

Transgressing the power/powerless divide: Hong Kong women academics (Individual Paper)

Aiston Sarah Jane, *University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong*

Abstract

Leadership in higher education is not inclusive, and 'significant others' are not being engaged in the decision-making processes of the academy. Leadership is implicitly constructed as male and male academics are positioned as *powerful*, whilst women academics are positioned as *powerless*. This paper explores the narratives of senior academic women who have successfully negotiated and transgressed the powerless/powerful divide. Based on interviews with the most powerful academic women leaders in Hong Kong, the paper will reflect on how these women have transgressed the power/powerless divide, their experiences of crossing that boundary and how they have constructed and made sense of their identities as lone academic female leaders. Particular attention will also be paid to the cultural context within which these women are positioned.

Despite the increase in the number of women entering higher education as undergraduate students internationally (although this trend is far from universal), women continue to fail to progress through the academic hierarchy in significant numbers and enter senior leadership positions globally. Leadership in higher education is not inclusive and is failing to engage 'significant others' in the decision-making processes of the academy. Leadership is implicitly constructed as male (Madera, Hebel and Martin, 2009; Fitzgerald, 2014) and male academics are positioned as *powerful*, whilst women academics are positioned as *powerless*.

This paper seeks to explore the narratives of senior academic women who have successfully negotiated and transgressed the powerless/powerful divide. The context is the Hong Kong academy.

Hong Kong provides a particularly interesting context in which to explore the position of women as academic leaders. With a 'foot in two cultures', Hong Kong culturally is considered to have more of an affinity with China than the West. With respect to the position of women, Asian culture, based on a Confucian heritage, espouses a specific concept of femininity; women's roles and conduct in public life are framed by cultural expectations that place a premium on women as dutiful wives, mothers and homemakers and on a woman's conduct in public as subdued, quiet and withdrawn (Luke, 2000). However, in terms of its socio-economic environment, as a leading international finance centre, Hong Kong's universities have great similarity with those in the West and many academics have been trained in the West. Moreover, the region has a strong higher education sector; six out the eight University Grants Committee funded institutions are ranked in the QS top 500 world universities.

Based on interviews with the most powerful women leaders in the Hong Kong academy, the paper will reflect on how these women have transgressed the power/powerless divide, their experiences of crossing that boundary and how they have constructed and made sense of their identities as lone academic female leaders. Particular attention will also be paid to the cultural context within which these women are positioned; to what extent has Asian culture impacted on their journey to become *powerful* academics? The paper will also consider the extent to which these women are under a higher level of scrutiny and if they have had 'trouble legitimizing their authority' (Ayman and Korabik, 2010), along with how they view their approach to leadership within this cultural context. Importantly, the paper will also explore their views on what they regard as the enablers and barriers to women's entry to senior leadership roles.

This paper makes a contribution to our understanding of women's academic leadership beyond the Western academy. Considering the experiences of women who have made the transition to senior leadership roles is crucial in understanding to what extent the academy is embracing plurality and difference in higher education.

References:

Ayman, R. and Korabik, K. (2010). Leadership: Why gender and culture matter. *American Psychologist*, 65(3), 157-170.

Fitzgerald, T. (2014). *Women Leaders in Higher Education: Shattering the Myths*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Luke, C. (2000). One step up, two down: Women in higher education management in Southeast Asia. In Tight, M. (ed.). *Academic Work and Life: What it is to an academic and how this is changing*, 285-305. Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Madera, J. M., Hebl, M. R. and Martin, R. C. (2009). Gender and Letters of recommendation for academia: Agentive and communal differences. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 94(6), 1591-9.