

Gender issues and barriers in chinese business



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What kind of barriers blocked (interrupt) female to be an organization leader in China?

Abstract

China is one of the most populous countries in the world, with over 50 percent of its female population in full time work. Like many other countries, China's women are under-represented in senior management or organisational leadership roles within Chinese organisations. Yet Chinese women are being educated as well as men, if not better, and benefit from fundamental policies which prevent discrimination in the world of work. It appears that there are barriers which affect Chinese women's ability to advance along the career ladder to become organisation leaders.

A qualitative, Grounded Theory based study was carried out to determine what, if any, were the barriers to women becoming organisation leaders in China. The study aimed to ensure a focus on women themselves and so the sample comprised women already working within Chinese businesses and organisations, who were asked to identify barriers to their becoming business leaders or senior executives. Sensitising questions followed up an initial questionnaire and proforma, to probe into more detail about their responses.

The Grounded Theory process of Open, Axial and Selective Coding was followed systematically, and the final three categories of Leadership Effectiveness, Stereotypes and Preconceptions, and Social and Societal Norms and Expectations and Personal Characteristics were identified and discussed. It seems that the key barriers to women becoming organisational

leaders are their capacity to be effective leaders, the stereotypes and preconceptions of them as women workers, on the part of others and on the part of the women themselves, and the social norms versus their personal characteristics. This last category included unique aspects of Chinese culture and business etiquette which pose significant challenges for women in leadership roles.

More research is now needed to explore in more concrete ways these barriers, and to identify practical and achievable ways that they might be overcome.

Introduction

China is one of the most populous nations in the world (Saran and Guo, 2005). “ China is a large country, with more than half a billion women, over 50 per cent of who are in full-time employment” (Cooke, 2004 p 243). This represents a significant percentage of the workforce. There is, apparently, a discrepancy between the numbers of women in employment and the numbers of women who achieve senior leadership roles within Chinese organisations. It seems that “ knowledge about these Chinese women in general and women in management in specific, remains very limited” (Cooke, 2004 p 243). There appear to be very little sources of information on the numbers of women in senior management or leadership positions in either the public or the private sector in China. While this may not seem to be a surprise to many, it does beg the question of why women do not achieve senior leadership positions within businesses and organisations in China, particularly given a growing awareness of China’s success within the

global business environment, which must influence business and organisational practices. It is established within the business and organisational literature, as well as other social literature, that “gender discrimination remains a reality in our society” (Agars, 2004 p 103). This is despite evolution of societies and apparent changes in values, because there is evidence that in all aspects of social life people and their reactions and judgements are affected by gender stereotypes and preconceptions (Agars, 2004). It is also well known that there are more men than women in managerial roles in the business and occupational world (Lublin, 1996), and this disparity increases the higher the seniority of the position (Agars, 2004; Adler and Izraili, 1994; AMBA, 1996).

The rationale for investigating the barriers which block or interrupt women from being organisation leaders in China stems partly from the great reliance of the Chinese economy on its economic capacity, and in particular its business capacity, locally and in the global marketplace. Economic success of developing countries (if China can still be considered such) is clearly linked to gender equality (Morrison and Jutting, 2005). If Chinese businesses are to succeed, they need to espouse and contain the characteristics of successful businesses. If Chinese state organisations are to function at their optimal capacity and make best use of available resources, they should optimise their usage of those resources, a significant one being their human resources. Women may be being overlooked as potentially valuable contributors to senior management and leadership positions. However, this may simply reflect the lower status of women in Chinese society (Tian et al, 2007). Paradoxically, Chinese women are not necessarily viewed by all as of

lower status. Foo et al (2006) quote a United Nations Development Fund study which summarises Chinese women as outshining men in the business arena because they are better at communications; they are able to think more rationally; and because they pursue their careers with single-minded resolve. Yet there is ongoing evidence that these women are still under-represented in senior leadership roles.

Noble (2006) states “ excluding women from leadership roles impacts on productivity and militates against a workforce characterised by a diversity of workers” (p 599). This idea of gender inequality comes down to simple business sense. “ Models of women in senior positions and in equal numbers generally benefit the institutions offering different perspectives, experiences and contributions women can make. (Noble, 2006 p 599). Noble (2006) describes the lack of women in such roles as a “ wastage of management and leadership talent which arises from and is perpetuated by the current under representation of women at senior levels,” and which “ seriously undermines organisations’ ability to respond to change and threatens its future viability and vitality in the face of the economic challenges of the changing workplace.” p 599). Therefore, it can easily be seen that for optimal business performance, the capacity of women to contribute to its success should not be overlooked, and so a study into the barriers which face women in achieving such positions could be of considerable significance for such organisations within China.

However, the other rationale for this choice of investigation is to promote the interests of women within the Chinese world of employment and entrepreneurship, and to ensure that the research carried out focuses on <https://assignbuster.com/gender-issues-and-barriers-in-chinese-business/>

their perspectives and illuminates their experiences. It is typical of the business world that the theoretical arena it is supported by is dominated by studies based on rationalistic principles and on outputs and outcomes relating to success and factors which contribute to that success. There is a human dimension of business, which the theoretical domain is now starting to appreciate, in which business capacity and success can be found to be reliant not only on the skills of the workforce, but on their capacity to contribute in multiple ways to the organisation and its outputs.

Understanding the views and experiences of women may help not only to define the barriers which face them in relation to achieving leadership roles, but to set out some ways in which such barriers might be overcome, sidestepped, reduce or even removed from their path. Women within employment seem to consistently suffer, at a certain level, from a relative inequality with men. Women in China, however, have for a long time enjoyed employment rights based on equality legislation which has shaped social norms to support women into full time employment, which continues throughout their working lives, even when they have children (Cooke, 2004). Despite this, women do not enjoy the same levels of seniority in organisations and businesses as men do, and certainly not in similar numbers. This is a human rights issue (Noble, 2006) and one which is of concern to China and to all women and women's activists. It may be related to a trend within former socialist countries of what Fan (2003) calls 'transition', which is characterised by a resurgence of gendered differences in occupational spheres.

Because China is a business culture in a state of transition and change, and in which the effects of change may not be realised for some time, there is a need for investigative studies which explore the characteristics of this culture, from the points of view of those within it. There is an issue here about understanding what barriers present themselves to women who aspire to leadership roles, but also, whether or not women in these Chinese business and occupational spheres do view themselves as working towards such advancements.

Because of the lack of empirical research on the subject of the barriers which present themselves to women who wish to aspire to leadership roles in organisations in China, the choice of methodological approach for the inquiry was limited, as quantitative studies are based on hypotheses developed from previously published research. Good quality quantitative research studies also require large samples of a diverse study population, and the limitations of this academic research project do not allow for the kind of survey that would provide adequate numbers, statistically, for a purely quantitative study. Therefore, having explored a range of options for the investigation of the research question, the author came to the conclusion that a quantitative approach would be best suited to this area. However, the author was keen to include simple descriptive statistics within the study data, and also wanted to achieve a similar level of rigour as is usually achievable within the quantitative domain. Therefore, the author settled on the use of Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), which is a methodology derived from symbolic interactionism and within which there are rigidly defined stages of the investigation, with clearly outlined process and steps towards the

development of theoretical understandings which nevertheless remain firmly grounded in the data derived from the study (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Goulding, 2005).

The following dissertation is set out within the traditional parameters required by the university and by the academic standards of higher education. There is first a literature review, then a description and exploration of the methodology utilised within the study. This is followed by an outline of the data characteristics and background, which is then followed an exploration and discussion of the qualitative data derived from the study. This data is considered and evaluated alongside extant research findings which relate to the data, as is required by the Grounded Theory method, in which data analysis and literature analysis occur simultaneously, such that the accessed literature is treated much as the data is, and subject to the same constant comparison (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This is followed by conclusions and recommendations for practice and further research. The study aimed to illuminate the murky depths of untapped knowledge and understanding of the barriers which interrupt women's career progression within Chinese organisations, and thus barriers will be identified and to some extent, their meanings or significance explored. The literature review and the data analysis are separated into themed subheadings, to better signpost the emergent discursive threads of the study. Literature Review

Due to the nature of the topic area, it is not possible to address all the available literature, but a critical literature review of key issues will be attempted. The literature review draws on sources related to Chinese business, women in business, entrepreneurship, social theory and even

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feminist theory, as well as general business and organisational studies, in order to explore the potential barriers that might have already been identified as challenging women to be organisational leaders. The balance of research is affected by the available literature, and by the nature of the research which has already been carried out into similar topics. Little however is written, in terms of empirical research, which directly addresses this dissertation's research question. However, there are valuable contributions to be made by research from across the business and organisational literature in relation to generic and specific factors affecting women's opportunities to become organisational leaders.

China has a vast area of land, and is characterised by considerable social, economic, geographic and ethnic diversity (Chow et al, 2004). Only those factors which can directly be related to the study question will be addressed here. This will allow for the setting of the context and current understanding of the factors which affect the experience of women in China aspiring to become organisational and business leaders. In China, women work alongside their husbands throughout their lifespan, and are supported by employment policies which assure them a reasonably equal role as workers, in terms of basic employment rights (Chow et al, 2004). Therefore, women have a firm foundation within the world of employment, and should, it could be argued, be surrounded by the same opportunities as their male counterparts in terms of career advancement. However, this does not seem to be the case.

It is a global feature of business that women seem to experience what is known as the 'glass ceiling' within occupational life (Ryan and Haslam, <https://assignbuster.com/gender-issues-and-barriers-in-chinese-business/>

2005; Cortis and Cassar, 2005). This refers to the fact that women can attain up to a certain level of seniority in many organisations or businesses, but cannot break through into senior leadership roles. There are numerous studies which explore how and why this glass ceiling came to exist, and how it is perpetuated. In terms of Chinese culture, there are strong traditions of loyalty to family and loyalty to one's boss or employer (Fu et al, 2004). This author would question whether this notion of loyalty contributes to the glass ceiling within Chinese organisations.

Gender

Obviously, the first and most obvious potential barrier for women in business in China (and in any other culture or nation-state) is that of gender. Gender within this context needs defining, as theoretically, it is still the subject of some argument. Ahl (2006) refers back to feminist scholarship which employed the term gender to distinguish between biological sex and socially constructed definitions of sex, the social practices and representations associated with femininity or masculinity" (p 596). In this article, gender is used to refer to sex in terms of the biological differences between male and female, and the socially-constructed models of masculine and feminine. It is important to note that these may differ according to Western and Chinese norms, and where possible, differentiations between cultural definitions of gender will be highlighted.

It has long been known that business is a male or masculine domain. There has been research which suggests that men and women even differ in terms of occupational aspirations, such that males would tend to aspire towards

male-dominated occupations in which they can hope for better success, and women, though to a somewhat lesser extent, showing a tendency to veer towards female-dominated occupations in which they are more likely to be able to excel more easily (Powell and Butterfield, 2003). This may be partly due to historical and even current forms of gender discrimination within business and occupational/professional spheres. Gender discrimination however is no longer as apparent as it used to be, thanks to anti-discrimination policies in most organisations and nations (Beck and Davis, 2005). However, in China, “ the half a century’s state intervention in women’s employment has largely focused on protecting women’s labour rights and increasing their share in employment quantitatively, whereas little provision exists which aims to ensure and improve the quality of women’s employment prospects” (Cooke, 2004 p 245). Cooke (2004) shows that women are less represented in professional or management positions, and are more prevalent in clerical and lower-level manual work (Sargeson 2006; Sargeson 2007a).

This is significant, given that Chinese women do not traditionally take career breaks to have children, and view their role as equal to that of their husbands in terms of full time work (Cooke, 2004; Sargeson 2007b). This is in direct contrast to the Westernised (and perhaps globalised) norms of women’s occupational experience, wherein women have to either accepted diminished occupational capacity and career advancement in order to have children, or embrace childlessness in order to comply with inherent business norms and achieve success within those parameters (Wood and Newton, 2006; Burke, 1999). Even so, “ men make up the majority of employees in

most of the occupations and in state owned sectors where average earnings are highest” (Cooke, 2004 p 245). This is no new finding.

For women in China, “ historical and socio-political factors such as the legacy of Marxism, state/party control, economic reform, political upheavals, local conditions and global influences” have affected their self identity, they understanding of their place within the business and employment worlds, and the ways in which they perceive of and experience their career progress and success (Chow et al, 2004, p 161). China has followed an intellectual revolution which has brought to the fore gender studies and feminist studies (Chow et al, 2004), which suggests that the cultural response would likely be that women are more aware of the kinds of organisational and societal cultural barriers to their career advancement into leadership roles.

Studying Chinese women’s experiences of barriers to career advancement could be problematic, however, because the very terms used by Westernised scholarly discourse to describe issues of gender and women’s equal rights are essentially difficult to translate (Chow et al, 2004). However, as all literature for this assignment is accessed in English, this should only be viewed as a potential weakness to the study if the respondents are first language Chinese and there are discrepancies between underlying meanings.

Another feature of gender discrimination in Chinese business is the fact that the “ state-owned enterprises and public-sector organisations typically operate in an internal labour market system in which jobs are rarely advertised, and promotion decisions are made internally...by superiors”

(Cooke, 2004, p 249). This means that internal cultural and business mores and codes, which are often set and perpetuated by managers and leaders (who are most likely men), are perpetuated in a way that might exclude women from achieving advancement (Boisot and Child, 1996; Church et al, 2003). These are however buried, often, and not easily labelled as gender discrimination (Beck and Davis, 2005). This is a common feature of all businesses and organisations, it seems, which continue to operate along traditional ' patriarchal' and hierarchical lines.

Cultural issues also point to gender issues which may present as barriers to women's career advancement (Brush, 1992). Hanser (2005) explores emerging conceptions of gender in China, in relation, in particular, to service work. This ethnographic study within three urban Chinese retail settings shows that there are gendered class distinctions which are communicated and perpetuated within this sector, which a move from socialism to a more marketized society, wherein younger, youthful and feminine (and urban) women are valued while older and rural women are devalued (Hanser, 2005; Duehr and Bono, 2006). This is reflected in other international contexts and other types of societies (Egri and Ralston, 2004). Hanser (2005) related this to a legitimization of certain roles for certain women within Chinese employment contexts, a fact supported by Coe (1992). This then has nothing to do with role effectiveness, but to do with the external characteristics of women (Hanser, 2005; Cooke; 2003; Cooke, 2005). Appropriate ' behaviours' may be reinforced and inappropriate behaviours censured by such limited characterisations of the suitable female employee (Hanser, 2005). Lewis (2006) uses the example of women entrepreneurs, and suggests that " the

behaviour (business or other) of women involved in entrepreneurial activity of whatever sort is defined and evaluated according to the standards of an invisible masculine norm” (p 453). This shows that underlying business activities are gendered definitions of how people within the market should behave and present themselves (Collinson and Collinson, 1990; Connell, 2005). Because of this, women’s ability to gain commercial, business or occupational success is defined and constrained by apparently unseen (but very real) forces (Cornelius and Skinner, 2008):

“ Where this behaviour is judged as differing from the normative standard of serious, professional business, women experience an ‘ othering’ as the non-male and are marked out.” (Lewis, 2006 p 453).

This is a constant theme of the business literature, that the male is the standard and the female is viewed as ‘ other’, as unconventional, as non-standard (and perhaps inherently non-compliant) (Beechey, 1987).

Perceptions of gender and gender limitations may also be internalised by many women, and may explain one reason why women do not lead as many successful businesses as men, or are not business leaders as frequently (Bryman, 1987). Kalleberg and Leicht (2005) show that women are less likely to innovate, take risks or step out in new directions in business than men, perhaps due to “ the social disapproval girls are likely to incur for straying from socially accepted, gender-normative patterns of behaviour, and the encouragement and tolerance that boys typically receive for engaging in innovative play and nonconforming behaviour” (p 142).

Education

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It is thought by some theorists that the lower representation of women in senior positions is due to their marginally lower levels of education compared to those of men in China (Cooke, 2004). However, it is also apparent that amount of women in higher education has been increasing recently in China, at a much faster rate than men (Cooke, 2004). Education is seen as a key to senior executive careers (Baruch and Peiperl, 2000; Bickerstaffe, 1992; Carpenter, 1997). This would suggest that the relative lack of education suggested as a barrier to women achieving senior leadership roles may be a factor which is being rapidly eroded. However, it is hard to find evidence of this. Cooke (2004) also argues that “ discrimination against women starts in the recruitment selection to higher education in institutions” (p 247), and this has follow-on effects throughout their subsequent careers. Women are under-represented in certain subjects, including science and business subjects, and have to perform better than men to achieve the same levels of acclaim (Cooke, 2004).

Bahry and Marr (2005) show how women’s education in Qatar has developed to such an extent that women are being over-represented in higher education, and that this might signify a shift in gender-dominance in future business domains. However, the nature of this education is not necessarily such that it would develop the kinds of abilities and capacities that are needed in order to gain leadership roles later on in life (Bahry and Marr, 2005).

Globalisation and the current international business environment

It is important to consider where women business leaders or potential business leaders in China might locate themselves, ideologically and paradigmatically, and how the current environment might affect their ability to assume such senior roles. Mamman and Liu (2008) discuss the difference between macro-level examinations of globalisation on business (and on culture and society), and the micro-level, in which the effects of globalisation on individuals can be appreciated. Globalisation can potentially affect all areas of business (Gunkel et al, 2007). China has, since the 1980s, both embraced and significantly benefited from industrial and business globalisation (Fishman, 2006; Hirst and Thompson, 1999; Stiglitz, 2002; 2003; 2006). According to Mamman and Liu (2008), “ globalisation is particularly important to a society like China where the impact of globalization can have both positive and negative connotations depending on where individuals are geographically located and whether they operate in the public or private sector” (p 2). Thus, there may be barriers to achieving career success or business leadership for women in China which are directly related to their personal experience or understanding of globalisation. Mamman and Liu (2008) suggest that “ the form and manner in which globalization is pursued by organizations (private or public) and the nation states is an aggregation of thoughts and behaviour of individuals enabled and constrained by global forces” (p 6).

This kind of understanding would suggest that global forces may act as barriers to women becoming business leaders, but it could also be viewed that globalisation could likely be an emancipating force for women in China, because it might at least provide role models for business leadership in other

areas and across a diverse range of businesses (Elliott and Stead, 2008). However, it is not enough to cite the forces that emerge from globalisation, such as greater participation in more diverse markets or the presence of women peers with which to do business. It is also important to understand the individual level of response to the new global business environment. It seems that “ to understand why and how organizations and institutions behave in the global economy, we also need to understand how key actors interpret global phenomenon” (p 6). Therefore, accessing individual women who work within business, and women who are seeking to develop as entrepreneurs, would provide this personal understanding of the global forces of business and perhaps identify more individual as well as international barriers to women succeeding as business leaders.

Globalisation is viewed in the business literature usually in positive terms (Mittelman, 2006), but Oka (1998) argues that this may not be the case. Oka (1998) suggests that the terminology of globalisation has “ a distinct connotation of something whole ...[that] suggests absolute relatedness, harmony, balance and smoothness” (p 32). However, this, according to Oka (1998) is not the case, and there is the argument that globalisation might corrupt social values which underpin society and over-value economics and material gain. However, given the current socialist model of society and economy in China, globalisation may not necessarily be a destabilising force, and the history of business in China in the last two decades certainly suggests that the country and its industry has taken full advantage of the opportunities globalisation presents (Mamman and Liu, 2008; Parker, 2005).

Mamman and Liu (2008) carried out research in individual views and responses to globalisation in China, and found that “ respondents view globalization from economic perspective rather than from cultural convergence or political convergence perspective.” (p 32). This suggests that globalisation is most significant to industry and business for Chinese women in business. Mamman and Liu (2008) also state that their respondents viewed globalisation as a product of capitalism: “ they view globalization not only as economic activities but as a philosophical and ideological (not cultural) shift in the way the world conducts economic activities” P 32).

This research suggests that globalisation is not part of a potential package of cultural barriers to women business or organisation leaders in China. But Child (2002) does underline the potential cultural conflicts which might challenge women in responding to global business markets, if they have not really had the appropriate training, experience or support during their business or organisational careers. Yet, it may be that many women who wish to assume leadership positions in China are not challenged by global forces or by potential cultural differences, simply because they take a pragmatic view of business and leadership. For these, globalisation might erode barriers to them achieving such roles (Dunning, 2003; Fiss and Hirsch, 2005).

Understanding the global context however, is possible from international literature. Beck and Davis (2005) cite the case of a financial organisation Australia that was attempting to increase the numbers of women at managerial level. This organisation had to overcome not only attitudinal barriers but personal barriers (Beck and Davis, 2005). Bahry and Marr, <https://assignbuster.com/gender-issues-and-barriers-in-chinese-business/>

(2005) discuss the social and ideological shifts which have changed women's roles and status in Qatar, such that they may be becoming more endowed with the capacity to take on leadership roles. However, Singh and Vinnicombe (2004) show that it is still the norm that masculine senior level managers and boards maintain their hegemonic status:

“ Evidence shows that senior women do not easily gain access to the boardroom, where an elite group of male directors maintain their power” (Singh and Vinnicombe, 2004 p 479).

If Chinese businesses are being significantly affected by Westernised business practices, there is the potential that these practices present more barriers to women taking on senior leadership positions, rather than helped to change entrenched cultural values which have been seen as inherent in Chinese business practice. Globalisation may therefore be viewed as a source of new hurdles and obstacles to be surmounted for women in China. These barriers include what are described as 'informal' or 'hidden' processes associated with senior promotion (Alimo-Metcalfe, 1995), a relative lack of appropriate and available career development routes and activities (Ragins et al, 1998), and, the more obvious barrier, the lower levels of pay allocated to women (Oakley, 2000). There are also behavioural and cultural barriers, which include the gender role stereotyping of leadership capability (Schein and Muller, 2002), communication styles which reflect gendered differences (Tannen, 1994), and the social exclusion, corporate cultural norms, entrenched power dynamics and old boys' networks which characterise British and American businesses (Ragins Sundstrom, 1989). It can be seen that while there may be similarities in Chinese businesses in terms of

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barriers which emerge from traditional business norms and behaviours, there may be others which could be derived from the businesses they are exposed to in the Global marketplace. Therefore, Chinese women may find themselves having to face and adapt to more or different challenges to ascending the corporate or organisational ladder.

Personal Capabilities

Other factors which may affect women's career success at senior level is a perception that they are not capable of leading businesses as well as men (Cooke, 2004; Kalleberg and Leicht, 2005; Fischlmayr, 2002), and the women being faced with competing family demands, particularly from children (Beatty, 1996). This is not necessarily the case in China, however, because it has become the cultural norm for women to work full time, even after having had children, and women do not take career breaks to have children, a fact which is facilitated by the one-child rule (Cooke, 2004).

Women may be viewed however in terms of their gender and this will likely affect not only perceptions of their effectiveness as leaders, but evaluations of their success as well (Gunkel et al, 2007; Gutek, 1985; Fondas, 1997).

Ryan and Haslam (2005) suggest that when traditional masculi