

# 127 Troubling Identity: An Illustrative Example of a Middle Woman Leader's Identity Construction in HEI in China

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## Research Domains

Management, leadership, governance and quality (MLGQ)

## Abstract

This study explores the identity construction of women leaders in Chinese Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) through the case of Liwen, a deputy dean in a junior college. The research highlights the marginalization and underrepresentation of women leaders in China's HEIs, despite societal changes. It reveals that women leaders in middle-level positions in higher education struggle to establish their leadership identities due to shifting discourses surrounding education, gender, and performance. The study adopts a post-structuralist perspective and demonstrates how Liwen manages her troubling leadership identity by adopting alternative identities of "big sister," "teacher," and "engineer." These identities enable her to reclaim authority within a specific cultural context. The research suggests that while Liwen's image aligns with the ideal educational leader, her legitimacy as a woman leader remains questioned. The study provides a valuable reference for future research on gender and identity in Chinese higher education leadership.

## Full paper

Women leaders in China's HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) have long been marginalised and underrepresented (References available on request). However, the rapidly changing socio-economic contexts continue to shape and modify the discourses around 'educational leaders' and 'women', persistently challenging the legitimacy of women's leadership identities.

Women leaders in China's HEIs are mainly concentrated in junior colleges and universities deemed non-prestigious, occupying middle-level leadership positions such as dean, deputy dean, or party secretary. These women leaders are the first batch of women who have received higher education after the resumption of the higher education entrance examination in China and grew up under the discourse of 'professional women' and the propaganda of gender equality. However, after experiencing economic reform and the invasion of education by the market economy, the discourse of higher education leadership continues to fit in an increasingly 'masculine' form. Rapidly changing situations and an emphasis on performance require leaders to be even more visionary, tough, and aggressive, while the discourse on women becomes more conservative as job market competition intensifies and the effects of the aging population.

This small-scale study adopts a post-structuralist perspective on identity construction, that is, women leaders in higher education need to face multiple identities brought about by subjects placed in different discourses. The current dominant discourse makes their multidimensional identities in opposition in contradiction while the troubling identities require them to develop a strategy to manage to achieve a subtle identity balance.

The study describes a women leader Liwen, a deputy dean working in a junior college, using narrative interviews, aiming to investigate how she constructs, understands, and manages her 'troubling' leadership identity. The results indicate Liwen has a strong rejection of leadership identity, and her description of her leadership practice and her preference for titles expressed an identity management strategy – taking another three identities of 'big sister',

'teacher', and 'engineer' to replace the leadership identity for reclaiming the authority. The strategy reveals an attempt to gain more legitimacy for a denied identity based on a specific cultural context. As an alternative to leadership identity, Big Sister's image is rooted in the context of Confucian culture, based on the natural sense of authority brought by the order of seniority, while Engineer and Teachers as identities she shares with her staff fit the communist definition of the attribute of leadership --coming from the people, with people.

The study claims that while the image of Liwen—a well-educated, elite woman—taking appears to be a 'right fit' (see Courtney and McGinity's typology of conceptualisations of educational-leader identity, 2020) for a higher education middle-level leader, the legitimacy of her leadership identity as a woman has never been accepted. This pilot study hopes to take this illustrative example to provide a reference for the ongoing research project on the identity construction of women middle and senior leaders in China's higher education. Gender and identity issues are becoming more prominent in current Chinese higher education leadership, but have not received commensurate attention.

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