Gendered Leadership Experience of Chinese Women Managers

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With more women doing paid work and claiming management positions, at least in the junior and middle levels, women’s leadership has become an increasingly popular research area in North America and Europe. Studies can be roughly classified into two categories, both of which are closely connected with general leadership research: feminine leadership; and barriers women face when working as formal leaders. For example, some studies (e.g. Kouzes and Ponser, 1997) concluded that transformational leadership (Burns, 1978, and Bass and Avolio, 1993) is the leadership style demanded in today’s organizations. Studies on feminine leadership concluded that women managers are more likely to apply a transformational leadership style (e.g. Loden, 1985, and Bass and Avolio, 1997). In light of these studies, researchers on barriers facing women managers attempt to find reasons in societal, structural and individual realms for the underrepresentation of women managers, despite acknowledging that women seem more suited to leadership roles in contemporary organizations.

While extensive studies have been done in North America and Europe, little such knowledge has been gained in the Mainland China context. This study is an attempt explore women managers’ leadership experience in Mainland China, with the hope that more researchers will join the effort.

The study was carried out in the specific organizational context of private-owned enterprises in Mainland China since they operate mainly by the market mechanism, unlike state-owned enterprises, and therefore closely resemble the Western industrial enterprises. In addition, under the current economic reform, private enterprises are expected to replace the state-owned enterprises, becoming the backbone of the Mainland China economy (Zhang and Ming, 2000).

In this study, ten women middle managers between the age of 25 and 45, working in eight private enterprises of different sizes and in various industries were interviewed. Their professions include general management, sales, marketing, finance and accounting, software development project management, and human resources. In order to see how their work affected their family life, special attention was paid when selecting participants to ensure a mixture of single, married without children and married with children. The study was conducted by interviews following loose guidelines with an effort to solicit their active participation.

The study focused on two research questions:

1. What are these women managers’ perceptions of leadership?
2. How has being a woman affected their leadership experience?
Constructing the concept of managerial leadership in this specific context

The perception on the positions with official leadership responsibilities will affect a woman’s intention to enter those positions, and affect upper managers to make decisions to recruiting women for such positions. Since there is no term in Chinese to convey the meaning of western style leadership, the aim of understanding leadership perception of women managers was achieved through exploring their ideas on the differences between “managers” and “leaders,” and through analyzing how they carried out their responsibilities as managers.

In contemporary Western management literature, management refers to the traditional command and control approach of managers, while leadership is the process among a team through which team members set visions, are motivated, and are developed to achieve the visions. With this understanding, leaders appear in all organizational echelons, as long as they provide such leadership.

This study showed that the participants understood managers and leaders as being two distinctive groups of people. While manager sometimes refers to those who have official titles and control other people’s work, the term “manager” is usually used as middle managers. On the contrary, the term “leader” refers to the people on the highest rung of an organization’s administration hierarchy. Besides the position differences, “leader” connotes being authoritarian, which is not extant with the term “manager.” Finally, leaders are believed to possess the kind of qualities, competence and temperament that women seldom have. Clearly, to the participants, “manager” is more gender neutral, “leader” is conveyed with much stronger masculine terms. In this sense, the participants commonly agree that as women, they would make good managers, but they would not be able to work as leaders.

Even though by their own definition, the women managers did not regard themselves as leaders, leadership was a crucial element necessary for them to fulfil their responsibilities as managers. Commonly demonstrated leadership behaviors include winning respect and trust from employees; resourcefulness; coaching employees and creating a pleasant working environment. From these leadership behaviors, themes of their leadership styles as women middle managers emerge. To briefly summarize, there are four characteristics of their leadership: hierarchical but not authoritarian; transactional with care; valuing relationships; and leadership based on personal integrity instead of charisma.

Understanding the impact of being women on their leadership experience. Social forces shaping gender identity of Mainland Chinese women

In order to understand how being women affects their leadership experience, we need to first get a sense of being an urban woman in contemporary Mainland China. There are three major social forces that significantly shape these women’s gender identity. The first force is the China’s longest feudalism history and its legacy on today’s society. The feudalistic tradition regards women as inferior to men in all respects. They were considered psychologically weak and intellectually undeveloped. With its deep roots in the culture, this belief is still held by many Chinese men and women. Even some of the participants thought it was true to some extent.
The second force is the socialist movement, since the foundation of socialist China in 1949. In this movement, women’s equal rights have been stipulated in the constitution. “Equal work and equal pay” is one of the primary rights that are protected by Chinese laws. Urban women in Mainland China have been encouraged and required to participate in paid work. For most jobs, especially technical and management jobs, part time work is not an option. To work full time is the norm for Mainland Chinese urban women, whether single or married, with or without children. Research (e.g. Stockman, Bonney and Sheng, 1995, and Second Survey 2000) about Chinese women’s work motives show that participating paid work not only meets the survival needs, it is regarded as a crucial factor for women’s sense of worth and self-fulfillment. A good portion of Chinese working women prioritize their work as equal to or higher than family (Kerr, Delahanty and Humpage, 1996 and Liang, 1994). In such social reality, to be a working woman is not only a legitimate identity, it is actually the only legitimate.

However, Chinese women’s equal rights with men are problematic in the following ways: First, their equal rights were granted by the state, not through women’s struggle based on the awakened consciousness of women’s submissive status. Also, by the time women’s equal rights were written into law, it was commonly acknowledged that Chinese women’s liberation had been achieved. Gender, therefore, has not been an angle for making sense of social issues. Under these circumstances, “Gender became an unmarked and neutralized category, its role as a vessel of self-identity was greatly diminished (Yang, 1999, p. 41). Second, the equal rights that Chinese women have been enjoyed are not based on the differences between men and women. Rather, equality means sameness, with masculinity as the norm (Li, 1997). Third, the equality exists more in law books than in reality. There has been little organized effort to dispel the negative stereotypes about women, and the actual gender discriminatory practices go on without sanction. This gender duality – the espoused equality and the practical inequality (Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998) – has been the principal mechanism sustaining the inequality between men and women in Mainland China.

The final major social force shaping Chinese women’s gender identity is the economic reform that China is undergoing now. Concurrent with the economic reform, the social ideology is changing as well. The image of “traditional Chinese women” with the virtues of being gentle, caring, supportive and sacrificing for their husbands’ career is accelerating in popularity through mass media and welcomed by society, especially Chinese men (Thakur, 1997). Besides, the media strongly promote another concept of the ideal women, in which they are depicted as strong and capable workers, as well as nurturing wives and mothers (Kerr et al., 1996).

These social forces cause an ambiguity about Mainland Chinese women: while even they believe they are inferior to men, the dominant discourses state their equality. They are expected to be independent and hardworking workers, to achieve career success, but at the same time are anticipated to be obedient and sacrifice their own careers for the sake of their husband’s. This ambiguity leads to the paradoxical gender identity of women in Mainland China, how they are treated in and outside of workplaces, and how they treat themselves.

**Gendered leadership experience**

Being a woman is not a particular barrier upon first entering the management ranks if she performs well as a regular employee and demonstrates a strong aspiration for her career. The barriers raise when they try to enter senior management positions, which they define as “leader” positions. The barrier comes from their belief that normally, only men possess the necessary
qualities of being leaders. And this belief is reinforced by the preference for men when senior managers make promotion decisions.

While obtaining management positions, being a woman has a significant impact on carrying out their leadership responsibilities. Three of the four characteristics of their leadership styles reflect such impacts:

**Hierarchical but not authoritarian.** Even though the cultural norm determines that leadership was hierarchical – managers are supposed to possess better technical skills and more acumen in business and the world in general, and are expected to protect their employees – a woman’s leadership style did not have the authoritarian element, as defined in Paternal Leadership studies of male leaders (Farh and Cheng, 2000). The participants explained that if women applied a more authoritarian style, they would encounter resistance from their subordinates. However, their male counterparts usually employed the authoritarian style to great effect.

**Transactional with care.** With the limitations that the enterprises imposed on middle managers, women managers applied a transactional leadership style, in the sense that they offered desirable rewards in exchange for an employee’s good performance. However, these women managers expressed particular care in the interest of their employees. In addition to providing tangible rewards, most made an effort to get to know their employees, and to pay attention to their emotional needs. They also regarded coaching and developing their employee’s skills as an important part of their job as managers, which their male counterparts seemed not to share.

**Valuing relationship.** In Chinese culture, particular attention is paid to relationships in all social contexts. Establishing relationships with superior managers, peer managers, and external business partners is an indispensable part of a manager’s work. Here, these women managers encountered problems because most of the people they need to build relationships with are men. The women managers felt that they could not have as close a relationship with their male superiors as their male counterparts, because this would raise suspicion that they could obtain favors by using their sexuality. However, close relationship with upper managers was very important in order to secure the resources to achieve the team goals. In this sense, employees preferred to work with male managers. Maintaining quality communications with male peer managers was difficult because men preferred to interact with men, and made no effort to include women managers into their informal structures. While men and women managers had different ways of communicating, women managers were expected to adapt to the male style. The relationship women managers had with each other was problematic, too. Due to negative stereotypes about women, the women managers generally regarded other women managers as less competent and less valuable allies. Furthermore, “Under conditions where resources and opportunities are perceived to be scarce for women, relationships between women may also be more competitive” (Ely, 1994, p. 137). Since enterprises demand more lateral cooperation, and building relationships with peer managers is an important aspect of leadership responsibilities, the women managers were at a disadvantage. The relationship with external business partners is also hard to establish and maintain, because negative stereotypes about women made it more difficult for the women managers to win their trust. Plus, on some occasions, there was the danger that the women manager’s were expected to entertain their male business partners in social and recreational activities, which caused great discomfort. The challenge to establish relationship with external business partners not only caused hardship for women managers to do their current work, it became a barrier for their advancement into upper
management positions, since at that level, building and maintaining such relationships will be a major responsibility.

The last characteristic of their leadership style - personal integrity versus charisma – does not seem to be informed by gender factors.

Consistently, the managers had not thought about how being women affected their work. For most, being a manager does not conflict with their ideas of being an ideal woman. On the contrary, some stated it actually facilitated their goal of being an ideal woman, because success was a symbol of independence, and the result of one’s intelligence and diligence, considered indispensable elements of being an ideal woman. However, they also agreed the ideal women should also fulfill their responsibilities at home, which made those with young children feel guilty because other family members, usually grandparents, took care of housework and childcare.

They also tended not to interpret their experience in terms of gender. They generally agreed that in their enterprises, they were treated fairly because there were systems, e.g. performance evaluation systems, to ensure the same treatment as men. If differences were noticed, they were inclined to reason that they were less competent than men. Ironically, the lack of consciousness of their discriminatory treatments seemed to benefit these women managers. Since the women managers admitted that they were less competent than men in general, they worked harder to compensate the imagined inadequacy, which means they achieved more than most of their male colleagues. To some extent, these achievements facilitated their entrance into management positions. Also, denying the existence of gender discriminatory practice in their enterprises spared them the sense of being victimized. They tended to attribute their success at work, or the lack of it, to individual efforts, rather than external factors. This “internal locus of control” made them more active in developing their competence and improving their qualities.

Despite these benefits, the unawareness of the structural discrimination and the acceptance of negative stereotypes about women are detrimental. Failing to recognize how gender distinctions were caused by structures, these were regarded as individual actions. The women managers attributed their success to their exceptional personal effort. They believed that as long as women were willing to make the kind of effort and sacrifice that they made, theoretically all could achieve career success. Instead of challenging the negative stereotype about women, the unfriendly arrangements at work for people with family responsibilities and the lack of support for women to achieve as much as men, they ascribed the seeming lower achievement of women to their lack of competence and lower desire to achieve.

This belief caused four serious problems. First, when women managers made the same arrangements as their male counterparts to under-use female subordinates and spent less time to develop them, the women employees’ under-achievement became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Second, failure to recognize the forces in the system that thwart their career development would raise doubt about their competence. This doubt will predictably lead to frustrations and harm their sense of self-efficacy. Third, the assumption of men’s superior competence would limit women’s desire for career development and make them achieve less than they were capable of. Finally, accepting the fact that men were more powerful than women in organizations made it more difficult for women to turn to each other for support. The acceptance of the negative stereotypes about women and the lack of awareness of the institutionalized hostility toward women hampered
the potential solidarity among women, to take actions to fight for the real rights they deserved, not the lip service they had been receiving.

The purpose of the study is to raise consciousness about women’s gender identity and to provide the lens through which women managers can view their work and life experience, by shedding light on the male-dominated structures hostile to women. The awareness will help women managers to make a deliberate and informed choice of the kinds of relationships they want to build with men and women in and out of their enterprises, and to make an effort to change the current systems and structures that are unfavorable to women.

References


