peng Liyuan can be positioned somewhere between Jacqueline Kennedy and Michelle Obama, as shown in [Graph 2]. Compared to the low profiles of previous political wives, her role as Chinese First Lady shows great visibility and international standing, despite its non-policy and traditional women’s issue focuses.

### 3.2 Factors Driving the New Type of Chinese First Lady

Why and how has Peng Liyuan been recognized as promising and successful? The factors that prompt the prominence of Peng Liyuan are composed of three main elements: historical, political, and personal. The historical factor is that modern China needs a political representative who can be charming enough to be proud of. Since 1949, when the People’s Republic of China was established by Mao Zedong, China has remained a socialist country until now. It was the economic reform led by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s that

prompted China to go through a stark change. It led China's economy to experience capitalist market principles through decollectivizing agriculture, accepting foreign investment, and allowing privatization, and China became interconnected with other countries. According to World Bank data, China has enjoyed GDP growth averaging about 10% a year after the reform, and recently became the second largest economy with an increasingly influential role around the globe.

While enjoying economic growth, however, China began to realize several challenges. One of the most critical is to continue leadership of the CCP and keep its legitimacy. Even though China opened up its economy to foreign countries and introduced a market economy, it is still one of the strongest socialist countries with the CCP's dictatorial policy decisions and governance, which induces a growing fear of other democratic countries toward China's rise. China's new security concept then arose in the late 1990s. Since 2000, "the policy of *heping jueqi* (peaceful rise)" has been articulated by the Chinese government (Starr 2009, 66). At the same time, it was announced that China should "establish a publicity capacity to exert an influence on world opinion that is as strong as China's international standing" (Kurlantzick 2007, 39). With this necessity of more cultivated publicity toward the outside, Chinese leaders have become more cautious about their manners and reputations. And the Chinese First Lady cannot be an exception.

Another reason for the China's increasing awareness of the importance of its projection of a positive image to both domestic and foreign public lies in the introduction of improved communications technologies. Despite the Chinese government's censorship that is often criticized by democracies, the Chinese public's opinion is more quickly expressed and shared these days than before, through online channels such as Weibo, Youku, or Baidu. The immense flow of online information affects the public opinion of the domestic Chinese, carrying a possibility of acting as a stimulus to influence the CCP's legitimacy. The increased coverage of foreign media and the growing interest of foreign publics in China also matter. With the 24/7 media cycle, foreign publics have attained more access to information about what is going on in China.

In U.S. history, the development of communications technologies has also affected the role of political wives. New media technologies such as radio and television, and the following developments of the whistle-stop train tour or the media-saturated presidential

campaign fostered First Ladies' engagement in presidential campaigns: Lady Bird Johnson, for example, did solo campaigning on a whistle-stop train tour across the South in order to "offset any ill will toward the president by Southern whites caused by Johnson's support of the 1964 Civil Rights Act" (Watson and Eksterowicz 2003, 7). Likewise, China's First Lady, especially among today's tech-savvy public, cannot ignore the needs of the time. She is encouraged to grasp the opportunity.

The second factor comes from her relationship with her president-husband, Xi Jinping, and his political initiatives. The role of the First Lady cannot be isolated from her husband's political orientation and the initiatives of her president-husband's administration. Peng Liyuan especially has a husband whose policy initiatives necessitate extended and coordinated publicity of the First Lady. As mentioned above, Xi Jinping has pursued anti-corruption as his main initiative since he became the leader of China. Anthony Saich, a professor at Harvard University, said that "this is the most ambitious anti-corruption campaign since at least Mao's days" (Oster 2014). Xi is strongly embracing the initiative to root out bribery that deteriorates the government's legitimacy and endangers China's economic growth.

With the strong initiative, one of the publicity approaches he has taken is to create a friendlier image to the public. His recent visit to a small steamed bun shop was successfully met with positive responses from Chinese citizens on social media, mitigating the gap between the leader and the constituents, despite a few criticisms accusing the visit of a political show. While the visit was a very rare case in China, this type of approach of a political leader toward the average citizen is very common in U.S. politics, where almost every candidate conveys to the electorate that he or she is the one who he is likely to have a beer with and chill with. In line with Xi's increasing image-making efforts, it is no wonder that Peng Liyuan's public image is also strategized and developed to present her as as friendly and charming as possible.

The third factor that makes her a promising First Lady of China is that she is an experienced and knowledgeable wife who knows how to be in front of cameras – i.e. publicity. She maintained a long career as a singer in China after she joined the arts troupe of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). She gained big popularity in 1983 "when she sang in the first Lunar New Year's TV extravaganza, broadcast nationwide by state-owned CCTV,"

the most watched TV show that is “comparable to the annual Super Bowl in the U.S.” (FlorCruz 2013). She also “spent 20 days on the front line entertaining troops as they fought a border conflict with Vietnam” in 1985, and “the following year she was accepted into the Communist party,” making her first appearance on the flagship Spring Festival gala show (Moore 2013). Even though Peng toned down her image in the years when it was clear that Xi would succeed Hu Jintao, stopping her appearances “on the New Year’s Gala” and accepting only “a few public singing engagements” (Larson 2013), her publicity experiences earned during her years of singing on the nationwide stage does bring a great synergy when she is now introduced as First Lady.

### *3.3 Implications of the Modern Chinese First Lady*

Like many other First Ladies in U.S. history, the very western-like approach of Peng Liyuan’s First Ladyship appears to have a purpose of winning publics’ hearts and minds. However, there are two distinct aspects of the Chinese modern First Ladyship. First, it tries to reinforce positive domestic public opinion through the increased international standing of the First Lady. Second, it has a high possibility to play an extended role in contributing to Xi Jinping’s political success through mitigating the gap between the leadership and the citizens.

Peng Liyuan’s stylish manner and fashion during her foreign trips have invited not only international attention but also great domestic attention from the Chinese public. During her official visit abroad to Russia in 2013, for example, Peng Liyuan “sparked a surge of interest in domestic clothing brands” by choosing a handbag and an overcoat by a Guangzhou-based local brand, which has “gained new fame around the country” (Ye 2013). In addition to the brand’s website crashing because of the heavy online traffic afterwards, the overall prices of Chinese fashion brands “jumped on the Shanghai stock market after predictions that the companies will be able to capitalize on the first lady's success” (EFE 2013). Positive comments in the Chinese fashion world followed: “First ladies are ambassadors of the culture and the design and of the soft power of a country. I'm glad that she chose to wear Chinese and take up that role of spokesperson for Chinese design here,” said Hong Huang, publisher of the fashion magazine iLook and one of the most popular micro-bloggers in China; Zhang Yu, editor of Chinese Vogue magazine, also said, “It's the first time that China's first lady appears like a modern woman. After so many years, we finally have a first

lady who can represent us so appropriately" (White 2013).

The importance of Peng's wearing a Chinese brand on the international scene to please the domestic public was shown in another case too. During her visit for a friendly soccer match between Chinese and German youth teams in Berlin in March 2014, she was applauded as "an effective brand ambassador for China" by using the Chinese mobile phone Nubia (Dasgupta 2014). This was the result of a quick adjustment after she was criticized for having used an iPhone on her Mexico trip of the previous year. By looking at the enormous interest of the domestic Chinese in every item used by Peng Liyuan, and how she rapidly responded to the public opinion dealing with criticism, it is not difficult to conclude that the Chinese First Lady is trying to fundamentally appeal to the domestic public. And she is trying to fortify her standing that is increasingly visible through her international appearances.

This has the effect of making herself an admirable representative, and the face of modern China that the Chinese can be proud of. And the psychological and positive identification of average citizens with their leaders has great meaning in understanding the current domestic and international politics of China. Despite its rapid economic growth and increased international influence, China still suffers from numerous problems, such as a bad reputation for its low-quality products, criticism for its human rights violations from international communities, and the fragmented national sentiment due to the existence of diverse minorities and corruptive political upheavals. Therefore, when the First Lady wears and uses local brands while she already possesses the charm and style that have international appeal, the ordinary public in China is able to be proud of their culture and commodities. That is, the mainland Chinese are enjoying their improved international standing through assimilation to their nation-loving and internationally popular First Lady.

Peng Liyuan's role also has a potential extension in correlation with Xi Jinping's policy initiatives to further help her husband's political success, thereby contributing to the strengthened legitimacy of the CCP. As discussed above, Xi Jinping has enthusiastically pushed and executed his anti-corruption initiative across the country. The core of the anti-corruption campaign is an appeal to domestic public opinion that has expressed nationwide anger toward the increasing polarization between the rich and the poor, while establishing the political power in the CCP during his initial stage of leadership. In line with the anti-

corruption initiative, he also made a delicate publicity effort to mitigate the emotional gap between the Chinese leadership and the average citizens by visiting a folksy restaurant.

Even though Peng Liyuan has not made any substantial moves yet to actually influence the policy decisions as First Lady, her actions show the possibility of taking a role reinforcing the initiatives and approaches of Xi Jinping. First, it is possible to trace her records before she became a First Lady while Xi was already recognized as a future leader, which demonstrated her interest in taking action to deal with poor and average citizens. In March 2005 at the CPPCC session, Peng suggested improving rural children's education, especially for the poor, by decreasing their tuition fees, subsidizing their living expenses and medical fees, and supporting the volunteers from universities who teach the local students; she even cited her nephew in Shandong suffering from poverty (SINA 2013). When a devastating earthquake happened in Sichuan in 2008, she also "staged special performances in affected areas and announced publicly that their daughter, Xi Mingze, who was 16 at the time, had volunteered to help relief efforts – another first for a Chinese leader's family" (Page 2012).

Her approach of making herself much friendlier to the general public has been steadily proven too. Unlike the previous Chinese leaders whose private lives were mostly hidden, China's state-run Xinhua newswire has published an "official version" of the love story of Xi Jinping and Peng Liyuan, which is the first case (Larson 2013). These days, she presents herself with an emphasis on her role as "mother" which sounds much friendlier, similar to Michelle Obama's "mom-in-chief" position: as articulated "in her recent video address on the naming of the giant panda club at the National Zoo in Washington D.C." in which "Peng brought a more personal touch by speaking from a mother's perspective" (Wang 2014).

Considering these two main aspects, we can expect Peng Liyuan to further extend her role as First Lady of China. As James Rosenau explained that this role and individual variables are significant explanatory factors in a study of foreign policy "in a large, economically developed, closed political system such as the former Soviet Union" (Watson and Eksterowicz 2003, 194), the role and individual variables can work as important factors in China with similar conditions for the First Lady to increase her influence, even in foreign policy domains. However, there already exists criticism for the potential extended role of the Chinese First Lady as well. One criticism points out that Peng's charity work and

engagement in soft diplomacy also complement Xi's role as "an authoritarian leader who sometimes relies on ruthless statecraft in the domestic and international arenas" (Huang 2014). This implies that her expanded role of First Lady can serve as a disguising strategy to eventually enlarge the gap between the positive image China wants to project and the real policy decisions China makes in its own interest of keeping the communist system.

If the attention to her international debut which focused on her charm fades, and either foreign or domestic publics begin to realize the potential two faces of the First Lady, her role will be greatly tempered by backlash. The extent of censorship on First Lady-relevant content online can also contribute to this problem. Even though the censorship seems to focus on managing the quality of her visibility so that her role can maximize positive impact, too much censoring will only hamper the positive resonance with the domestic public that was naturally attracted to the new type of First Lady. For example, there was the recent case of an online fan club on Weibo devoted to Peng Liyuan, which was launched on the day of the first official foreign trip and had more than 5,600 followers, but was suddenly shut down by authorities without any notice (The Indian Express 2013).

In addition, there are possible constraints that prevent further extension of Peng Liyuan's role as First Lady. These are mainly due to the remaining perception of gender roles in China. In China, "there's still this strain of thought, particularly in the countryside, that there are two possible roles for a female: the woman is either servile ... or an empress type," said Ross Terrill, who wrote biographies of Mao and his wife, Jiang Qing: "the woman-as-evil-schemer archetype got some recent reinforcement when one of Xi's rivals, Bo Xilai, was ousted from the Politburo amid a scandal involving his wife, who was convicted of murdering a British businessman" (Makinen 2012). The controversy of the extended First Ladyship has been long centered on the gender role issue, even in the U.S. Therefore, it is nothing new to see the same pattern coming from China, especially with its controversial experience with Jiang Qing's case. It will be interesting to see if Peng Liyuan will be able to manage her role when she tries to broaden it more actively, overcoming the traditional gender perception ingrained in the Chinese culture.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Maintaining a good reputation as First Lady is a tricky task. First Ladies in the U.S. have met challenges between the traditional roles and the extended roles they have explored:

sometimes they were applauded as a personified symbol of a country or as an influential political figure, but other times they had to endure sharp criticism of their public lives and decisions. Nonetheless, the role of First Lady has pioneered various issues and activities, with the First Ladies' continuous efforts to create the most positive influence on presidency. And one of these extensions has been obvious in their international standing with the real representative type of roles: that of a diplomat.

In China, the challenges facing the most recent and modern First Lady, Peng Liyuan, are being cast in the non-democratic political system. She is deemed to be under a more rigid set of circumstances because of the traditional gender restrictions the Chinese government places on women, as well as the inherent dilemmas in the communist regime of China. However, her high visibility on the international scene was impressive and attention-grabbing to foreign and domestic audiences. Peng Liyuan makes the audience wonder how she would further extend her role, and what kinds of political meanings her role will bring about. Her role as First Lady will continue its journey with the question of whether to be expanded or to be limited. And it will be interesting for anyone to watch, who is interested in China's rise and image projection on the international stage.

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