Since the initial launch of the public administration discipline in the 1980s, women-related research has gradually become an essential field in public administration in China. With the rise of the international women’s movements, gender equality is included in the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) since 2000. As the first major country committed to the SDGs, China adheres to the basic national policy on gender equality and advocating women’s development. Despite such commitment, China’s gender equality work still has a long way to go. Social issues such as gender imbalance, gender discrimination, sexual harassment, and violence against women often trigger fierce socio-political debates and unintended social impacts. According to the United Nations’ 2019 Gender Development Index, China ranks 85th among 189 countries, leaving much room for improvement in gender equality (UNDP, 2019). In response to such challenges facing the Chinese government, scholars and practitioners need to think more systematically about how the evolving body of women research can be used to enhance scientific gender policy and gender-responsive governance in China (Rubin, 2016).

Gender is “a pattern of social relations in which the positions of women and men are defined, the cultural meanings of being a man and a woman are negotiated, and their trajectories through life are mapped out.” (Connell, 2006). The binary biological differentiation between women and men has long been criticized for denying the complexities of gender culture, experiences, and norms (Hutchinson, 2001). In public administration, research on women refers to the incorporation of a gender perspective into the research framework to understand public policy processes and public administration practices and its influence on the lives of women, both in the family and in the public sphere. The studies in women in public administration look at women’s rights, interests, needs, as well as issues and challenges facing women. Women assume multiple roles and identities, including public management subjects (bureaucrats and...
political leaders), public management objects (service recipients and customers), and co-producers of public services (bureaucrats and citizens). Although different women play their respective roles, they have similar socialization experiences and processes (Rabovsky & Lee, 2018), which lead to their similar perspectives, attitudes, behaviors, and in turn shape public policies and public administration practices (Rho & Lee, 2018; Riccucci et al., 2016).

Women research originated from the reflections and initiatives of feminist public administration scholars in the United States in the 1960s (Stivers, 1995). The evolution of feminist theory as an approach to the study of organizational and managerial behavior has been accompanied by a series of government reform movements. After formally being put forward, women research has increasingly become an important source of theoretical accumulation of international public administration. A generation of PA scholars delivered theoretical reflection on gender in public administration (Goetz, 1992; Guy & Schumacher, 2009; Neal et al., 2020; Riccucci, 2009; Sabharwal et al., 2018). A series of recent empirical research have been published in public administration and public policy journals, covering a broad array of research topics such as gendered organizational performance and management (Barnes et al., 2018; Bishu and Heckler, 2021; Jacobson et al., 2010; Rho & Lee, 2018), coproduction of public goods or services (Meier & Nicholson-Cratty, 2006; Riccucci et al., 2016), and the social influence and policy outcomes of women’s representation (Park & Liang, 2021; Potter & Volden, 2021; Stensöta et al., 2015). This leads to the following research questions:

1. In the past four decades, what is the development trajectory of research on women in Chinese public administration?
2. What are the paradigms, topics, methods, and theories of research on women in Chinese public administration?
3. What are the explanatory factors and outcomes of empirical research on women in Chinese public administration?

Answering these questions is indispensable for assessing the contribution of women research to public administration, explaining gender differences in the public realm, and understanding the changing roles and influences of women in social-political life in China. From a practical standpoint, broader lessons can also be drawn from a systematic review for evidence-based gender policy formulation in China.

This brings us to the outline of this article. We first briefly describe the overview of research on women in public administration. Next, we use scientific journal selection and document screening methods to obtain 222 peer-reviewed articles published in 15 influential Chinese journals since the 1980s. On this basis, this article analyzes the trends of research, research topic, theories, methods, and systematically summarize empirical research. Finally, this article analyzes the deficiencies of existing research and explores future development directions in conjunction with international frontier research.

**Overview of research on women in public administration**

Throughout the development process in international public administration, women research has roughly experienced three stages: theoretical exploration, theoretical expansion, and empirical testing. As early as the 1960s, feminist public administration scholars in the U.S. were aware of the lack of gender consciousness in mainstream public administration and set off a “gender enlightenment” in public administration theory (Wang, 2011).

Since the 1970s, public administration theory in the U.S. has begun to reflected issues of diversity (Sabharwal et al., 2018). Feminist public administration theory has been part of this rapid expansion and a unique branch of it. In the 1990s, Stivers (1995, 2002) reflected on the important role of women progressives in the American government reform movement in the “Progressive Era,” calling upon the incorporation of women experiences and values into public administration and a gender lens to the issues such as power, status, leadership, legitimacy, and government reform.

In the past 10 years, a series of empirical discussions examining gender inequities or incorporating gender perspectives appeared in mainstream international journals within the discipline. Existing research mainly falls into two categories. The first body of literature examines the political and social influence of representation of women in public officials, involving themes such as governance and policy performance (Potter & Volden, 2021; Riccucci et al., 2014), government integrity (Barnes et al., 2018; Stensöta et al., 2015), coproduction (Riccucci et al., 2016), public-private partnership (Johnston, 2017), and women’s welfare (Park & Liang, 2021; Zhang, 2019). The second body of research focuses on the internal management of the public sector, including topics such as gender differences in managerial behaviors (Barnes et al., 2018; Rho & Lee, 2018), gender inequities and gender segregation in the workforce (Riccucci, 2009), and the influence of women leaders on employee behaviors, organizational performance, and gender pay gap (Grissom et al., 2012; Hamidullah et al., 2021; Jacobson et al., 2010; Nielsen, 2015; Rabovsky & Lee, 2018). Both streams of research explore how gender shapes the experiences of women and men, which contribute to a general theoretical accumulation of public administration. This rapidly developing field lay a solid foundation for theoretical construction and empirical research based on different countries and institutional scenarios. Hence much exploration remains to be explored for Chinese public administration scholars.

The study of women in public administration in Chinese journals began in the 1980s and has been enriched and developed with the progress of the discipline. However,
there is a clear gap between the research on women in the Chinese public administration and the international frontier. Chinese research on the theory and method of public administration focuses on government reform and governance, public policy theory and practice, public organization theory, and government tools (Chen & Xue, 2007), much less attention was paid to culture and social identity. Consequently, gender has rarely become the main research direction and core research interest of public administration scholars in China. Moreover, in horizontal comparison with other disciplines, gender differences, and gender inequality in the labor market are classic topics in economics in China (Qing, 2011). The sociology of gender focusing on a gendered society, gender culture, gender and marriage and family, and gender stratification and mobility has become an independent branch of sociology (Tong, 2008). Executive gender is one of the most active fields of management in recent years (He & Liu, 2010). In contrast, the overall development of research on women in Chinese public administration not only lags behind the international frontiers, but also lags behind traditional social science disciplines such as economics, sociology, and management in China.

### Design and method

**Study and report eligibility**

Due to the origin of the discipline and historical inheritance, Chinese public administration research is mainly published in the professional journals of two major disciplines, namely, management science and political science. Following recent practices (Ma, 2020; Zhang & Guo, 2021), this article uses the Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI) source journals (2019–2020) to identify top-tier journals in political science and management disciplines with one of the following two characteristics: (1) are specialized periodicals in the field of public administration; (2) are with a public administration section or with core themes of public administration, government work, and national policy research in their stated scope. This was done by browsing journal descriptions on official websites. This article identifies 15 PA-related journals that fulfilled the above criteria (See Table 1).

### Data collection and record selection

To maximize coverage of the literature, this paper conducts a preliminary search and identifies a set of specific female identities that will be used as keywords. To determine search terms, the author first searched “women” (女性), “gender” (性别), and “identity” (身份) in the academic journal database of the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) among the 15 selected Chinese public administration journals. The full text research was adopted for the preliminary search. The author reads articles from the search results and noted that women-related articles used these terms in their titles: “female” (女性), “women” (妇女), “gender” (性别), “female civil servants” (女公务员), “feminism” (女性主义), “female college students” (女大学生), and “female teacher” (女教师). Based on this finding, the author decided to use these terms as subject terms in the second phase, which should offer the most comprehensive results. The two-step searching criteria yields 281 primary articles from the 15 top journal in the field.

As this study aims to review the Chinese literature on women research, non-research articles should be excluded. Research involves theoretical and empirical work linking to theories or empirical data and referring to exiting literature (Zhang & Guo, 2021). Applying this criterion and carefully examined all cases, data cleaning includes four steps (Figure 1):

1. The author screened and removed 17 non-research articles with no academic contribution (e.g., book reviews, book introductions, meeting minutes, state affairs, newsletters, and headlines).
2. The author screened research by reading the title and abstract of articles and removed 44 non-public administration articles in private management, literature, and history.
3. The author removed nine papers that are less relevant to the research subject by reading the full text (e.g., studies in ancient women, men, and human photography).

### Table 1. Description of selected periodicals.

| Number | Periodical                                      | Articles |
|--------|-----------------------------------------------|----------|
| 1      | Chinese Public Administration (中国行政管理)    | 38       |
| 2      | Theoretical Exploration (理论探索)              | 24       |
| 3      | Management World (管理世界)                    | 23       |
| 4      | Probe (探索)                                   | 19       |
| 5      | The Journal of Jiangsu Administration Institute (江苏行政学院学报) | 16       |
| 6      | Journal of Public Management (公共管理学报)     | 15       |
| 7      | Journal of Chinese Academy of Governance (国家行政学院学报) | 14       |
| 8      | China Soft Science (中国软科学)                | 14       |
| 9      | Journal of Public Administration (公共行政评论) | 11       |
| 10     | Journal of Gansu Administration Institute (甘肃行政学院学报) | 11       |
| 11     | Journal of Beijing Administration Institute (北京行政学院学报) | 11       |
| 12     | Theoretical Investigation (理论探讨)             | 8        |
| 13     | Administrative Forum (行政论坛)                | 7        |
| 14     | Journal of Shanghai Administration Institute (上海行政学院学报) | 8        |
| 15     | E-Government (电子政务)                        | 3        |
Following this screening process, 222 articles were included in the review.

**Coding method**

Retrospective study involves the analysis of previous literature to understand the study’s area of interest (Guy & Schumacher, 2009). As a retrospective study, this article is based on published women-related articles in Chinese public administration journals, using conventional content analysis to analyze text information. Conventional content analysis is a qualitative research method that takes root in original text data to develop coding rules, and its purpose is to increase the theoretical accumulation in a certain field (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Conventional content analysis been used in recent literature review on policy entrepreneurship (Frisch Aviram et al., 2020). Conventional content analysis best suits for this study because no coding scheme was developed in previous research literature on women in Chinese public administration.

Following open coding procedures described by content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), researchers allow original literature to drive codes and categories. New codes and variables were added to captured newly founded characteristics. Based on the relationships between subcategories, researchers combined and organized a larger number of subcategories into fewer categories. The final coding book consisted of seven content categories, including both quantitative subcategories (numeric variables) and quality subcategories (nonnumeric variables). The coding book is reported in Supplemental Table A1.

The coding process involved multiple rounds in an inductive way. The author and another researcher randomly reviewed 20 articles and drafted an initial coding book including broad categories and variables derived from the articles. Again, two researchers extracted 20 documents for independent precoding to refine the coding book and reach consensus on definitions and categories. Finally, two researchers coded the rest of the articles and discussed to reach agreement on ambiguities and differences.

**Findings**

**General results**

Before turning to detailed analysis of research on women, I first report the general state of research in terms of yearly distribution, journal distribution, research paradigms, and trend of research methods. As shown in Figure 2, the uneven numbers of annual publications from 1987 to 2019 reveal a fluctuated increase in research focusing on women. The literature retrieved in this article was first published in 1987, and the number of publications was about three per year until 2000. In the first 10 years of the 21st century, the number of studies in women increased rapidly from about 6 per year to about 12 per year. The increasing academic interest in women can be partly attributed to the national policies and programs for the development of women in China. Since the “Tenth Five-Year Plan (2001–2005),” the development of women and children has always been an important part of the national macro-plan. The “Thirteenth Five-Year Plan (2016–2020)” even outlines a chapter on “Promoting the All-round Development of Women” (促进妇女全面发展). However, the number of
studies in women has shown a fluctuating upward trend since the 2010s. Therefore, although significant progress has been made in the field in the past 40 years, the development momentum is not yet stable.

Table 1 reports the distribution of 222 articles on women in 15 journals. As shown in Table 1, only three journals, namely *Chinese Administration*, *Theoretical Exploration*, and *Management World*, have published more than 20 studies focusing on women's issues. Given that the sample selected covers 33 years, less than one women research is published every year for most journals.

This article divides the literature into theoretical research and empirical research based on the research paradigm (Cucciniello et al., 2017). As shown in Figure 3, theoretical research (i.e. literature review, foreign experience reference, government reform practice, and work summary) accounted for 54.50%, while empirical research accounts for 45.50% of the research sample. In the empirical research, this paper divides it into exploratory research (three articles, 1.08%), descriptive research (44 articles, 43.56%), and explanatory research (54 articles, 53.47%) according to the research purpose. Furthermore, in the explanatory study, 49 articles (or 90.74%) used women as the key variables, and five articles (or 9.26%) used women as the control variables.

Figure 2 illustrates the trend of the research methods found. The theoretical and empirical strands of research on women are now occurring at two distinct rates, with empirical research demonstrating sustained growth and theoretical studies remaining growth before 2014 and reduce after 2014. The number of empirical studies exceeds theoretical studies since 2014, which reflects the surge in empirical research in Chinese public administration in recent years (Lu et al., 2019).

**Research topic**

As research on women in public administration is concerned with challenges and issues facing women, Table 2 lists seven areas of women-related social issues in existing research. Women’s development is the most popular issue with the greatest frequency (66 articles), which includes issues such as career development, entrepreneurship, and educational resources of women. Women’s rights is the second most analyzed issue (51 articles), which examine women’s rights dilemmas in the public workplace, marriage, and public governance. Women’s political and social participation (40 articles) and women’s health welfare (29 articles) have become emerging hot topics of scholarly debate. The former mainly discusses women’s access to and participation in political life, public governance, and social labor, and the latter involves women’s welfares in social and...
family policies related to childbirth, pension, marriage, employment, etc. Gender consciousness (21 articles) and work-family conflict (eight articles) are new social issues that have emerged in research in the past 10 years, reflecting the emergence of research addressing women’s concerns along with social changes. Public security issues caused by the imbalance of gender structure often arouse public concerns but attracted little scholarly attention. Only seven articles (3.15%) focus on social safety, such as female college students’ loss of contact, rising crime rates, and sexual violence.

To facilitate this discussion, this study further identifies the policy areas in the literature from the perspective of policy typology. As Table 3 shows, childbirth (47 articles) and employment (46 articles) are the most discussed policy areas, followed by marriage and family (13 articles) and gender imbalance governance (12 articles). Human resource development and management have only a few discussions, education, environment, and urbanization have the lowest frequency. These findings reveal that scholars pay close attention to sex-typed policies (childbirth and marriage and family) (Goetz, 1992) and policies related to state development (such as employment and population). Yet, there is a surprisingly small number of discussions on policy areas concerning disadvantaged groups (old people and rural residents) and public interests (public goods and the environment). Together, our review exhibits an uneven distribution of research across women-related social problems and policy fields.

To gain a deeper understanding of the development of women research in Chinese public administration in the past 30 years, this paper pinpoints the most frequently used words to the keywords of research in the sample, then divides the observation period into three periods, and counts the frequency of keywords among all articles in each stage after filtering out the stop words. The author uses the Jieba word segmentation module to do the segmentation in R program. Table 4 lists the 20 most frequent keywords in each period.

This article finds that the academic achievements of each stage reflect a distinct theme of the times. From 1987 to 1999, China was in the early stage of constructing the socialist market economy system. Key words in this stage were marked by Marxist gender equality thoughts. From the founding of the People’s Republic of China, women began to break free from the shackles of traditional domestic labor roles and enter social labor market under the national political mobilization. During this period, the top high-frequency words are “ideological system” (思想体系), “housework” (家务劳动), “women’s liberation” (女性解放), and “become talented” (成才) reflect progress toward gender equality in the labor market under the socialist system.

From 2000 to 2009, with the deepening of market-oriented reforms, China’s accession to the World Trade Organization, large-scale urbanization, and population mobility became the distinctive features of this period.

### Table 2. Women-related social issues.

| Social issues                        | Frequency | Percent (%) |
|--------------------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| Women’s development                  | 66        | 29.73       |
| Women’s rights                       | 51        | 22.97       |
| Women’s political and social         | 40        | 18.02       |
| participation                         |           |             |
| Women’s health welfare               | 29        | 13.06       |
| Gender consciousness                 | 21        | 9.46        |
| Work-family conflict                  | 8         | 3.60        |
| Women’s public safety                | 7         | 3.15        |
| Total                                | 222       | 100         |

### Table 3. Distribution of policy areas.

| Policy areas                               | Frequency | Percent (%) |
|--------------------------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| Childbirth                                 | 47        | 29.75       |
| Employment                                 | 46        | 29.11       |
| Marriage and family                        | 13        | 8.23        |
| Gender imbalance governance                | 12        | 7.59        |
| Human resource development and management  | 7         | 4.43        |
| Health                                     | 6         | 3.80        |
| Pensions                                   | 7         | 4.43        |
| Population                                 | 5         | 3.16        |
| Rural land                                 | 4         | 2.53        |
| Public goods                               | 4         | 2.53        |
| Education                                  | 3         | 1.90        |
| Environment                                | 2         | 1.27        |
| Urbanization                               | 2         | 1.27        |
| Total                                      | 158       | 100.00      |

Note. The total number is less than 222 because we exclude articles that lack specific policy implications, such as theoretical analysis and literature review. However, policy fields are not mutually exclusive.
Accordingly, “employment” (就业), “population” (人口), and “development” (发展), “labor force” (劳动), etc. have become high-frequency words. Meanwhile, due to the deepening gender gap in the process of social transformation (Wang et al., 2008), a series of words reflecting gender inequality appeared, such as “status” (地位), “digital divide” (数字鸿沟), “gender equality” (性别平等), etc. The issue of gender ratio began to enter the field of vision of researchers.

From 2010 to 2019, the modernization of national governance has become the theme of the times. High-frequency words such as “society” (社会), “governance” (治理), “participation” (参与), “budget” (预算), “gender equality” (性别平等), etc. reflect the process of modernization of China’s national governance system and governance capabilities, and the democratization of governance values. Words such as “family” (家庭), “work” (工作), and “imbalance” (失衡) demonstrate the difficulties facing professional women in coping with conflicts between work and family, and the magnifying effect of market economy development on the gender gap.

**Theoretical frameworks**

This study also analyzes the theoretical foundations used in the exiting research. To our surprise, among the 222 articles examined, 58 (21%) do not introduce any theories, which are descriptive in nature. Table 5 summarizes the discipline origins, representative theories, and theoretical representative scholars cited among studies that incorporated theories. The mainstream scholarship has used theoretical lenses based on eight major disciplines, which are: economics, sociology, public administration, public policy, political science, management, leadership science, and systematic science (see the left column of Table 5). Feminist theory, as an interdisciplinary theoretical lens, has also received extensive attention from researchers.

Theories of sociology and economics occupy the dominant positions. Scholars have carried out a range of research based on theories of sociology of gender, family sociology, welfare sociology, neoclassical economics, labor economics, and population economics. In contrast, public administration and public policy theories (such as governance, representative bureaucracy, collective action, and public goods theory, gender mainstreaming, policy interest subject loss theory, and policy network theory) and political science theories (such as political rights, political justice, bureaucratic politics, political power, embeddedness, and political culture) have received limited applications. A small body of recent studies has incorporated the women perspective into public administration and public policy theories such as representative bureaucratic theory (Wang, 2011), governance theory (Shang et al., 2015), collective action theory (Du et al., 2018; Gong & Liu, 2018), public goods theory (Yu & Leng, 2019), policy network theory (Liu, 2011). Management, leadership science, and systems science theories have only received much lesser attention.

The current body of women research mainly follows the theoretical orientation of western academia, using theories developed by western scholars to analyze the problems facing Chinese society and government practices. For instance,
in contrast with literature emphasizing gender differences, Wang (2005) have used the theory of social stratification to analyze the stratification and differentiation within women and categorizes difficulties faced by women at different social strata. Liu (2011) analyzes game behaviors of different policy groups in the context of gender imbalance in China, suggesting that Heclo’s conceptual model on policy issue is not totally suited for Chinese policy issue network.

Table 5. Theoretical themes of research on women.

| Discipline origin | Representative theory | Representative scholars |
|-------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| Sociology         | Sociology of gender   |                         |
|                   | Gender cultural theory: | Birgit Pfau-Effinger, Duncanc & Edward |
|                   | - Gender stereotypes, patriarchal culture, gender cultural groups, androcentrism, Confucian ethics, gender roles | |
|                   | Market transformation and gender equality | Victor Nee |
|                   | Gender consciousness | Zheng Wang, Bohong Liu |
| Family sociology  | Family modernization theory: | Paul DiMaggio, Jeffrey Greenhaus, Rongjun Sun |
|                   | - Marriage squeeze, family structure and division of labor, intergenerational interaction, group cooperation model | |
| Welfare sociology | Social capital | Nan Lin, Yanjie Bian, Robert Putnam |
|                   | Social mobility | Peter Blau, Otis Dudley Duncan |
|                   | Gender and welfare regime: | Ilona Ostne, Esping-Anderson, Fancy |
|                   | - Decommodification, defamilyization, welfare triangle, citizenship theory | Fraser, Adalbert Evers, Ann Shola Orloff, George Catlett Marshall, Helga Hernes |
| Sociology of risk | Social amplification of risk | Roger Kasperson |
| Economics         | Neoclassical economics | Mancur Lloyd Olson, Downs Polacheck, Garrett Hardin, Andrew Walder, Dennis Aigner, Glen Cain |
|                   | Rational choice, division of labor and specialization, commons tragedy theory, principal-agent theory, statistical discrimination | |
| Labor economics   | Human capital, opportunity cost, birth cost benefit, labor supply, labor division, labor participation elasticity | Gary Becker, Jacob Mincer |
| Population economics | Relative Income Hypothesis | Richard Easterlin |
|                   | “Wealth flows” theory | John Caldwell |
| Feminist theory   | Ecofeminism, Marxism/socialist feminism, postmodern feminism, feminist organization theory, feminist research method theory | Marquis de Condorcet, Amartya Sen, Ann Okalaye |
| Public administration | Governance theory: | Terry Cooper, Andrei Shleifer, Theda Skocpol |
|                   | - Collaborative governance, governance structure, the modernization of governance | |
|                   | Feminist public administration | Camilla Stivers |
|                   | Representative bureaucracy | Donald Kingsley |
|                   | Collective action and public goods | Douglass North, Vincent Ostrom |
|                   | Feminized organization | Robert Denhardt, Jan Perkins |
| Public policy     | Policy stakeholders | Valerie Hudson |
|                   | Policy topic network | Hugh Heclo |
|                   | Customer-oriented model | Evert Vedung |
|                   | Poverty theory in rights | Amartya Sen |
| Leadership science | Female leadership traits | Gary Powell, Laura Graves |
| Management science | Organization theory: | Mary Parker Follett, Joyce Rothschild |
|                   | - Organizational fairness, flexible organization and rigid organization, feminine organization | |
| Political science | Political rights | Kathy Ferguson |
|                   | Political justice | John Bordley Rawls |
|                   | Institutional theory: Bureaucracy, institutional embeddedness; | Michael Granovetter, Margaret Reid, Karl Polanyi |
|                   | Political culture | Gabriel Almond, Sidney Verba |
|                   | Power and discourse theory | Michel Foucault |
| System Science    | System engineering theory, synergetics | Hermann Haken |
on gender imbalance due to its broad interest groups with blurry boundary and pluralistic interest pattern. Based on the conceptual frameworks of social amplification of risk proposed by Roger Kasperson, Liu and Li (2010) construct a risk amplification framework for gender imbalance to explain the risk of social transformation under gender imbalance in China.

In general, the women research has gained great strength through diversification of theoretical streams. In theoretical application, scholars often use theories of different disciplines to analyze and explain the same social problem. For example, regarding gender differences in the labor market in the public sector, the traditional gender role theory of sociology believes that social psychological factors such as gender stereotypes can hinder women’s success in the public sector (Qing, 2011). Family economics studies point out that labor division in the family leads to the lack of work experiences of women in the labor market, which in turn restricts the development of their leadership (Zhang & Yang, 2009). Welfare sociology adopts social capital theory that attributes differences between women and men in social and economic status and social networks for accruing political capital (Lowndes, 2004). Hence, theoretical foundations from multiple disciplines reflect increasingly inclusive, open, and interdisciplinary colors of public administration and advance future research on women.

To explore the theoretical innovation of existing research, this article categorizes articles according to theoretical contribution and theoretical innovation, and divides the entire sample into the following six categories (see Table 6): (1) Descriptive analysis describes the social reality of women and does not have a clear theoretical basis (22.07% of the sample); (2) evaluation research defines a quantitative evaluation of policy effect or exploring the impact of gender differences on economic and social phenomena (7.21% of the sample); (3) normative analysis involves literature reviews, government work, and policy practice (45.95% of the sample); (4) theoretical application uses existing theoretical perspectives to analyze social reality, but not proposes a new theoretical framework or revises existing theories (12.61% of the total sample); (5) theoretical testing proposes new or the integrated theoretical framework to test hypothesis (10.35% of the total sample); (6) theoretical construction generates new concepts, propositions, or theoretical frameworks from research or Chinese public administration practices (1.60% of the sample). In general, only 23% of sample articles (mainly theoretical applications and theoretical testing studies) contain a clear theoretical basis.

In recent years, some scholars have tried to use case studies to revise western theories or frameworks for theoretical construction based on the reality of Chinese society. For instance, based on a collective action case of rural left-behind women participating in public pond resource management, Du et al. (2018) revised western collective action theory and field model, and constructed a multi-field analysis framework based on a case of collective action of rural women participating in public pond resource management. Yu and Leng (2019) analyzed a rural “three-left-over” care service project led by the Women’s Federation and explain the governance failure of sustainable supply of public service by combing the theory of public goods and incentives of local governments. Also, Li et al. (2019) combined the feminist perspective and the theory of organizational legitimacy to construct a theoretical framework for the building process of female entrepreneurs’ legitimacy, thereby expanding the connotations of the entrepreneurial legitimacy literature.

In this case, theoretical innovation in the field lags behind because few original theories can be drawn from our review. This caveat leaves much room for future research to make theoretical improvements.

### Empirical research

As an important trend in social sciences, empirical research can help identify differential experiences and outcomes for women, predict the social consequences of gender policies, and provides scientific guidance for improving gender policies. As noted earlier, there is fast growth in empirical studies in women. This section presents a detailed synthesis and evaluation of empirical research methods being used and explanatory empirical studies.

### Empirical methodology

We also reviewed the methodologies used in the 101 reviewed empirical articles (See Table 7). In terms of research types, most of the existing empirical studies are quantitative studies (68.32%), a small part is qualitative studies (27.72%), and only a few adopt a mixed research design (3.96%). In terms of basic research methods, survey research accounts for the largest proportion (65.35%), while literature research (23.66%) and field research (10.89%) accounted for a smaller proportion, and experimental

### Table 6. Types of theoretical contributions of research on women.

| Types of theoretical contribution | Frequency | Percent (%) |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| Descriptive analysis              | 49        | 22.07       |
| Evaluation Study                  | 16        | 7.21        |
| Normative analysis                | 102       | 45.95       |
| Theoretical application           | 28        | 12.61       |
| Theory test                       | 23        | 10.35       |
| Theory construction               | 4         | 1.60        |
| Total                             | 222       | 100         |

Note. The descriptive analysis and normative analysis classified by theoretical contribution here are different from the descriptive research and normative research classified by the empirical research purpose in Figure 3.
Table 7. Empirical research method.

| Category            | Number | Percentage (%) |
|---------------------|--------|----------------|
| Methods types       |        |                |
| Quantitative        | 69     | 68.32          |
| Qualitative         | 28     | 27.72          |
| Mixed               | 4      | 3.96           |
| Research methods    | Survey | 66             |
|                     | Literature | 24             |
|                     | Field   | 11             |
|                     | Experimental | 0             |
|                     | Text    | 12             |
|                     | Field research | 7             |
| Data examined       | Survey | 61             |
|                     | Census  | 2              |
|                     | In-depth interviews | 7     |
|                     | Official statistics | 14  |
|                     | Text    | 12             |
|                     | Field research | 7             |
| Data source         | Observation | 2              |
|                     | Primary source | 48             |
|                     | Secondary source | 53          |
| Unit of analysis    | Individual | 65          |
|                     | Group   | 13             |
|                     | Organization | 2              |
|                     | Community | 2              |
|                     | Social product | 19            |

Source. Compiled by the author.
Note. The texts used in studies include: official resumes (2), web searches (3), international conferences (3), journals (2), policy texts (1), etc. As some studies use multiple data sources, the sum of the frequency of each category of data sources is greater than 100%

Such a shortage of primary data sources would limit the ability of authors to examine crucial variables unique to research on women and the originality of research to advance our understanding of complex gendered phenomenon.

Explanatory research in empirical literature

Explanatory empirical research is the mainstream of empirical research on women in the world. It explains the causes or consequences of a phenomenon and provides evidence support for theoretical hypotheses. Given the growth rate in empirical research, this paper uses an integrated framework to synthesize the explanatory variables and explained variables in existing literature (see Figure 5).

Explanatory variables and explained variables can be grouped into four categories: society, organizations, family, and individual. Individual characteristics are the most common explanatory variables, while social and family factors have received increasing scholarly attention. Most early research on women started from the individual level, focusing on the impact of relevant factors on individual psychology, behavior, and welfare. Some studies have drawn attention to higher-level explanatory variables such as family, organization, and social factors in the past 10 years.

In brief, empirical research demonstrates interactions among micro-, meso-, and macro-level traits. At the micro-level, a variety of citizen characteristics have been used to examine gender inequality in China, including demographic variables (e.g., gender and fertility desire) and individual behaviors (e.g., migrate from the countryside to work), or analyze the effects of individual, family, and social factors on women’s psychology (e.g., willingness to be migrant workers, attitudes toward pension responsibility), behavior (e.g., policy concern and policy participation), and welfare (e.g., health and education). At the meso-level, studies explore the impact of characteristics of family (e.g., family labor division and intergenerational interaction) and on individuals, family, and society outcomes; At the macro-level, studies analyze (1) the influence of female groups on social organization, social production, social governance, and institutional changes; (2) the impact the characteristics of organizations (e.g., public expenditure) and society (e.g., female labor participation) on the welfare of female groups. Overall, these explanatory empirical studies demonstrate various new problems faced by both women and men in family, economy, society, and politics.

Discussion

Based on our systematic review of existing articles, this part aims to clarify the limits of research on women in the Chinese public administration. These limits shed light on theoretical insights and research methods that are underdeveloped and interesting research topics that are currently understudied in the field for future theoretical discussion and empirical testing.
First, the theoretical innovation of the existing literature needs to be improved. On the one hand, most of the existing articles use theoretical frameworks and concepts developed in the western context and mainly use sociological and economic research perspectives and logical explanations. The theoretical application of public administration and public policy disciplines is insufficient. Scholars often verify or supplement western theories based on the Chinese context. Looking back over the past decades, theoretical contributions of studies in women in Chinese journals are concepts with local characteristics such as uxorilocal marriage (招赘婚姻) and patrilineality (父系制度) (Li et al., 2006) and logical interpretations based on traditional Confucianism culture such as preference of boys to girls (重男轻女), family incense (家族香火), carry on the family name (传宗接代) (Yang et al., 2008). Very little research has established a theoretical framework by analyzing gender dilemmas in public administration and gender policies from the theoretical lens of public administration and public policy (Du et al., 2018; Yu & Leng, 2019). In the long run, the lack of gender-based theoretical innovation will hinder progress of Chinese public administration research and its intellectual contribution to the international academic community.

Second, the current research topics are relatively narrow. It is necessary to broaden the research horizon from multiple angles to enrich the content of the research. On the one hand, many studies are conducted on the origin and results of gender social issues, but few on Chinese women’s specific problems and gender policies in China. With the advancement of social civilization and the popularization
of higher education in the new era, contemporary women’s rights consciousness has gradually awakened, and people have begun to think more about the shortcomings of existing gender policy practices. For example, does shared parental leave work better than extended maternity leave for women in reducing gender discrimination in the public workplace? Should the differential retirement age between women and men be abolished? How can sexual harassment in the workplace and sexual violence against women be eliminated through policy design?

On the other hand, research rarely integrates diversified social and cultural backgrounds and governance realities in research topics. Research on women in international public administration usually conducts empirical research closely combining various gender issues and government governance defects. For example, sexual assault is one of the lowest reported crimes in the United States, mainly due to the indifference and improper handling of police. Meier and Nicholson-Crotty (2006) found that the proportion of female police officers in the jurisdiction is positively correlated with the number of reported sexual assault cases and the number of arrests. This may be because policewomen take sexual assault cases more seriously and may also increase the sensitivity and input of male colleagues, prompting female victims to be more willing to cooperate with the police. As research in the field often fails to empirically explore the role of female public officials in public service and public governance practices, as well as their influence on individuals, public organizations, and social governance, international research provides a novel perspective for Chinese public administration scholars.

Third, research design and research methods need to be strengthened. Further improvements can be made in the following aspects: In terms of research paths, the existing literature is mostly normative research based on anecdotal evidence or theoretical speculation. There is insufficient theory-guided, high-quality quantitative, qualitative or mixed research. Moreover, overwhelming emphasis has been placed on individual citizens and government leaders. Little is known about women-related groups, organizations, communities, social products, or their collaboration network and how contextual situations in China drive the outcomes of specific phenomenon.

**Conclusions**

This article begins with the goal of showing the development trends of women research and identifying the lessons we can learn from 30 years of scholarship in China. This paper selects 15 major journals in public administration and conducts a systematic analysis of 222 research on women since the 1980s. The systematic review shows that the research on women in Chinese journals has been continuously developed, and Chinese scholars have made concrete achievements in this field. However, compared with the work of international academic peers, the current research of Chinese scholars still has certain gaps in theoretical construction, research topics, and research designs. As gender equality has become a global sustainable development goal and an important task of China’s governance modernization, Chinese public administration will inevitably strengthen gender research.

In terms of knowledge production, the questions to be answered by the research on women in public administration are: How to use existing theories to analyze women’s experiences? What kind of knowledge is contained in those newly-generated and inexplicable women’s experiences? How should studies on women in public administration introduce gender to reflect on the basic assumptions and knowledge connotations of male positions and reshape new knowledge? The lack of comprehensive knowledge for the development of theories and empirical settings has made answering these questions challenging.

This article establishes an integrated research framework around research on women in Chinese public administration to overcome this challenge from two aspects: discipline evolution and theoretical-empirical framework. On the one side, this article clarifies the evolution and current situation of women research in Chinese journals to help Chinese public administration scholars grasp the deficiencies of existing research and consider future research directions. On the other side, this systematic review also contributes to the development of women literature by summarizing theoretical and empirical frameworks needed for future research.

Given the above understanding, we conclude by suggesting the following lessons learn from past research and what future studies may explore further.

Lesson 1: Improve theoretical innovation. As Chinese scholars often rely too heavily on traditional concepts and ideas and lag behind in its use and development of theories, they can make unique theoretical contributions by having a dialog with new and innovative public administration theories and influential women research. Note that theoretical innovation is likely to occur through the integration of international theories and local contexts (such as Chinese women’s issues, gender policy, and realities of social governance), which reflects the struggles and challenges facing by Chinese women at the intersection of transformation of society, culture, and systems.

Lesson 2. Identify contexts and theoretical mechanism. Given the scholarship of women mostly examines Western countries, it is essential to explore the effects of gender representation on social outcomes in different political, social, and cultural contexts (Meier & Morton, 2015). For example, Stensöta et al. (2015) analyzed the conditions for women in public office to reduce corruption based on institutional theory and pointed out that the powerful bureaucratic system can de-gender the asymmetrical gendered experiences, thus mediating the
relationship between female officers and corruption. Potter and Volden (2021) showed that women’s leadership can generate a conditional policy premium when women are in agencies that focus on women’s issues and that have a supportive working environment. These studies imply that institutional theory can underpin studies in women, which reveal the theoretical mechanism behind gender-related phenomena in countries with heterogeneous characteristics. Because women are embedded within social and political contexts, scholars should pay closer attention to the macro and meso-level contexts in China, such as the patronage networks, market transformation, political reform, culture and social norms, and their influence on behaviors and status of women.

Lesson 3. Diversify research topics. Scholars should pay more attention to hot topics in the real world, and provide theoretical guidance and evidence for policy formulation through solid research. Since the 1980s, networked, hierarchical, and multi-centered governance models have gradually become popular in countries including China. Studies of women at the organizational level or network level are needed to advance the understanding of women’s roles in the trend of government decentralization, market transformation, and political reform in China. Scholars can further expand the research scope from governments to its social partners such as international organizations, non-profits, private organizations, and other diversified organizational fields, and explore how women in collaboration networks affect administrative performance and social welfare. Theories such as coproduction (Riccucci et al., 2016), public-private partnership (Johnston, 2017), and representative bureaucracy (Meier & Morton, 2015; Meier & Nicholson-Crotty, 2006) can also enrich academic reserves of Chinese scholars. For instance, it is interesting to empirically explore the differences in collaboration governance by the gender of organizational leaders and the impact of female officials on social welfare and public organization performance. Overall, future research should continue to track the frontier of the international academic community, and explore interesting research issues in the practices of Chinese government reforms and social situations to enrich the current single research topic.

Lesson 4. Methodologies. Chinese scholars should conduct more rigorous empirical research design and adopt up-to-date quantitative and qualitative methodologies to make up for the shortcomings of single research methods. Scholars can learn from cutting-edge research, focusing on accurately measuring relevant variables, and testing gender differences and gender effects by establishing panel data and conducting random control trials (Park & Liang, 2021). Moreover, experimental research methods have been developing and growing in recent years as cutting-edge tools in testing theoretical hypotheses, probing causal effects, and explaining causal mechanisms. In identity economics, experimental methods have provided rich empirical evidence for theoretical development in the past 10 years and has opened a new era of identity economics research (Albert et al., 2011). Experimental methods has become popular in international public administration research on women (Baekgaard & George, 2018; Barnes et al., 2018; Hamidullah et al., 2021; Riccucci et al., 2014, 2016). For instance, Riccucci et al. (2016) conducted a survey experiment and found that female leaders in recycling agencies can enhance willingness of women to coproduce recycling services, thereby promoting overall social welfare. The international frontier experimental design provides references for Chinese researchers to improve research methodologies.

Aside from the opportunities for extending research, this paper also provides practical guidance for policy makers and practitioners to improve practices dealing with women’s issues in China. Policy practices such as maternity leave or increasing women’s participation in village government in China have sometimes generated unintended consequences because of a failure to recognize asymmetric gender norms, experiences, and culture. This article inspires public administration scholars and practitioners to identify interpersonal, internalized, and institutional barriers women in public administration face, and incorporate the values of fairness, justice, gender equality, and inclusiveness into all levels of government and all stages of legislation and policy process. They should also reflect on the impact of government reforms and policy practices on different social groups (especially socially disadvantaged groups) and the possible contributions of different groups to public administration. In short, gender should be further incorporated into public administration research and practices. The diversified public administration in China is calling for more in-depth research on women.

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