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**Research Paper**

# Female Diplomates of China Are Growing Strong From Struggle

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***Abstract***
*This article uses the method of interview and cases study, analyzes the advantages and disadvantages of the career development of Chinese female diplomats, introduces the current situation of Chinese female diplomats in the difficult situation, but also shows the hardships and long road of Chinese women's liberation. However, as a woman who loves diplomatic career, the author is not pessimistic about the development of female diplomatic career. She sees hope in difficulties and light in darkness, pointing out the bright prospect of Chinese women's liberation.*
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Ms. Fu Ying, the then second female vice-foreign minister since the founding of the Chinese Republic, was born in Hohhot, the capital of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in China and entered the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs as an interpreter in 1977. At the age of 45, Fu became the eighth Chinese ambassador to the Philippines, the youngest female ambassador at that time, and the first female ambassador of Mongol ethnic background. She later fulfilled ambassadorial roles in Philippines Indonesia and Australia, but the tenure that truly brought her into the public view in China was her three years in Britain.

During that term, Fu concentrated not only on communication with the UK government, but on appearing relatable to the general public. She published several articles in Western media, such as *The Sunday Telegraph* and *The Guardian*, to respond to western "demonization" of the Chinese occupation of Tibet and western portrayal of riots in Uygur. She relied on facts and statistics to bolster her arguments.

Considering the overwhelming western rhetoric already in such media outlets, Fu's message may not have influenced the British public as much as she had intended. Still, for the Chinese, her decision to publish these articles in the western media itself was an unprecedented diplomatic measure.

Fu's adherence to national positions and points of view, combined with her engaging narration and rationality, play directly into growing Chinese influence and the widespread support for "soft power" diplomacy—achieving national goals through indirect means while appearing to be a sensible and principled world power. Fu's diplomatic methods have since been coined "the Fu Ying style", a style that emphasizes storytelling, extensive use of accessible analogies, appealing to public pathos through the media, and promoting cultural understanding. This method is known for being "soft," but in a way that makes Chinese positions more internationally irrefutable.

In China, "softness" has a deep-rooted gender connotation, implying feminine sensitivity and compassionate instincts. Combined with Fu Ying's high stature as a female diplomat, the connection is easily, though

quite arbitrarily, drawn between being female and being adept at "telling the Chinese story." The public has thus come to value "the female voice," hence garnering support for the inclusion of more women in Chinese diplomacy. Fu Ying has not only altered the public's perception of Chinese diplomatic women but has also transformed—to a certain extent—women's perceptions of themselves, as well as their long-term career aspirations. A new generation of budding female diplomats are tempted to follow in Fu's footsteps.

"Before Ms. Fu Ying, you either had to adapt more masculine characteristics, or be content with not being in leadership positions," one female Chinese diplomat said to me. "Fu changed that. She made it possible to be female *and* be a leader in international relations."

Fledging Diplomat Liu from the Chinese embassy in Washington D.C. claims that "Fu Ying is a career idol for myself and many of my female coworkers."

Ms. Fu certainly marks a critical threshold of female participation. she has shown that Chinese women are competent for the job. Yet the male-dominated hierarchical diplomatic structure remains. Rates of women working in international relations in China remain low, especially in leadership positions. According to statistics from 2020, only 28.8% of Chinese diplomats are female, and merely 21 out of more than 8,000 of those in leadership positions (consulate general or ambassador) are women. Despite the outpouring of praise for the feminine perspective and the successful example of Fu Ying, women are still not dominant of Chinese diplomacy. But the situation is evolving and improving.

When asked about her take on the phenomenon, Ms. Liu points out that Fu Ying's circumstances do not represent those of the majority of her female colleagues. "Fu had the full support of her husband, a case quite uncommon for Chinese women in diplomacy." Fu Ying's husband Hao Shiyuan, assistant to the president of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, grappled with his own work while taking on more family responsibilities. His support went one step further; before one press conference, Fu Ying claims to have gone over clothing details with Hao: "What color might the background board be? At a press conference of the National People's Congress, there may be some big red blocks on the background board, and the walls outside the background board are grey and white. These color differences need to be taken into account." Together, they settled on a royal blue suit jacket.

Ms. Liu explains that most female diplomats are not so lucky. "Many of the husbands don't want their wives to go to places too far from their home base and are even more unwilling to give up their careers because of their wife. A social stigma is attached to men sacrificing for their wives. Just see how many more wives there are quitting their jobs and accompanying their diplomatic husbands than the other way around," she continued. "I personally wouldn't even have reached this place in my career without [my husband's] support." She gestures towards her husband—an easy-going, friendly man around 50 who put his business career on hold to accompany his wife—making tea on an opposite table.

For most female diplomats, the average diplomatic term abroad of three to four years requires the painful experience of dividing up their family. In the same scenario, however, male diplomats either bring their self-sacrificing wives and children along, or readily justify their absence as warranted, due to their masculine ambition.

Because of women's traditional domestic roles, most women diplomats do not easily leave their families behind. Ms. Fu herself shares a heartbreaking story in her book *Seeing the World*: one evening, her daughter was suffering from high fever while Ms. Fu had to catch a late-night flight to another country. "I was physically gone, but my heart stayed with my daughter. I worried all day," Ms. Fu says.

While Ms. Fu left, many women in the same situation feel obliged to stay. "I declined many opportunities of promotion because I wanted to wait until my son went to college to be stationed anywhere far," a Chinese diplomat who working in one of Southeast Countries Ms. Yang claims. Now at the age of 46, with her son in a selective college in the UK, she plans to refocus her attention on her career, hoping it's not too late. When asked whether she would have made a different choice, she gave a decisive no, though a bitter smile spread across her face. "Investment on your children and family is always worth it, but it might not be the case for women investing in careers in international relations."

The ultimate disillusionment with the field comes for most women when they realize that, despite recent advances in equality, it still takes much more to be successful as a woman in diplomacy. Female diplomats have a tendency to gloss over gender imbalances in interviews, intentionally leading the conversation away from gender-specific problems with their work. Yet, it is apparent that unequal treatment between genders does exist and is an integral reason for female diplomats' discomfort with their work. For example, women are often overlooked for dinner discussions that require drinking and official occasions that happen later in the night in the name of "protecting and respecting females." In contrast, the women themselves believe they can very much cope with and contribute to such events. Ms. Liu's experience is another striking case in point. Despite her outstanding work, she is still publicly criticized as "soft and lacking in masculine decisiveness" by her male coworkers.

However, Ms. Liu and Ms. Yang seem reluctant to talk in any depth about such events. Neither do they regard

such incidents as sexism; rather, they seem to think it is a professional necessity to disregard gender-specific demands and make room for "more relevant and important discussions concerning national dignity and the effectiveness of embassies," as if the declaration that they indeed face discrimination is a disgrace for their country.

Ms. Liu and Ms.Yang's reluctance to address gender-specific problems is the remaining issue after Ms. Fu Ying and other similarly prominent women in the Chinese diplomacy have proven that ability is not what limits Chinese women in international relations. Pioneering women's perspectives have garnered societal support for the inclusion of more women into diplomacy. Nevertheless, entrenched prejudices against women persist and largely negate the aforementioned progress, rendering Fu's success unable to be replicated. Beliefs held by the public and diplomatic women alike that women are more obligated to family, male chauvinism, the general tendency to underestimate women, and women's deliberate unwillingness to recognize acts of discrimination continue to limit Chinese women in international relations.
Ms. Liu asserts, "Women like Ms. Fu Ying have broken the glass ceiling. Now more work needs to be done to give every Chinese diplomatic woman an equal chance."

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