

“I Got to Where I Am by My Own Strength”: Women in Hong Kong Higher Education Management

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This paper is part of a larger study on women in higher education management in southeast Asia, namely Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. Case studies of eleven academic women in senior positions spread across four universities in Hong Kong are reported. The study investigates women's perceptions and experiences of “glass ceiling” factors that may impede women's career advancement to senior management levels in higher education. It is argued throughout that Western concepts of “glass ceiling” politics cannot be taken as universal explanations of women's career trajectories. Cultural “values” and “traditions” are important factors that mediate women's career ambitions and opportunities, and these are always historically situated. The testimonies of the women in this study suggest that in addition to domestic, family and childcare responsibilities, cultural ideologies about gender, and generational differences impact considerably on women's career paths. Other issues identified include: isolation in often male-dominated departments and disciplinary fields, lack of management training, dual career pressures among professional couples, gender differences in management and leadership styles, and a lack of support among women.

Introduction

This paper reports on case studies of women in higher education management in Hong Kong. On the basis of extensive educational, management, and feminist literature that has documented links between glass ceiling

politics and women's academic career mobility, I began this study by asking: What are the limiting and enabling factors that influence women's career mobility and women's role as senior managers in the prestige university sector of higher education? The study was conducted in 1997 as part of a larger study that included women in higher education management in Singapore and Thailand. The Hong Kong fieldwork was undertaken in September 1997, six weeks following the historic handover — or, "return" from China's perspective.

In the months leading up to the July 31st handover, the global media had given prominent coverage of many of Hong Kong's most senior public women, most notably Anson Chan, Chief Secretary for Administration and Elsie Leung, Secretary for Justice. Other key women in the civil service to receive media attention included the Secretary for Health and Welfare Katherine Fok, Secretary for Trade and Industry Denise Yue, Director of Immigration Regina Ip, and Lily Yam as Chief Commissioner of the Independent Commission Against Corruption. Global networks such as CNN, BBC, CNBC and ABN (Asia Business News) repeatedly profiled what one network called "the handbag brigade," the female elite of the most senior officers in the new Special Administrative Region. The women I interviewed, also consistently referred to these women as exemplars and evidence of the lack of glass ceilings in Hong Kong: "We do have large numbers of women leaders in the civil service; it demonstrates that women can get through those difficult parts." Several women gave me newspaper and magazine clippings they had saved for me featuring profiles of these senior female civil servants. But half a dozen high profile women in a population of 6.3 million does not constitute overwhelming evidence to support arguments about the lack of glass ceiling politics.

I began my conversations with the women about the disparity between women in public office and women in higher education. Was there a particularly pernicious set of glass ceilings in universities that restricted women's academic mobility? With the kind of affordable domestic help available in Hong Kong — a support system women in the West would envy — why has that not translated into enabling conditions to enhance women's career aspirations and mobility? Why have women's high educational achievement levels not produced greater female representation in senior management levels in the university sector? I found the concept of glass ceiling an appropriate entry point into conversations because it was a widely understood concept about which women had very strong feelings. All the women had studied overseas (most in England) for at least one

postgraduate degree, several had worked overseas, and all were familiar with the concept of glass ceiling, Western debates about Affirmative Action and Equal Opportunity, and with versions of "Western feminism."

Women in Higher Education: What Is the Problem?

In a 1993 UNESCO report, *Women in Higher Education Management*, editor Elizabeth Dines comments: "With hardly an exception the global picture is one of men outnumbering women at about five to one at middle management level and at about twenty or more to one at senior management level" (p. 11). The lack of women in senior positions in higher education is a curious phenomenon. In Europe, North America, and Australia women have made great strides into higher education and the workforce over the last two decades (Eggins, 1997). In southeast Asia as well, women's workforce participation and tertiary education participation has increased substantially (Ghorayshi, 1994) throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Yet, as Dines notes the global picture is one of women's exclusion from higher education management. And in this region, it is not a question of "development" differences among industrialized (ICs) and newly industrializing countries (NICs) for women's absence is as conspicuous in NICs such as Thailand or Indonesia as it is in ICs such as Hong Kong, Singapore, or Australia. We might ask then: What is the problem?

It is axiomatic that the position of women in higher education cannot be judged or theorized independent of the position of women in society. Scholarly analysis and statistical data have long confirmed that when women's educational levels rise so does their position in society. High rates of female participation at all levels of schooling and post-secondary education correlate with improved socio-economic status, delayed marriage age, increased labor force participation in more diverse and skilled occupations with higher income levels. In countries where women's educational achievements and labour force participation rates are near or equal to men's, women indeed have become more visible in corporate and public sector management positions, yet they remain curiously invisible in higher education management (Heward, 1994, 1996). Hong Kong is a case in point. In Hong Kong, as in Australia or America, women have high rates of educational participation and outcomes, and are making substantial inroads into high visibility and high status positions in the private corporate and public service sectors. In Australia, for instance, an emergent critical mass of femocrats (Eisenstein, 1991) in the state and federal public

service sector parallels women's visible presence in senior ranks of Hong Kong's public service sector. In America throughout the 1980s and 1990s women moved into local municipal government, junior college and public school management (Grogan, 1996). Yet in all three countries women remain a minority in senior management in the prestige university sector of higher education. Their persistent under-representation in higher education management suggests a tenacious resistance among the most educated elite in any society, namely men, to granting women entry into the professional management of the academic knowledge industry. Yet as some research has suggested, it may not only be men and patriarchal systems that keep women down, but may include women themselves. I shall return to this issue in more detail later in the paper.

In Hong Kong, women's participation in higher education has been numerically equal to men since the post-war period (Morris & Sweeting, 1995). Whereas systematic data exist on gendered patterns of educational participation in southeast Asia are available, gender distribution in higher education academic staffing are not reported in universities' annual reports, in the scholarly literature or authoritative reports and compendia such as the OECD *Issues in Education in Asia and the Pacific* (1994), *The International Encyclopedia of Education* (Husen & Postlethwaite, 1994), UNESCO's *World Education Report* (1995), the *Commonwealth Universities' Yearbook* (Archer, 1994), or *The World of Learning* (1997). Clearly, women in higher education academic staffing are not considered relevant as an analytic or socio-demographic category. The lack of statistical data on women's progress and positions in southeast Asian higher education staffing coupled with the lack of scholarly debate and analysis of women academics in higher education, make it difficult to even begin to conceptualize where structural obstacles or flashpoints of resistance to women's entry and ascent into senior levels of management might be located.

Pipeline, Double-Day and Glass Ceiling Explanations

American, Australian, British and Canadian research has identified three conceptual metaphors — pipeline theory, double-day, and glass ceiling — that have been widely used to explain women's structural impediments in career pathways in both public and private sectors. However, as I will argue below, these models do not all or consistently apply to specific southeast Asian higher education (HE) contexts.

One common explanation for women's invisibility in senior HE management is the so-called "pipeline" theory. The argument goes like this: females generally have lower levels of educational participation and achievement which subsequently flows into lower HE participation and credentialled. With few women in the "pipeline" with requisite credentials to qualify for academic promotions few, in turn, have the bundled merit factors of credentials, promotional track record, and administrative experience to qualify for appointments to the most senior administrative and executive management positions. While "pipeline" theories usually apply to newly industrializing nation states where females are seriously disadvantaged in educational access to both schooling and tertiary education (Dines, 1993), this model does not fit Hong Kong's IC status and educational history given women's near equal participation in post-secondary education over the last forty to fifty years. Although "schooling opportunities for females became virtually equal in quantitative terms over the post-war period" (Sweeting, 1995, p. 116), "gender stereotypes are still reflected in enrolments for further and tertiary education courses" (p. 67). This has resulted in a persistent pattern of HE participation and outcomes which remains skewed along traditional gender lines: women dominate enrolments in the Arts and Humanities, Nursing, Education and remain under-represented in the more traditional male fields of study, namely Medicine, Engineering, Science, and Technology (Government of Hong Kong, 1993). Pipeline theories, therefore, may explain the lack of women in senior management in traditional male fields, but fail to explain the dearth of women in senior positions in those disciplinary fields where women historically have dominated enrolments.

Women's childrearing, domestic, and family responsibilities are the most commonly cited career impediments in studies emanating from research in management (Eggins, 1997; Ledwith & Colgan, 1996; Still, 1993), and education (Davies, Lubelska, & Quinn, 1994; Morley & Walsh, 1996). The dual or double-day of professional and domestic responsibilities is not an issue men contend with which therefore frees them up to pursue career aspirations and commitments without hindrance. The "double-day" phenomenon is also commonly associated with "dual career" conflicts perceived by women as another major impediment. In dual career families, women are more likely to adjust their own professional aspirations and opportunities in line with their partner's job demands, promotions, or relocations (Powney, 1997). The double-day and dual career conflicts are generally seen to subordinate women's career aspirations to a

partner's career path. However, not all women are married or have children. Moreover, in Hong Kong, as in Singapore, live-in domestic service is inexpensive and widely available; in the words of one Dean: "it's common practice even among women who are only secretaries." Clearly, the demands of child and family responsibilities cannot explain the dearth of women in senior positions in a context where live-in domestic help is affordable and routinely available, and given that many women in middle and senior management are either single, widowed, divorced, or married without children. Moreover, the cultural values placed on the care and integration of elderly kin into family (deLeon & Ho, 1994), means that relatives and elderly parents are expected to provide a fair share of childcare.

Glass ceiling explanations have been widely used in the last decade in the women and education, and women and management literature to explain women's lack of progress up the occupational hierarchy in both public and private sectors. Glass ceiling barriers refer to the transparent cultural, organizational, and attitudinal barriers that maintain horizontal sex segregation in organizations. Glass ceilings are often invisible to women and men: women look up the occupational ladder and get a clear vision of the top rungs but they can't always clearly see where they will encounter invisible obstacles. Men, on the other hand, "can look down and ask why women are not achieving and, seeing no barrier, can only surmise a lack of talent, commitment or energy" (King, 1997, p. 94). Unlike the pipeline theory, which depends on statistical quantification of female educational participation and outcomes for analytic and explanatory validity, the concept of glass ceiling lends itself more to qualitative analyses of occupational and cultural variations. That is to say, the particularities of glass ceiling politics are said to be specific to informal workplace cultures and professional milieus within organizations, and are always specific to a society's cultural values and attitudes. For instance, how women's marital status is valued or devalued in organizational contexts, is highly culture specific. Yet, across cultural and institutional contexts glass ceiling barriers share certain structural features such as the concentration of power and authority among male elites, concepts of merit, career, and success based on male experience and life trajectories, and social and institutional practices that reproduce culturally dominant forms of patriarchy. As Adler and Izraeli (1994, p. 13) note: "the specific image of an ideal manager varies across cultures, yet everywhere it privileges those characteristics that the culture associates primarily with men." This

suggests that, regardless of cultural, historical and regional differences, dominant forms of masculinity and patriarchy in any society comprise "an exclusive and closed male club ... with men choosing the 'right people' who can think in the same way they think, and exercise control largely through the selection of key individuals: ones like themselves" (Itzin, 1995, p. 47).

Culturally dominant forms of patriarchy in any society, then, frame up not only social and gender relations, but public life more generally including the institutional ethos, structures, processes, and cultures of organizations, and enactments of status, power and authority. These formal and informal cultural structures combine with, as Yee (1995) puts it, the residue of ancient root origins, "Asian traditions," blended with the legacies of diverse systems of colonial rule across Asia before, during, and after WW II. Although "Asian traditions" are not and never have been uniform across Buddhist, Confucian, Muslim, Christian, communist and post-communist southeast Asia, today, especially in nation states like Singapore and Hong Kong, they have combined with the socio-political ideologies and values of fast capitalism: a skilfully balanced "composite of Asian traditional and 'Western' middle class elements which resonate with the core values of the family within the Confucian social system" (Hill & Lian, 1995, p. 155). Hence, Western free market notions of competitive individualism and meritocratic equality are woven within "traditional" Confucian emphasis on entrepreneurial familism (deLeon & Ho, 1994), utilitarian familism (Lau, 1997), and authoritarian paternalism (Yee, 1995).

Arguably, although universities around the world are more or less structured on European/American organizational structures, ethos (academic inquiry, research and publishing cultures), and labor (research and teaching), they are always locally adapted *in situ* to a society's dominant cultural values, hierarchies and practices. In Hong Kong, of course, over 150 years of British colonial rule have shaped a distinctly British model of education which makes it difficult to excavate whatever "original" or traditional Chinese values might make Hong Kong education "culture specific" (Lau 1997; Sweeting 1993).¹ What is culture-specific to Hong Kong is its historically unique identity as a cultural hybrid. In relation to education, Chinese and British "traditions" have converged in a shared reverence for "the educated person," and "in both cultures university status is the ultimate goal of education" (Yee, 1995, p. 47). Both cultures have historically placed high social and cultural value on

the scholar-philosopher, but it appears that an academic profession in the late 20th century is not seen as a lucrative or high prestige career choice.

It is my view that single concept explanations are inadequate to account for the complexities of dynamic historical, political, social and cultural factors that shape educational institutions, the cultures and social relations within them, and the public and intellectual discourses that variously sustain or challenge them. The structural features implied by pipeline, double-day, and glass ceiling concepts, alongside cultural values, attitudes and stereotypes, operate together in cultural specific configurations under certain historical and economic conditions. Most of the women in this study, for instance, passed through the HE sector, first as students and later as junior staff, at particular historical moments when women's options were more narrow than they are today. Their academic career success, and the impediments they encountered, must therefore be viewed in generational terms. The younger, "thirty-something" women in this cohort face a very different mix of post-feminist choices and options in conjunction with residual, "traditional" gender values. According to some of these women, the older generation of women who now hold senior positions, embody many of those "traditional" values that are often said to be at the core of tensions among women. The career path struggles encountered by women who today are in their 50s and 60s are very different from what women in their 30s encounter in their ascent up the mobility ladder. However, across generations, women do face common barriers associated with systemic issues endemic to women's embodiment in relation to childbearing, women's position in the cultural constructs surrounding childcare and childrearing, and women's position within enduring rules and practices of capitalist and patriarchal power relations, institutional hierarchies, and academic cultures (Adkins, 1995; Heward, Taylor & Vickers, 1997; Oerton, 1996).

Sample

I had organized 13 women for interview of which 11 were able to see me at the time of my visit.² Interviews were audio-taped and lasted approximately one hour. Following transcription some months later, transcripts were returned for checking and editing in case they wanted changes made. None returned edited transcripts. All the women were ethnic Chinese and held positions as Deans (one Associate Dean) and Professorial Department

Heads in Faculties of Science, Medicine, Accounting, Social Sciences, Arts, and Continuing Education spread across four universities. The youngest woman was 34 and the oldest 67; four women were in their 40s and five in their 50s. Eight women were married and three were single. The two youngest women were unmarried and had no children. All the married women had children; seven women had school-aged and adult children living with them. The children's ages ranged from 6 to 24. All children over 21 were either attending or had completed tertiary education. Ten women had at least one overseas postgraduate degree (most from the UK); ten women listed PhDs as their highest degree and one had an MD. Eight women had full-time live-in maid service (domestic and/or childcare), two had regular part-time help, and one had no hired help. The average salary listed by eight women was around HK\$1 million, equivalent approximately to \$180,000 Australian dollars or \$135,000 US dollars.

Pipeline Trickle: The Competing Private Sector

I began by asking each woman what she considered the major reason for the lack of women in senior university posts. All the women's initial responses invoked the pipeline theory: there are not enough qualified women coming through the system. Although I was familiar with the history of Hong Kong education, most of the women gave me a thumbnail history sketch as a prelude to their "pipeline" explanations. Generational differences figured prominently in all the women's observations. For example: "back in the 50s, a lot of the girls' schools did not teach science or did not teach it well and for admission into medicine you need science ... In my days, there were so few ladies [in university] and we were treated 'ladies first,' that sort of thing, even in clinical settings." The women I was interviewing, were that generation of women in their late 40s and 50s who had gone through higher education and postgraduate studies in the 1960s (one woman in the 1950s) who constituted in their day an elite group of privileged women. One woman sums up what many told me:

If you look back, in Hong Kong and China, if there is a choice, because of limited resources, they only send the sons to get an education and the girls always stay home to take care. So education was always more male dominated. Later, there were few females got into higher education. They're from families that are very much open and Westernised and well-to-do. Women in the 1930s, 40s, 50s their parents or grandparents may have had

outside influences, so the girls of that generation got the equal opportunity to go into universities.

However, when I challenged their pipeline theory by pointing out women's longstanding educational achievement rates in Hong Kong (Suen, 1995), they readily granted that Hong Kong indeed has a long British tradition of meritocratic schooling, that women for several decades now have graduated with higher degrees at virtually the same rate as men across most faculties (except traditional feminine fields such as Arts, Humanities, Nursing and Education), and that women by and large are better students than men: "you know, women always do work better." But why, then, don't they pursue a career in higher education? Two women alluded to a diverted pipeline of qualified women as part of the "brain drain" exodus related to the "1997 question." In higher education and the private sector, change had been underway "since 1984 and after that many many people emigrated — a brain drain you call it" but "we now get the reverse brain-drain. We get a lot of Chinese returning from North America, from the UK." Another woman in her 30s explained the lack of senior women as part of the brain-drain exodus, a missing generation of women:

a lot of people have left the university because of 1997. Most of our administrators, quite a lot of senior ones who are women, they have all left. Where is this generation? We don't see them — women in their 40s. That was the generation that has been most impacted by the 1997 question, and a lot of them actually left. So there is actually a very small pool of available and qualified women.

Similar to comments made by women I interviewed in Singapore, most of the Hong Kong women saw the private sector as a more lucrative career choice for today's young women graduates where they can make a lot more money: "the Hong Kong ethos is, after all, to make money." "Women tend not to spend so many years in preparing for a career. You need only a first degree to join the private sector and the public sector." Further, Hong Kong men make "big money" which means that

women don't all need to work. They will work for a while to have some money to shop and travel; many have boyfriends who they will probably marry and who are already making a lot of money, or they will have very good incomes in a few years. So the women, they don't look at careers too seriously. I mean they want careers but not for the long haul.

Another woman said that “the young women, they want to be DINKs (double income, no kids), and for those incomes you have to go into business, not education.” Because parents often still feel ambivalent about daughters continuing past undergraduate education, “a lot just don’t go into it, and that’s why you have a small pool of women at this level. A lot of women at my age are out in the private sector.” But there are other reasons why women don’t go into higher education management.

Isolation

Isolation, long hours for relatively few rewards other than intrinsic job satisfaction, lack of female role models and support systems, and pressures to postpone marriage or children, were reasons the women repeatedly noted. Isolation had a lot to do with women finding themselves as the only woman, or among only a small number of women, at senior levels: “men are not used to having the only woman, because at that time I was the only senior woman in the university.” Once a senior position is reached and “you are the only woman on a committee where there has never been a woman before, you feel a lot of pressure. What will she say, how will she act, can we trust her?” Another woman felt that

if you are the first one in that position, a lot of people suddenly don’t treat you like an old colleague, but they speak formal and friendly with you, not like before, and so you feel isolated because you never know if they are saying what they really mean.

Stereotyped expectations of female behavior can also feel isolating:

Because I’m a woman, and the first one to hold this position, I think many men expect me to act in a certain way but that’s not me. They know I am outspoken, but now in this position, it is expected that I act more like a good Chinese girl, like their wives, their secretaries or their daughters.

Several women also claimed that, although they did not feel any “formal” exclusion from the “old boys’ network,” there were things such as talk about sports, or “coarse language” that were part of a male code which made them feel excluded and isolated. “It’s there all the time. You notice it but try to ignore it but because it’s there all the time in the way they joke and talk, you sort of sit there and think ‘yes, it’s hard to get into the boys’ club, but who wants in?’” Male attention to women’s appearance rather than intellect, is another strategy that isolates and trivializes women,

and makes them feel devalued and “visible” for all the wrong reasons. One woman explains in detail:

If you ask the males in this university, they would tell you that there is no discrimination. It is this unconscious situation that allows them to have a [glass] ceiling ... so they unconsciously discriminate [against] you. They refer to the secretaries about how they dress and you are the only senior woman in the room! I consider it quite rude that they are telling jokes about other women, and when they approach you, they don't respect you as their colleague. They say: “Oh you dress very nice today” which has nothing to do with me coming to the meeting. You can be in a meeting, giving the same kinds of proposals and ideas but if it is coming from you, they don't consider it much. But if the colleague is a man, then everybody thinks it is a good idea.

Several women felt that they had to work twice as hard as men to gain recognition, respect, and approval.

I think it's because they don't know how to judge me now that I'm no longer simply an assistant dean, or in charge of postgraduate students, or something like that. And they don't know how to show approval or respect like they do with each other. I mean, they don't come and ask me to come for a drink or something like that. They can't slap me on the back but they do it to each other.

Although it hasn't happened to me, I think men notice each other more as equals but they notice women more for being nice, or attractive, or smart *and* attractive. It's difficult to be noticed as an intellectual equal, and if you are, men can feel more threatened by it. So you don't get noticed and appreciated, or rewarded in the same way and so you work even harder.

Another woman had this to say:

For years I stayed late to do the paperwork and I know my male colleagues just got their secretaries to do their jobs. Me, I did all the work myself. I think women do that: pay attention to all the detail. But I often thought I work much harder and longer hours but the men somehow get the better positions offered first; like important committee posts or things like that which later get you the big promotions.

But women's sense of isolation within a predominantly male institutional culture is only one, although common, form of isolation women can experience. Differences in cultural and linguistic background can also dislocate women (and undoubtedly men as well). For example, two Taiwanese women alluded to occasional feelings of social dislocation and

isolation: not being able to fully and fluently participate in Cantonese conversations although “I understand what is being said”; being fluent in Mandarin which is “good for doing [academic] business in China” yet not being considered as “authentic” Hong Kong Chinese to represent the institution. In the cultural-historical context of Hong Kong where the “majority of the population has always been Chinese but brought up under a colonial regime,” issues of “authenticity” — who is “really” Chinese? — has been brought into new relief with the “1997 question,” and is tied up with the ideological downgrading of Cantonese, with shifts in perceptions and cultural valuation of a “foreign education,” and with subtle changes in the hierarchical ordering of “authenticity” among the Chinese diaspora of the region as Hong Kong’s political and cultural status slips from British to PRC rule. In her view: “right now I think there is some confusion, some fear and anxiety of the mainland — of the politics and cultural influence — and how we should make our identity. It is complicated.”

Family

Marriage and children were seen by all the women as the most important “career impediment” and “career choice” issues facing women. Women talked about having “to space the children out carefully”; “to fit the different things in at different times in your life; men don’t have to do that”; “the 7-day week, 8 a.m. to 9 p.m., I can only do it now because my children are grown up.” One woman in her late forties with a six-year-old child, had put off having her first child which was a “career-based decision.” Unlike private sector careers, in academics “you have to go through 10 or more years of studying after you leave school, then you start from a lecturer position and slowly move your way up. It is a difficult choice to give that up and stop to raise a family.” For women in medicine, the road is even longer:

A medical degree will take you five years, then you are 23, one year internship is 24, and specialty training at least 3 years after you pass the first examination which would make 26, 27. If you don’t pass the first examination, add more years. By the time you finish, you are almost 30 years old. Then you need to devote time to getting established in your first posting. Most medical women marry after 30 and have children even later, some in their early 40s. Medical women are better paid so they can have more than one Filipina maid and that helps.

On the other hand, as several women commented, “raising children is not a must today”; “women can choose not to have children”; “women today have choice, unlike the previous generation.” Several women saw women’s opportunities and career aspirations in generational terms. The older generation, women in their 40s and 50s, came of age and through the academic system at a time when an extended higher education was seen to diminish women’s marriage opportunities: “for that generation, you go to university, then you have to work first, you have to get a master’s degree, and all that would in some ways damage your marriage prospects as you get older, more educated, but less ‘marriageable.’” One woman, part of the “new” generation, mentioned that her “mother refused to speak to me for six months when I decided to do a PhD because she was concerned about me finding a husband.” For the older generation, according to two of the youngest women in this group, a different kind of patronage system operated to channel women through the system. In that culture,

your intelligence and appearance mattered a great deal. A lot had to do with looks. Women climbed up because they belonged to a patronage system which is run by men; they all graduated together, and that generation of men they prefer women like a nice-looking secretary, starting with a tea-maker. And then you climb up, so there is a lot of that in the traditional hierarchy where looks count. The adornment factor. For academic women, it’s been that. Thankfully, that has changed.

That generation produced what one woman called “academic *tai-tais*” — academic “society ladies” who climbed the academic and social ladder through “old networks of my parents’ generation,” who “dressed up,” and sat on all the “right charity boards, went to all the right social functions. Oh they can be ruthless.” Although “thankfully, that has changed,” there are enduring cultural factors which maintain strong gender divisions of labor and roles, and what some called “a very Asian thing,” “traditional values.”

Cultural Mindsets

When women in the West chose to stay at home, to raise a family, to manage a household, such choices have often been denigrated by feminists. However, in “Asian societies,” “it is considered a luxury, it is respected because it shows you are dedicated to the ideals of being a wife and mother, and it shows your husband can afford it. It is the poor women who go to work.”

I don't think there is as much pressure here as in the US where there is a lot more pressure for women to become professionals, to work, and for those that don't, there is a certain guilt. But here they don't think that way.

However, the cultural and ideological values associated with women and work and women as homemakers, are clearly class-based issues:

it's a poverty issue in terms of whether women work and what work they do. It's a luxury to stay home if you have a wealthy husband; it's a luxury if you get a degree and work for a few years, and then marry and stay at home. But that's the upper and middle classes. Work and raising families is not a choice for poor women but it is a choice for women from affluent backgrounds. So, it's different. The roles are different, the choices are different.

Others just simply felt that "Hong Kong is still very much a male dominated society, especially in the household"; "it would be very unusual in Hong Kong for men to go home and help with the housework"; "there are many traditional roles played by women in the middle-income level and they still have to be much more submissive." Repeatedly, however, women acknowledged the powerful cultural values that circumscribe women's role in the family in "Asian" or "Chinese" society. I will let one woman speak at length on this issue for the issues she raised summarized many similar comments from the other women:

for the Eastern family, the Chinese society, there are lots of things to take care of by women: the relatives on the husband's side, or on the wife's side. You have to do a lot of things to show that you are polite, and respectful to the elderly. If it's the men or boys, people don't dare to criticize them or scold them, or not be too demanding of them. If you are a male, if you haven't paid too much attention to your mother's birthday or forgot someone else in the family, it's more acceptable than if you were a woman and forgot. If you have a wife, she should cater for everything, remember everything, note this or that. It's her job and it's a full-time job.

Culturally, "women's responsibility to have children, to raise them, to look after the parents, that is very important in Asian, particularly Chinese culture." Parents still "want their married children to give them grandchildren, to carry the family name even if it's just symbolic and not about passing on wealth or property. But then even today, inheritance, especially in Hong Kong, is still a big thing." "Having a boy used to be important in Chinese families. It is very important in China. Today we say it is not important in Hong Kong but for many people it is still an issue. So that pressure is there indirectly for women."

Most women still want to have children. It's important in Chinese society. And that means that you have to give up something. For women, it's the job. Even with maids, you still have to have the time to care for the children, especially when they're young. Maids can cook, clean, take the children for walks or school, but only mothers can give the love, the nurturing. So, you have to walk away from your career for a while and then you miss out. You pay a price. If you chose not to have children you pay a price. If you have children you pay a price.

Several women felt that rather than "any structural inequalities," which had long been eliminated in universities, the biggest impediments to women's academic career mobility were women's "mindset," and "the culture":

Women's devotion to the family — it's very important in Chinese culture.

In Asian society, the expectations of daughters is hardly as demanding as of sons. Then when they go into the workforce, they are not as competitive; I mean, they don't have the drive to be competitive. I think it's cultural.

It's not the system — it's the mindset and also the culture because women are expected to care much more for the home and the children. In academics, promotion depends very much on research, not teaching. And to do good research, you have to stay at the edge, go on sabbatical, go to conferences, network, and women find it very difficult to leave the family behind to go on sabbatical.

Although many traditional expectations for women seem to be changing for the current generation, particularly among the middle and upper class, the "cultural mindset" continues to reproduce cross-generationally, as one woman noted:

I think the cultural part probably is what nurtures a woman's ambition. Women are not expected to rise high, in the cultural sense, in a family sense. Even I was surprised by my colleague talking about his daughter. He said "I don't want her to get into a too demanding job. She will find a good husband and she will be fine."

One woman who had worked in the US for decades and had only recently moved to Hong Kong, made a similar observation: "I don't think I, or people of my background, would bring up a daughter and say, 'you go find a good husband and you will be settled for life.' But I see that more here".

Double-Day and Dual Careers

The consequences for women becoming mothers and managing the double-day, despite what one woman called a veritable “army of servants” from “drivers, gardeners, several maids” to “time management consultants,” are that “their research production falls for a few years so there’s a period when they don’t get promotions.” One single woman reflected on the plight of her female colleagues:

I see it in my female colleagues: they had children later and they are in their 40s with young children. The University provides housing so they live nearby, near the hospital. So I actually see my colleagues getting very sick because they have to go back and forth and look after the children all the time. We all go for lunch, we rest, but they have to do a lot of things during lunchtime; things for the family or household or children — check on maids, look in on sick children. They refuse to go on sabbatical, or go to conferences.

Dual career conflicts also impinge on women’s professional aspirations and opportunities. Professional women tend to be married to professional men, but despite comparable professional status and commitments, it is commonly women who give up or interrupt their careers to follow a partner’s relocation. “I was willing to give up my career to move with my husband; there are many women in that situation in Hong Kong. Of course, there are also men who give up their career for their wives, but less.” Speaking of colleagues, two women explained:

She just got married and now she’s resigned because after marriage she moved from Hong Kong to Kowloon side to his apartment and she had to leave very early for work and come home very late because now she has to be home to do the cooking and marketing [shopping] and it was just too much.

She was a Senior Lecturer with us. Then she emigrated with her partner to Canada and then she came back and had to start again at Lecturer.

Women who had spent considerable time abroad studying and/or working, provided comparative analyses of “Asian” and “European” men. Asian men — except, of course, their own husbands — were generally considered more “traditional,” “they don’t really help at home,” “spoiled and sometimes arrogant but then that’s how they were raised by their mothers and that’s of a different generation.” European and American men, the women considered to be more “easy going with helping at home,” “pushing prams on the street,” “pushing trolleys in the supermarkets, that’s a very American thing, all the men do it.” All the married women claimed

that their husbands were extremely supportive of their career choices and helped with the children at home, although, "when the children are sick, I still have to take a day off, not him." Despite the rhetoric of equality, especially in negotiated households, all the women with "extremely supportive husbands," acknowledged that women remain tied to domestic and childcare responsibilities:

He does what he can but he's just not home as much as I am; he's away in China or overseas a lot.

When you wake up in the morning, the child is sick, who stays home? When you have a supportive husband, there is room for negotiation. But who has a day or half-day that you can cancel? Most likely the woman, even if she is a professional. The support in principle, the rational support, it is not the same as the actual support.

It seems then that the choices educated women can make are structurally available — "women can do whatever they want today, there are no restrictions, it's up to women to work their way up" — but they are ideologically and subjectively heavily circumscribed. "All the women I know who become professors, they either married late or they have no children. If they have children late in life, it's usually one, two at most." Cultural expectations and gender differentiated socialization still map out different expectations and opportunities for men and women. Subjectively, the professional and personal choices women make, such as whether and when to raise a family, come at what many called a "cost" or "price."

You pay a price. If you chose not to have children you pay a price. If you have children you pay a price.

Yes, I planned to have a child rather late but I almost waited too long. I wanted to get my career established and then there was always something else. It is a price you pay.

Well, everything is trade-offs. If women have ability, they have choice. If you pursue a career, there are trade-offs and costs. If you have children, even with full-time help, and want to stay in your profession, there is a price to pay.

You can't do it all — have a career, a social life, and a family. Something has to go. For me, I let my social life go.

Until I worked closely with the transcripts in the course of my analysis, I was unaware of the prevalent use of terms such as "pay-off," "price" and "cost." They appear in virtually every woman's transcript, but are not

mentioned at all by the Thai women, and only mentioned twice by the Singapore women in my studies (Luke, in press-a, in press-b). Metaphors are culture- and place-specific. Perhaps Hong Kong's entrepreneurial ethos has trickled its way into the discourse of everyday life where "costing" one's choices and decisions on a balance sheet of trade-offs seemed quite natural to the women in this group.

Women's Support

I asked all the women whom they considered most influential and supportive in their career development. Some said that the support of their husbands had been most invaluable. For others, mostly the older women who had been trained and had worked in traditional male fields such as medicine, mathematics, and the physical sciences, there had been no women in the departments and laboratories they trained in 20–30 years ago and eventually would work in as academics. One woman was the first female "back in 1974" appointed to the Senate, and it caused quite an uproar:

The males objected to it. They were saying, this woman, not even a professor and never been in administration. They had a good point. I was fully untested, I wasn't even a professor at that time and after me, there were no more women until I became a PVC, and then there were a few more.

One woman explained that she could not comment on support or lack of support by other women because she had been the only female in her department for years, and had been "the only one in my [university] class." But what she had to say in terms of men as colleagues, as research collaborators was instructive in light of both the cultural propriety surrounding the politics of gender relationships, and the often lonely and isolated road academics can be for women.

I can understand the case for a male colleague if he needs some partners to do things — it would be more convenient for him to get a male partner. That simplifies a lot of things, including unnecessary explanations between him and his wife, or even between him and his colleagues. They will not take the initiative to look for me as a collaborator. They are more used to getting along with males, so they feel a bit uneasy. They would ask: with so many male colleagues there, why would he choose that one [female]?

Repeatedly, women told variations of the same narrative: "most of the help, it came from male colleagues"; "I was the only female for most part

of my career.” Although the women agreed that a lack of female role models may be one barrier to women’s career aspirations in higher education, several women went further to comment on women’s lack of support for each other.

No, there are no or few role models. But women, even in middle management as I was coming up the ranks, don’t support each other. They don’t really talk to each other. They are not helpful to other women. So who wants those women as role models? The people who helped me most were men.

Some women made veiled allusions to having had bad encounters with other women. A few women were very explicit about women’s lack of support for each other, in some instances characterized as open warfare and “very vicious.” “Women are most unsupportive, most unkind. They oppose other women. There are so few women and when they get in power, they are certainly not helpful to other women.” Tensions and jealousies between women can be “worse, much worse ... such as that I may lose my job.”

[Women] don’t need a reason, maybe just that they don’t like your looks, you are younger, taller, you are perceived as academically threatening, it could be as irrational as that but these are the things that matter to women, especially those in a very traditional mould. And certainly women in my generation suffer a lot of that.

Men envy in a competitive sense; men envy other men because they are more intelligent whereas women envy because they are better looking.

One woman Head had been invited to apply for a Deanship in an older, well-established university for which she was eventually turned down, despite much encouragement and support from senior male academics across the university. Her account of this incident was long and complicated and had obviously caused her much grief and stress. After submitting her application, she was told by the University’s most senior officer: “Well, if you don’t get it, you can always apply for associate deanship.” Shortly after her interview, “the chairman of the board said, ‘well, we feel that you are our candidate; however, we think that we would like you to serve as an acting dean.’ A slap in the face!” Following her probation period, “they said we want to observe you one more year!” In the end, the senior executive gave her a litany of reasons to support their decision against her. As it turned out later, “the person who made all these com-

ments about me was a woman. She was the incumbent exiting the position.”

Women’s lack of support for each other and the apparently not uncommon subversive and oppositional stance towards other women is something women don’t readily talk about. The multi-layered issues and tensions among women in professional contexts have not been addressed in the scholarly literature. Yet from my own experience and the many conversations I have had with women in the course of this study, suggests that it is an issue that many women experience, and one that generates substantial anger, stress, and strong emotions. I sensed far more outrage, disappointment, and anger among the women in this group at the behavior of other academic women than at the patriarchal culture and behaviors of men. It may be that women ascending the career ladder unconsciously expect the tacit support of senior women. On the other hand, women in senior positions who have made it through the system without female mentorship or support may feel that overt support and advice to aspirant women lower down the system may be seen as granting unfair and unprofessional favors (King, 1997). Perhaps some, but certainly not all, successful academic women feel protective of hard-won positions and status, and may feel threatened by the increasing competition of younger women. Women themselves may hold unconscious stereotypes of women as maternal nurturers, as “naturally” more caring and supportive than men. When those expectations fail to materialize, women may feel more disappointed and let down. It is possible, therefore, that women’s interpretations of other women’s behaviors are couched in more negative terms than if those behaviors came from men, from whom women may have learned to expect equally stereotyped behaviors associated with an over-generalized notion of patriarchy. The “professional sabotage” (Spurling, 1997, p. 30) of women commonly attributed to men within patriarchal systems of institutional power and control, thus, must be reconsidered in light of the changing gender composition of institutional management, and the cultural dimensions of the politics of interpretation.

Gendered Management Styles

Towards the end of our conversations, I asked if women bring different understandings and styles to senior management positions. Although most of the women claimed that “we cannot generalize: this sex does it that way, this one another way,” the women did have experiences and interpretations

of women's managerial and leadership styles that they viewed as different from men. The institutional position of women in relation to "centers of power" was seen to influence how women manage and relate to others:

It's all linked with the issue of power. If you don't have that much power, you have to work your way around it and that requires a much more indirect, interpersonal, more negotiating style. But that doesn't necessarily mean that all women adopt a different approach. I mean, different approaches have a context which has to do with hierarchy, and the way things have been.

In addition to women's structural positions in relation to power as one factor mediating their management style, women are also seen to use power differently:

Women see themselves as powerful when they say "yes." Like, when women can say "yes, I let you do it." But men tend to see themselves as powerful when they say no. They deny you — that's being powerful. But women, they see it as confirming you.

Most noted differences that match those identified in the literature:

Women can handle human relationships better than men.

Women do bring something different than men to a relationship, to a committee. I think because they understand life experiences differently.

More inclusive and more careful about hurting others' feelings. They are less prone to use rough language. They don't use foul words, men do. In that sense, we are more careful about the way we carry ourselves.

One woman, with the longest serving academic and senior management record among this group of women, had this to say

They are better in interpersonal skills and they are more charming. There are two types of women: the majority try to rule by consensus, by consultation and they carry the rest of the committee. The other type of woman tries to take over from the men by being too aggressive. Some women try to compensate by shouting, by behaving too aggressively. We have to strike a medium. Women have to stand firm, no matter how charming you are. Women have to be aggressive, but quietly aggressive.

On balance, the women in this group felt that both men and women can be domineering and aggressive in traditional masculine ways, and yet also manage in consensual and team-building ways: "you can't stereotype; it's

the individual really"; "we can't generalize — I find some women who are more like men. I think it's the individual person." But underneath assumptions of individual style and personality, and despite many harsh comments about the lack of support from other women, some consensus emerged about women's different life experiences and their structural relation to institutional power which tend to develop better negotiation, communication and interpersonal skills.

Summary Comments

All the women had worked hard to get to the positions they now held. Women in their late 40s and 50s had virtually no management training and were, in some ways, "self-taught": "I got to where I am by my own strength."

The university — it is a business now, you have a very high profit margin and need to know how to manage money. They don't teach you that.

Nobody knew how to do it [financial management] at that time. I felt scared because I had never done accounting. I asked this person in the university "can you give me some help, advice." He wouldn't give it to me, he wouldn't even help me. So I decided to get a traditional accounting book and I worked it out myself.

Work is all-consuming, and as noted earlier, most of the women were well aware of the price they had paid for professional mobility and success:

I seem to come in earlier and earlier. And weekends I always work.

It's a very long day, so less time with family.

There's other things that come with the job: the social commitments; then you become president of this society, vice-president of that society, the meetings on weekends, and so on.

We have liaisons with universities in China and we'll be taking the contingent to Beijing, and next year to Shanghai. A lot of that takes time, and when one has this position, one wants to enhance the standing of the university with international links of this kind.

Women in their 50s and 60s were looking forward to retirement and had no further career aspirations: "I have my reading, my orchids, travel. I'm looking forward to it. I think it's easier for women to retire than men because women have other interests. Men just have their work." Women in

their 40s with a good part of their career still ahead of them had further career aspirations which included Professorial Chairs, Deanships, and “yes, maybe PVC, but that is a long way off.” The older generation of women had been trailblazers: often the first women in senior positions or appointed to prestigious committees. Many had been the only women during their university student days, and the first or only woman in departments where they first took junior lecturing positions. Although some of the younger women talked about generational differences that positioned older women as having climbed “social” academic ladders in traditional “patronage” networks of their parents’ generation, the cultural and patriarchal values and attitudes those women confronted were undoubtedly different but perhaps no less difficult to surmount in an era where women’s professional aspirations were the exception rather than the rule. Women in their 30s and early 40s, by contrast, passed through higher education in Hong Kong and overseas, and subsequently into the academic system, at a time when women’s options were greater and more varied.

However, their personal and professional struggles up the academic hierarchy are with other women as much as they are with the patriarchal culture of academia. Glass ceiling politics, therefore, must be viewed in generational terms and reframed to include women as implicated in the complex visible and invisible barriers that academic women face. All the women had been trained in and seemed to have bought into the Western ideology of meritocratic equality. However, on closer probing, many narratives emerged that revealed different institutional and collegial treatment, and cultural expectations, on the basis of gender. All the women alluded to personal and professional costs of having children and getting married. Academic women tend to delay marriage and having children. Despite domestic help, women remain tied to family, domestic, and childrearing responsibilities. Women have worked hard to gain entry into the public sphere, the professions, and to break through old stereotypes and seniority barriers — in short, they have worked hard to earn the right to work the double-day. Conversely, it’s apparent that men have not demolished old stereotypes, and have not struggled to gain entry into the private household sphere where they might support women’s double-day workload of professional commitments plus domestic and childcare duties.

Given Hong Kong’s exceptional educational record of gender balance of outputs at all levels of education, pipeline explanations for women’s

under-representation in senior HE management do not hold. Rather, the women in this study felt that the private sector lures many graduate women into more lucrative careers, that women don't plan careers "for the long haul," and that parents may still be an impediment to encouraging women to continue beyond an undergraduate education. As well, according to several women, the historical and socio-political context leading up to 1997 had diverted the pipeline into an overseas exodus of qualified women (and men) — a "missing generation" — in anticipation of 1997. As with glass ceiling explanations, the pipeline concept must be contextualized in generational, historical, economic and political terms.

Without wishing to make sweeping generalizations, the overall message was clear: women loved their work, their teaching and research, and even their managerial roles despite the many complex work- and family-related strategies they had to devise in order to achieve their goals.³ They were well aware of the professional and personal "costs" of their choices yet they were prepared to put in the effort. The older women had stayed the distance during a time when women's presence in HE administration was largely confined to secretarial roles. The younger women were also intent on staying in academics for the long haul: committed to their work and academic career goals. The lure of private sector careers had not detracted these women from what I interpreted as their dedication to and love of their chosen disciplinary and research areas. Given the still persistent cultural values placed on "women's responsibility to have children, to raise them, to look after the parents, that is very important in Asian, particularly Chinese culture," the women had made some hard decisions about remaining childless, postponing children, and balancing family and professional demands. In academics particularly, those demands require a track record of research grants and research productivity that consume huge amounts of time far in excess of comparable private sector jobs. In academics, there is always another paper to write, more data to collect, another grant to complete, or more fieldwork or labwork to attend to which usually cuts into after-hours family time.

Drawing on French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's (1988) work on academic power and capital, Heward (1996, p. 17) has argued that:

any understanding of women in the academic profession has to examine the interaction of structure and process. There is no single barrier or "glass ceiling" that can be shattered.

The women who have spoken here have given us insights into how women's career trajectories and opportunities are shaped by the intersections of historically situated cultural values and structures, and place-specific socio-political and economic factors. This network of intersections is framed within colonial and postcolonial legacies which do not neatly fit into single theory explanations or one-dimensional Western conceptualization of "glass ceilings," "pipeline," or "double-day." Whatever the actual impediments subsumed under the concept of glass ceiling may or may not be, one thing is certain: they can only be made intelligible by reference to local sites, socio-political and cultural contexts and histories. We need to look at the politics of place — that is, historically contingent and shifting cultural and political discourses, structures and processes — to understand how women are shaped by and themselves shape the social enactment of personal and professional relations, career aspirations and mobility, and concepts of career.

Notes

1. The history of schooling and post-compulsory education in Hong Kong is crucial to an understanding of the position of women in higher education today. However, even a synopsis is beyond the limits of this paper. For an instructive overview of higher education in southeast Asia, see Yee, 1995; for a comprehensive overview of education in southeast Asia see Morris and Sweeting, 1995 and Sweeting's chapter in that volume for a critical political and economic analysis of Hong Kong education; see also Sweeting, 1993 for a post WWII history of Hong Kong education; for a comparative analysis of the position of women in higher education management in southeast Asia see Dines, 1993; for a wide-ranging scholarly and journalistic sketch of the British legacy in pre- and post-handover Hong Kong see Lau, 1997.
2. Confidentiality protocol requires that I do not identify the women's comments with their institutional titles, faculty or university location, or other personal information. Hong Kong's academic community is relatively small and the few women that are in senior high profile positions would easily be identified by mention of their university, faculty, or position.
3. I am indebted to the women who took part in this study, and two colleagues who helped to establish contacts. Several women offered to see me without prior arrangements, having been recommended by other women in the course of fieldwork. I am grateful for the time they took to see me on such short notice. I thank all the women for sharing personal reflections and critical

insights. They form the backbone of this paper which I hope has been an accurate and intellectually productive analysis and interpretation.

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