

Original Paper

“Holding up Half the Sky”—Women and the Glass Ceiling at a University in China

Kathy O’Sullivan^{1*}

¹ Department of Student Recruitment, Admissions & Services, Niagara College KSA, Al Majma’ah,
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Received: August 29, 2019 Accepted: September 9, 2019 Online Published: September 19, 2019
doi:10.22158/jetss.v1n2p58 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/jetss.v1n2p58>

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to describe the glass ceiling is perceived by women in the role of mid-to-senior level academics and administrators in higher education in a Chinese university. This study also sought to understand the characteristics of women in mid-to-senior level positions, as well as the tools and resources necessary for women to obtain such a position in higher education. Drawing on in-depth interviews with eight women in mid-to-senior level academic and administrative positions in one university and informed by constructivist views, the essence of their lived experience helped to inform a broader discourse of women and the glass ceiling. The findings highlight how women’s career progression is shaped by cultural norms and conventions.

Keywords

glass ceiling, cultural norms, management, mentors

1. Introduction

The Chinese Women’s Development Plan (2011-2020) issued by the State Council proposed a mission, objectives, and measures aiming had the stated aim of promoting women’s participation indecision-making and management in various fields in the new century (The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2011).

The origins of the term “glass ceiling” are disputed. Marilyn Loden was said to use the term during a 1978 Women’s Action Alliance meeting in Manhattan, USA, though there are no written records available to confirm this. In July 1979, at a Conference of the Women’s Institute for Freedom of the Press, the concept of a glass ceiling was used in a presentation by two employees of Hewlett-Packard, Katherine Lawrence and Marianne Schreiber (Zimmer, 2015). The Wall Street Journal first used the term “glass ceiling” in 1986, referring to the invisible obstacles women faced in obtaining higher

positions in companies in the United States (Sheng, 2009). Since then, use of the term has become more popular, and today, it is used to describe the imperceptible challenges that women encounter when seeking promotions.

The proportion of women on the board of directors of Fortune 500 companies, for example, was only 9.6% in 1995 and 13.6% in 2003; however, it rose to 16.9% in 2013. The proportion of female chief executive officers (CEOs) in the Fortune 500 companies was 0 in 1995 and 1.6% in 2004, then rose to 4.8% in 2014. Figures for 2018 show a static 4.8% of female CEOs in Fortune 500 companies, compared with 2014, although this was 25% lower than 2017 (Atkins, 2018). In China, the proportion of female directors in listed companies was 9.2% in 1999 and 11.7% in 2010; moreover, the proportion of female CEOs in listed companies was 4.6% in 1997 and 5.6% in 2010 (Yan et al., 2018).

Where higher education is concerned, educator Wu Yifang took up the post of the president at Jinling College in 1928, and in so doing became the first female university president in China (Wang et al., 2013). However, in 2007, a research group at Renmin University of China found that women occupied the position of president at a paltry 4.5% of 1,792 colleges and universities (Yang, 2008). In 2016, out of 759 university presidents in China, only 28, or 3.7%, were women, according to the 8th World Women University Presidents Forum held in Wuhan, China, in April 2018. Underrepresentation of women in mid-to-senior level administrative positions in higher education remains an issue in many countries, not only in China.

This paper reports the findings of a small-scale research study undertaken to investigate women's career development. The aim of the study was to explore the current situation for women in the university workplace, focusing on their day-to-day experience of working life. The study also examined whether women should take more control of their own careers. The reason for this focus is that, as career development structures have become more informal and less transparent over recent years, so the need for individuals to take control of their own development becomes key (Morris et al., 2015).

2. Literature Review

Although nowadays women's employment rates in China are amongst the highest in the world, with almost three women out of four in the labour force (Attané, 2012), with many women occupying management roles and taking responsibility for promoting the construction and development of universities, relatively few women progress to leadership (Sheng, 2009; Wang & Kai, 2015). In higher education, a survey of presidents (the equivalent of Vice Chancellors in the UK context) conducted among 1,792 of mainland China's higher educational institutions, conducted by Renmin University of China (as cited in Xue, 2008), found that only 4.5% of leaders were female. Another study of the resumes of 7,796 top-level university leaders at 1,166 Chinese universities found a comparably low proportion of female leaders (Wang & Kai, 2015), and a study of female leaders in a top university group, referred to as Project 985, found one or two female leaders in each institution, and some universities had none. Moreover, women were found to predominantly occupy deputy or associate

positions and serve as Communist Party leaders, rather than university leaders (Wang et al., 2013). This mirrored the case in the university in this study.

2.1 The Role of Cultural and Social Factors

The higher up the hierarchy one goes, the more social capital appears to matter (O'Connor, 2014). Precisely because Chinese society operates on a system of relationships (known as *guanxi*), men benefit greatly from the social capital and opportunities that social networks provide. Women, on the other hand, are constrained in taking part in important social networks by powerful socio-cultural barriers (Zhang, 2005; Huang & Aaltio, 2014; Zhang, 2010). Female academics in Chinese universities are affected in many other - often indirect - ways. For instance, research suggests women as managers are not viewed positively (Javalgi et al., 2011) and that the opportunities for males and females in Chinese universities are different, due to a situation existing where "social prejudice against women is very strong" (Zhang, 2005, p. 105). This suggests that where traditionalist values dominate, there is a less positive perception of women as managers.

Cho and Ryu (2016) examined career success through surveying the faculties of two major universities in Shandong Province, China, finding that the perceptions of career expectations of Chinese female faculty were impacted by social comparison standards.

In China, the conflict between work and family is the most significant obstacle faced by women in their career development (Yang, 2011). In traditional Chinese family culture, women are expected to assume the greater share of the family and homelife responsibilities, so it is more likely to be very difficult for them to invest the time and dedication required to meet the demands of a career without family support (Ip, 2011). In this, they have much in common with other studies reported in the literature from around the world.

Traditional values in China also emphasize that married women's primary duty is to support their husbands' careers fully (Cooke, 2005). Additionally, Chinese women show less self-efficacy in their career development compared to men (Firoz, 2015). Since self-efficacy is central to career development intent, discovering why women have generally accepted this condition and have not made some changes becomes essential. For instance, by investigating the relationship among work and family conflict, career expectations, and career development for Chinese women, Wang and Cho (2013, p. 49) argued that "women face high work-family conflict, influencing their career expectation and hindering career development". Cultural environment plays an important role in the process of leadership and management (Kong & Zhang, 2011; Zhang & Foo, 2012). Although being wary of generalizing, consistent with research by Hofstede (1980, 1991) and Shi and Wang (2011), Chinese culture places greater emphasis on collectivism whereas some cultures, such as that of the US, tend to emphasize individualism. Additionally, in a predominantly collectivist culture, there is a tendency to support collective values and standards, which are in accordance with behaviours of transformational leaders who associate the personal values of subordinates with group goals and visions (Avolio & Bass, 1988). However, transactional leaders tend to associate external reward with performance so as to stimulate

the competition, autonomy and achievement of individuals (Avolio et al., 1995), which ties in with the culture of individualism, but is somewhat inconsistent with the value of collectivism (Walumbwa et al., 2007). Transformational leadership has generally been believed to be an effective leadership style (Bass & Avolio, 1993), and female leaders are often better at adopting this kind of leadership style than male leaders (Eagly & Carli, 2003a, 2003b). Therefore, it is more beneficial for female leaders to take on an effective transformational leadership style in Chinese academic culture.

In a 2015 study, Peusa et al. claimed that paternalistic leadership is very prevalent in corporate contexts in the Chinese society (see also Chen et al., 2014). To what extent this paternalistic leadership characterizes female leaders in China is not known.

It is indisputable that China has been heavily influenced by Confucian culture (Wah, 2010), where women often play a dependent role. As the ancient Chinese proverb goes: “Only women and villains are difficult to support. One cannot approach them too closely, nor drift apart too far” (Confucius). In fact, it is deeply rooted in Chinese culture to maintain gender role traditions as well as the concept that men are somehow superior to women (Gu, 2003; Zhang, 2015).

Therefore, traditional Confucian culture in China may heighten the glass ceiling effect, which lowers the possibility for women to be promoted to senior positions. Conversely, this could also mean that women promoted to more senior positions are perhaps more capable than their male counterparts (Foschi, 1996; Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997).

2.2 Glass Ceiling

The term glass ceiling has been reimagined in a myriad of ways over the years (Mulcahy & Linehan, 2014; Smith et al., 2012) and remains a powerful image of organisational culture. Being excluded from men-only events is described in New York (Fiorina, 2006) and London contexts (The Economist, 2011). Of course, women also tend to exclude themselves, such as when they are less likely to apply for promotion (Litzky & Greenhaus, 2007; Sandberg & Scovell, 2013). This was identified by Austin (2009, p. ix) as a “psychological glass ceiling”, where women who are capable often lack self-confidence and belief in themselves.

Snyder’s (2014a, 2014b) gender comparison of 248 performance assessments in the US showed that more critical language was used about women compared to their male colleagues, especially when it came to promotion and performance review.

2.3 Queen Bee Syndrome

Another barrier, known as the “queen bee syndrome”, describes a woman in a position of authority who views or treats subordinates more critically if they are female. This term was coined in the 1970s following a study led by researchers at the University of Michigan (Staines, Tavis, & Jayaratne, 1973), which examined promotion rates and the impact of the women’s movement on the workplace. They found that women who achieved success in male-dominated environments were at times likely to oppose the rise of other women, essentially because the patriarchal culture of work encouraged the few women who successfully rose to the top to become fixated on maintaining their power (Blau & DeVaro,

2007).

2.4 Research Performance

Morley (2014) found the existence of a gendered research economy in academia. Women are less likely to be journal editors or cited in top-rated academic journals (Wilson, 2012), are less likely to be principal investigators (European Commission, 2011), are also awarded fewer research prizes and tend to receive fewer invitations to be keynote conference speakers (Schroeder et al., 2013). In fact, many female academics have contracts that are temporary or heavily weighted towards teaching rather than research. Universities in East Asia are rapidly ascending the global league tables, yet quality does not yet seem to be linked to gender equality (Grove, 2013).

2.5 Mentors

Support or mentoring from others makes a discernible difference to those who aspire to climb the career ladder (Holton & Dent, 2016). Much of this support occurs on an informal basis, with establishing a good working relationship with the boss being viewed as a vital source of career development. Some organisations do formalise support with mentoring or executive education programmes. This type of support is particularly significant when women are in the minority in their workplace, especially early in their career (Sanders, 2012). However, mentors are useful at every level in the organisation.

2.6 Recent Advancements

The former Chinese leader Chairman Mao's slogan on the role of women in the new socialist society, that women were "holding up half the sky" (Li, 2000), may still remain as an unattainable dream, but there has been some encouraging news in recent years. Xie and Zhu (2016), in a study involving 296 women managers who were taking MBA and EMBA programmes in China, found that there has been positive improvement, with the majority of women managers being satisfied with the proportion of women as managers, and with their own promotion situations, in their current organizations.

3. Research Context

According to a relatively recent survey among Chinese colleges and universities (Jiang, 2017), males in senior-level positions account for more than 90% of higher education leaders, while there is a distinct lack of females in such positions (25%). In academia, few females are in charge of important research projects. This is brought into sharp focus when one considers the chief scientists in the "973 Plan", where women account for 4.6% of those selected; when one considers the chief scientists in "the Yangtze River scholars" scheme, where women account for 3.9% of those selected; and when one considers the chief scientists in the research group of "863 Plan", where there was not a single female representative in 2017 (Jiang, 2017).

Correspondingly, at the university in this study, among the senior leadership ranks, women occupy more deputy and associate-level positions than principal ones. Established in 2012, the university in this study is a public institution with a student cohort of almost 4,000 students. The university is

expanding quickly, thanks in no small part to generous government funding. A university with research, innovation and entrepreneurship as its mission, there is a male-female student ratio of 3:1.

4. Research Question

As women continue to break through the glass ceiling, the proportion of senior female leaders in Chinese higher education remains low, compared to other fields and to higher education in other countries.

The following questions were used to guide the study:

1. How do mid-to-senior level females in higher education perceive their experience with the glass ceiling?
2. What are the characteristics of females in senior positions which allowed them to break through the glass ceiling to their current position?
3. What are the barriers that prevent females from being promoted to higher positions?
4. What are the tools and resources needed in higher education for females to advance in their careers?

5. Method

In previous research on the glass ceiling, a quantitative approach has been more popular than a qualitative one. However, the focus in this study was on interpreting reasons and motivations for perceptions, beliefs and behaviours of people (Donley, 2012). Bryman (2012) noted three particular features of a qualitative research: an inductive view of the relationship between theory and research, a stress of the qualitative method on understanding the social world through an examination of the interpretation of that world by its participants, and lastly, the implication that the social properties are outcomes of the interactions between individuals.

Using a qualitative methodology, however, may be seen as “too impressionistic and subjective” (Bryman, 2012, p. 405). It may also be perceived as being dependent on the researcher viewpoints about what is considered to be important, and the relationship between the researcher and the people studied (Bryman, 2012). However, as this study sought explicitly to understand the participants’ viewpoint and experience, it was deemed to be the most appropriate method.

To this end, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight women in mid-to-senior-level positions. Six of the women interviewed were in mid-level positions, and two in senior-level positions. All personal details pertaining to the participants’ work was anonymized. All the women began their careers as teachers.

Interview questions were open-ended questions, to capture participants’ views about their work and life, career development path and obstacles they have faced and/or overcome. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews because these are a form of interaction as natural as any other (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997). Interview data were analysed by coding words and phrases from the

interview transcripts and then incorporating these into general thematic categories (Mayan, 2001).

6. Results and Discussion

The findings of the study are presented in four themes: perception of the glass ceiling, challenges, breaking through barriers, and advice. Each of the themes shall be discussed in turn.

6.1 Perception of the Glass Ceiling

Amy, an associate director of a department, shared the following description that illustrates how the glass ceiling phenomena is dependent on who's in charge at the institution: *"If you look at who's running the universities, who's running this university, they're all older -probably 50s, 60s, even maybe 70s, that that was the world they grew up in and they don't want things to change, even if they say they do. The ones that are younger have a different mentality, they just want to do the best job, and they don't care so much if you're male or female – until there's a conflict! But it's still hard to break down the cultural barriers, though it'll change faster with a new generation. It's already beginning to change, even as we deal with students"*.

Four of the participants believe that a possible reason why the glass ceiling exists in higher education is because some men feel threatened by capable women: *"So, I think, there are still some, some men in administration and they don't know how to deal with women in positions that are higher than theirs. And it may be because they're jealous women got the positions and not them. A man's worth is in his career here, so to have a woman as a line manager can be a problem"*. (Amy)

Although all participants acknowledge that the glass ceiling exists in higher education, four of them did not believe the institution was intentionally creating an environment that held women back. They stated that, although it happened, it was not intentional: *"I don't think that there's anything about our structure or our policies or anything that makes it any more difficult"*. (Jackie)

Jackie recalled that as the mother of a young child and the only mid-level administrator at the time, the challenge of being a working mother with mainly male colleagues: *"I sat around these conference room tables, I was the only one who was a mother, a mother of a young child, first of all, because there's this age difference, and I would be one of the few women there, making the tea for all the men, because that's our function at meetings, isn't it?! And you know, when somebody's going to start scheduling meetings at seven am or seven pm, I would sometimes speak up. Just say, you know that's hard for me to do that. And sometimes, and I didn't speak up all the time, but I knew that I had to, to try and make it easier for other women in the future. So, I think those sorts of things mean yes, there is a glass ceiling"*.

Three participants believe that women do not support other women at work, making promotion difficult – in essence, confirming the queen bee syndrome. Carol, a mid-level academic, believes that: *"Sometimes we have to be truthful and acknowledge that many women do not want to have a woman as a line manager, because they believe she will not support their career ambitions. This was certainly true in my case at my previous university, as I felt she was jealous of me. She never praised me or supported me in any way, and went out of her way to criticise me. However, it was not only me who*

noticed this, but others also, even some of the men! Here, I have a male dean who is very supportive, and I feel my career is going to progress further here”.

Janice, a mid-level academic, stated *“I don’t think men are sitting in the conference room saying we want to create a barrier for women”*. Jackie commented that although there is a glass ceiling in higher education that she believes it is not intentional but, rather, a historically cultural way of thinking: *“Women have many parts to play. I’m lucky because I have an understanding husband, but I still have the majority of home responsibilities because I’m a mother. This is how it is for every woman I know. It’s the culture here. I don’t think universities are deliberately putting obstacles in our way. This is just how things are”*.

6.2 Challenges

Six participants acknowledged that the responsibilities for women outside of the office are often more demanding for women, despite the fact that they hold management positions, as they remain responsible for most household tasks and childcare. Jackie shared the following: *“It’s hard. You have to be able to give 100% at work and then do the same thing at home—and sometimes you also have to solve home problems during the work day, such as when your child is sick, or the babysitter can’t come. Is that the same for a man? I’m not saying men don’t care or don’t do anything at home, but they do not have to worry about it in the same way we do, and they don’t have to drop everything in the same way, to deal with problems at home. So, it’s a big challenge for women, to combine duties at work with duties at home, and I don’t think men understand that”*.

Seven of the participants commented on the different communication styles of men and women, which they feel presents a challenge that women have to face on a daily basis. They shared examples of when their ideas were either not listened to or completely ignored by the men in the group and, therefore, they felt belittled. Jackie recalled that many times she would contribute in a meeting and her contribution would not be acknowledged, only to find that a few minutes later a man would provide the same idea - and suddenly it was seen by the president as a great idea: *“I’ve been in so many meetings and said something which was ignored as if I hadn’t spoken, then listened to somebody, a man, five minutes later say the exact same thing and then it becomes the best idea ever. Sometimes, if something needs to be done, I have to plant the idea in a male colleague’s mind, so that it becomes his idea when he says it, just to get something necessary done!”*

Lisa, a mid-level administrator, gave examples of when she had been in meetings and shared her ideas and was seen as someone who was pushy, aggressive, *“and can you believe it, I used the same tone of voice that the man who spoke just before I did used”*. Such behaviour is viewed as a way of diminishing the ideas of women: *“You say something and it’s as if you didn’t speak. But when a man says the same thing it’s interesting and everyone should listen and act on it. It doesn’t matter that it’s the same thing you said—because it comes from a man, it’s taken seriously”*. (Lisa)

Seven of the participants stated that they did not or do not still feel self-confident in their abilities, and that this is a challenge they need to overcome individually. These participants all expressed the view

that maybe they are not good enough, suggesting that positive feedback from others plays a large part in how these women view themselves in the workplace. This is especially evident when it comes to applying for a promotion: *“I used to believe that if I didn’t have all the experience required in a job description then I didn’t have the right to apply. I’ve tried to change that about myself, because I notice that men don’t worry about such things. I feel it’s how most women think, and we need to understand that it’s something we are creating for ourselves, making another obstacle”*. (Janice)

When considering whether or not to apply for promotion, women generally tend to worry more than men about having all the relevant experience or qualifications. Four participants in this study even mentioned that they waited until they were asked to do so before applying for promotion! Angela, a senior level academic and administrator, was promoted because of her expertise in other organisations in terms of being able to drive forward innovation: *“I think that in my position now, others who applied had perhaps a greater level of experience in other areas than I did, but what the university needed was someone with my particular kind of experience in innovation in my field. It’s more about the best fit for the university’s purposes at that time, and the relationship you have with others, and how you can build on that. Women need to understand that they have to put themselves forward and not worry about being able to meet every single part of the job description”*.

The study determined that while there was a noticeable increase in the number of women holding mid-level academic and administrative positions, the vast majority of senior-level positions continued to be held by men. The management landscape is changing in higher education in China, albeit at a snail’s pace.

6.3 Breaking through Barriers

All of the participants were of the opinion that one had to first excel in either teaching or research in order to be taken seriously by their male colleagues in a managerial role, even if that role was wholly administrative, as Angela shows: *“Though there is a separate administration system and teaching system at Chinese universities, to be taken seriously by men in management, all women are expected to have been excellent in teaching and research. This is often difficult for women, because they have children and other family responsibilities, and haven’t been able to spend as much time on this aspect of their careers as men have”*.

It should be noted that all of the participants in this study began their careers in higher education as teachers.

The participants mentioned qualities that you would expect those in managerial positions to have, such as always being professional, being hardworking, not watching the clock but putting in extra hours when necessary, and not being too emotional. Making things easier for that one line manager was also mentioned. Women cannot say no too often if they want to get ahead at work: *“I just say yes to more and more work and just try to get it done. If that means working late at night or working on weekends, then that’s what needs to happen. Men do that, so women can’t say it should be different for them. We have to show loyalty and have to show we’re willing to do whatever it takes”*. (Amy)

Amy's work ethic was evident in many examples throughout the interview: *"I just want to make everyone else's life easier, because life is hard for others and we never know what someone is going through. That means I look for ways to change the way things are done, to make it more efficient. Sometimes people don't want to do things differently because there's a certain way it's always been done, but if that isn't efficient, it's up to us to look for ways to make things better. It's about attitude"*.

Janice believes always being professional is the most important factor for women who want to progress in their careers. She stressed this is perhaps more the case in higher education than in other fields, where enquiring amongst one's peers as to one's suitability is commonplace: *"People always say the Chinese are the best networkers. This is true when applying for a job at another university or applying for a promotion, as it often has nothing to do with your resume, or how well you do in the interview, but what about people who've worked with you in the past have to say about you. So, if you are always professional, no matter where you are and what your position is, you won't have any problems. That builds your professional reputation, and reputation is everything"*.

However, it is not only about being professional, but about having to prove that more than men do: *"A man here is automatically assumed to be a good manager, a good leader. Not so for a woman, as she has to prove it in many different ways, with many different people"*. (Angela)

This was also mentioned by other participants, suggesting that there is an increased level of scrutiny for women who aspire to managerial or leadership roles.

Lack of self-awareness was generally felt to be a barrier that many women need to overcome over the course of their careers, as a knowledge of one's own strengths and weaknesses can only help when moving up in one's career. As Angela said, it is all about *"be honest about what you want, know what you are good at and plan to become the best"*. Having a critical friend, or receiving honest feedback from one's line manager was viewed as something positive. It was felt that self-awareness helped women be and feel more confident at work and would help them be more likely to apply for promotion. All participants expressed the view that pregnancy is a disadvantage when considering whether to apply for promotion, with three participants also mentioning that they were part of interview panels where male managers asked women about whether they were married, how many children they had etc. as a means of deciding if they should not be hired for a higher level position. This is seen to dissuade many women from pursuing career opportunities, as there are no policies specifically in place to address this.

6.4 Advice

All of the participants were eager to offer advice to others, in order to assist other women in navigating their career paths. When a new director restructured the administrative department she worked in and decided to hire an associate director Jenny shared the following: *"I had not ever given much thought that I had wanted to have a higher position, because I loved what I was doing with. However, if I'm honest, I didn't like the director, and worried that if I didn't like a new associate director, then my life would be twice miserable. I applied, because I knew that people from other departments would also*

have a say, and luckily, I got it".

This particular timeframe in her career was described thus: *"I became involved in a lot of committees, which was important. You have to be noticed to be a hard worker. Also, I like to challenge myself. Soon, others began to notice that I could do different tasks, and everything started to go better. My director couldn't put me down so easily any longer"*. (Jenny)

Again, remaining calm and composed in every situation and not being seen to be emotional comes through strongly from participants: *"When a woman becomes a manager, it's important to be unemotional. Here, the men expect us sometimes to be emotional, but if we show that we can manage this, they accept us very well"* (Helen). Women can make *what* are perceived to be female characteristics, work in their favour: *"Males look at the situation differently, they see the bigger picture and want to solve the problem quickly. Women notice the details, and are usually softer, which is what the situation often needs, when you are dealing with people"*. (Carol)

Helen offered advice for women to make their ambitions known to their line manager: *"It's actually attractive when a woman shows her desire to move up, to be the best. Maybe nothing happens immediately, but then, you don't know when something comes up, and people remember you. And they remember you are motivated and hardworking, and you are often given the chance. I've seen it happen, but it doesn't happen if you don't let people know"*. Making one's desire for career advancement known is advocated by many participants: *"Let them know you want to have more responsibility, to grow. People respond to enthusiasm, to those who show they are hungry for more"*. (Lisa)

The importance of being able to see the big picture was highlighted, with advice being offered for women pursuing a senior level position in higher education: *"Be strategic. Look at the big picture, the why, the how do we get there. Stay one step ahead, and you will get ahead. My mentor showed me this"*. (Helen) In saying this, Helen touched on what can be an obstacle to women pursuing a career in higher education—the lack of mentors. When there are fewer women in senior leadership positions, female mentors are obviously lacking. Women can have a powerful effect, in terms of encouraging other women to apply for promotion. Mentors serve as role models, and all those in higher education need to see that, not least, students.

There was unanimous consensus from the participants that having mentors is important for women who are seeking senior level administrative positions in higher education. Mentors can also serve as examples of behaviours that are not desirable which can also be useful: *"I've had some bosses and mentors that I've worked with, some teach you good things, some don't, or, I mean, they teach you things you should never do. But we can learn from everyone, and learning what not to do is just as important as learning what to do"*. (Helen) Mentoring is seen to be at its best when it is informal: *"Observe different people and how they do things, find a woman who is the same age as you but who has a higher position, or find an older and wiser woman and learn from them. Many women are generous with their experience and knowledge, and we can learn so much"*. (Lisa)

Helen shared the following story of her mentor who was her boss: *"She was great. I didn't always like*

how she expected all of us to work hard, but, you know, she worked harder than any of us. I learned so much, and came to understand that she worked so hard because she wanted to make the system work better, and wanted life to be easier for the rest of us in the end. And she was also my mentor when my husband and I moved to a new city, and now she's one of my closest friends. She always wants the best for me".

As far as mentoring and coaching is concerned, one of the challenges is access to female mentors. However, all of the participants in this study believe it is one of the most crucial factors in career success, particularly when moving from a mid-level position to a more senior role.

The study highlights a number of areas that make it harder for women to achieve their career potential. There are the difficulties experienced by working mothers, ideas that a person is somehow less capable, less committed or less intelligent simply because they are women and many other factors making it difficult for women in China to scale the heights of career success.

However, the findings from the research also identify key factors that are likely to create career success for women.

7. Limitations

While this article contributes to understanding key issues surrounding women and the glass ceiling in China's universities, which may be relevant in other cultural contexts, there are also limitations to this study. For example, a larger sample from a broader range of colleges and universities could reveal a diversity of views. Second, the interviews were conducted at a single point in time, perhaps leading to similar views being expressed.

This study was concerned with higher education, as the focus was on the experiences of the glass ceiling of individual women managers in the university milieu. Wider issues weren't examined in-depth, therefore, future research could combine macro- and micro-level issues with a wider number of participants, which would enable us to gain a better understanding of the influence of social norms on women, career and the glass ceiling in the wider society, as well as in other workplaces.

8. Recommendations

Future research could involve longitudinal research, possibly following newly appointed female academic and administrative leaders. Comparative studies with other national contexts could also prove productive in furthering our understanding of the glass ceiling as it is experienced by females in Chinese universities.

Although promotion occurred internally for most of the participants in this study, with an international outlook forming part of the rankings criteria for universities, more attention will most likely be paid in the future to diverse working experience in a globalised context. Women need to be cognizant of this and plan their careers carefully.

One thing the study highlights is the need for more research on the significance of mentors for women

in higher education in China. Young women in today's China are more likely to have a mother who works outside the home. While they can be mentors or role models, women should also find a mentor in their chosen career, as this would appear to be an untapped resource of enormous potential.

9. Conclusion

The glass ceiling can partly be shattered by women taking more responsibility for their own career path development. However, alone, that is unlikely to be enough. What is really needed is for higher education institutions to acknowledge they need to be proactive in creating policies and an environment where organisational culture is more favourable towards women, where women are better able to contribute to institutional success.

The participants in this study could be said to have learnt how to position themselves within social and cultural norms, even if they sometimes find it difficult to manage expectations. In essence, they are navigating their own career paths, and are forging new ways of dealing with the glass ceiling. They have taken some of the first steps on the longer journey those who follow in their footsteps will need to continue.

Compared to foreign countries, the proportion of female leaders in China's higher education field is still low, and this state of affairs has not been given nearly enough attention in the literature. If more higher education institutions improve career development support and mentoring and, perhaps critically, if more women also understand the importance of taking full responsibility for their own careers, then the situation for women will inevitably improve over time. Career aspirations will no longer be as limited as perhaps they have been heretofore.

In summary, the research findings indicate the need for better career development guidance and support. While some barriers to women's career advancement in higher education have been identified, and some strategies to overcome these barriers have been suggested, this small-scale research study will attempt to give voice to women in mid-to senior-level academic and administrative positions in higher education, allowing them to share how they were successful at breaking through the glass ceiling in higher education.

References

- 8th World Women University Presidents Forum. (2018). Retrieved from <http://www.cuc.edu.cn/zcyw/10399.html>
- Atkins, B. (2018, August 7). *Where did all the female CEOs go?* Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/betsyatkins/2018/08/07/where-did-all-the-female-ceos-go/#4940b44ed1ec>
- Atkinson, P., & Silverman, D. (1997). Kundera's immortality: The interview society and the invention of the self. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 3, 304-325. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107780049700300304>
- Attané I. (2012). Being a woman in China today: A demography of gender. *China Perspectives*, 5,

5-15.

- Austin, L. G. (2009). *What's holding you back?: Eight critical choices for women's success*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Avolio, B. J., & Bass, B. M. (1988). *Transformational leadership, charisma, and beyond*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.
- Avolio, B. J., Bass, B. M., & Jung, D. I. (1995). *Multifactor leadership questionnaire technical report*. Redwood City, CA: Mind Garden.
- Bass, B. M., & Avolio, B. J. (1993). Transformational leadership and organizational culture. *Public Administration Quarterly*, 17(1), 112-121.
- Biernat, M., & Kobryniewicz, D. (1997). Gender and race-based standards of competence: Lower minimum standards but higher ability standards for devalued groups. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 72(3), 544-557. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.72.3.544>
- Blau, F. D., & DeVaro, J. (2007). New evidence on gender differences in promotion rates: An empirical analysis of a sample of new hires. *Industrial Relations*, 46(3), 511-550. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-232X.2007.00479.x>
- Bryman, A. (2012). *Social research methods* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Chen, X. P., Eberly, M. B., Chiang, T. J., Farh, J. L., & Cheng, B. S. (2014). Affective trust in Chinese leaders: Linking paternalistic leadership to employee performance. *Journal of Management*, 40, 796-819. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206311410604>
- Cho, T., & Ryu, K. (2016). The impacts of family-work conflict and social comparison standards on Chinese women faculties' career expectation and success, moderating by self-efficacy. *Career Development International*, 21(3), 299-316. <https://doi.org/10.1108/CDI-11-2015-0146>
- Cooke, F. L. (2005). *HRM, work and employment in China*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Donley, A. M. (2012). *Student handbook to sociology: Research methods Volume II*. New York, NY: Infobase Publishing.
- Eagly, A. H., & Carli, L. L. (2003a). Finding gender advantage and disadvantage: Systematic research integration is the solution. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 14(6), 851-859. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2003.09.003>
- Eagly, A. H., & Carli, L. L. (2003b). The female leadership advantage: An evaluation of the evidence. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 14(6), 807-834. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2003.09.004>
- European Commission. (2011). *Structural change in research institutions: Enhancing excellence, gender equality and efficiency in research and innovation*.
- Fiorina, C. (2006). *Tough choices: A memoir*. New York: Portfolio.
- Firoz, F. (2015). Female entrepreneurial capacity in China: A comparative study of two periods. *International Journal of Social Science Studies*, 3(5), 10-25. <https://doi.org/10.11114/ijss.v3i5.879>
- Foschi, M. (1996). Double standards in the evaluation of men and women. *Social Psychology*

- Quarterly*, 59(3), 237-254. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2787021>
- Grove, J. (2013, May 13). The global gender index. *Times Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/features/the-global-gender-index/3/2003517.article#>
- Gu, Z. Y. (2003). The strengthening path of “women are inferior to men viewpoint” in Chinese ancient society. *Collection of Women’s Studies*, 4, 48-51.
- Hofstede, G. (1980). *Culture’s consequences: Institutional differences in work-related values*. Beverly Hills, CA.: Sage.
- Hofstede, G. (1991). *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind*. London: McGraw-Hill.
- Holton, V., & Dent, F. E. (2016). A better career environment for women: Developing a blueprint for individuals and organisations. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 31(8), 542-561. <https://doi.org/10.1108/GM-08-2015-0074>
- Huang, J., & Aaltio, I. (2014). Guanxi and social capital: Networking among women managers in China and Finland. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 39, 22-39. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2013.09.002>
- Ip, N. Y. (2011). Career development for women scientists in Asia. *Journal of Neuron View*, 70(6), 1029-1032. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuron.2011.06.008>
- Javalgi, R. G., Scherer, R., Sánchez, C., Rojas, L. P., Daza, V. P., Hwang, C. E., & Yan, W. (2011). A comparative analysis of the attitudes toward women managers in China, Chile, and the USA. *International Journal of Emerging Markets*, 6(3), 233-253. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17468801111144067>
- Jiang, J. (2017). Research on career development of women in universities—Based on the investigation and analysis of female teachers in colleges and universities in FuJian province. *Proceedings of the 2017 International Conference on Economics and Management Engineering (ICME)*, 223-227. <https://doi.org/10.12783/dtem/iceme2017/11792>
- Kong, D., & Zhang, J. J. (2011). The research on Chinese ancient management philosophies’ similarities with contemporary human resources management thoughts. *Chinese Management Studies*, 5(4), 368-379. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17506141111183145>
- Li, Y. (2000). Women’s movement and change of women’s status in China. *Journal of International Women’s Studies*, 1(1), 30-40.
- Litzky, B., & Greenhaus, J. (2007). The relationship between gender and aspirations to senior management. *Career Development International*, 12(7), 637-659. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13620430710834404>
- Mayan, M. J. (2001). *An introduction to qualitative methods*. Edmonton, AB: Qual Institute Press.
- Morley, L. (2014). Lost leaders: Women in the global academy. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 33(1), 114-128. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2013.864611>
- Morris, S., Snell, S., & Bohlander, G. W. (2015). *Managing human resources*. Boston, MA: Cengage Learning.

- Mulcahy, M., & Linehan, C. (2014). Females and precarious board positions: Further evidence of the glass cliff. *British Journal of Management*, 25(3), 425-438. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.12046>
- Peusa, C., Brauna, S., & Knipfer, K. (2015). On becoming a leader in Asia and America: Empirical evidence from women managers. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 26(1), 55-67. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2014.08.004>
- Sandberg, S., & Scovell, N. (2013). *Lean in: Women, work and the will to lead*. New York: Random House USA Inc.
- Sanders, I. (2012, December 17). Technology's gender barrier. *The Financial Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.ft.com/content/374e2658-37e5-11e2-a97e-00144feabdc0>
- Schroeder, J. et al. (2013). Fewer invited talks by women in evolutionary biology symposia. *Journal of Evolutionary Biology*, 26(9), 2063-2069. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jeb.12198>
- Sheng, Y. (2009). Glass ceilings in progressional development of female faculty viewed from analysis of the faculty structure. *Collection of Women's Studies*, 1, 26-31.
- Shi, X. M., & Wang, J. Y. (2011). Cultural distance between China and US across GLOBE Model and Hofstede Model. *International Business and Management*, 2(1), 11-17.
- Smith, P., Caputi, P., & Crittenden, N. (2012). A maze of metaphors around glass ceilings. *Gender in Management*, 27(7), 436-448. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17542411211273432>
- Snyder, K. (2014a, August 26). The abrasive trap: High-achieving men and women are described differently in reviews. *Fortune*. Retrieved from <http://www.fortune.com/2014.08.26/performance-review-gender-bias>
- Snyder, K. (2014b, October 2). Why women leave tech: It's the culture, not because "math is hard". *Fortune*. Retrieved from <http://www.fortune.com/2014.10.02/women-leave-tech-culture>
- Staines, G., Tavis, C., & Jayaratne, T. E. (1973). The queen bee syndrome. In C. Tavis (Ed.), *The Female Experience* (pp. 34-56). Del Mar, California: CRM Books.
- The Economist. (2011, November 26). Special report: Women and work. *The Economist*.
- The State Council of the People's Republic of China. (2011). *The program for the development of Chinese women (2011- 2020)*.
- Wah, S. S. (2010). Confucianism and Chinese leadership. *Chinese Management Studies*, 4(3), 280-285. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17506141011074165>
- Walumbwa, F. O., Lawler, J. J., & Avolio, B. J. (2007). Leadership, individual differences, and work-related attitudes: A cross-culture investigation. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 56(2), 212-230. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1464-0597.2006.00241.x>
- Wang, W., & Cho, T. (2013). Work-family conflict influences on female's career development through career expectation. *Journal of Human Resource and Sustainability Studies*, 1(3), 43-50. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jhrss.2013.13007>
- Wang, Y., Yue, Q., & Yu, K. (2013). Women leaders of higher education: Female executives in leading

- universities in China. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 9(6), 40-45.
- Wang, Y-H., & Yu, K. (2015). A survey of the female leaders of Chinese universities. *FuDan Education Forum*, 3, 21-26.
- Wilson, R. (2012, October 22). Scholarly publishing's gender gap: Women cluster in certain fields, according to a study of millions of journal articles, while men get more credit. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from http://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Hard-Numbers-Behind/135236/?cid=wb&utm_source=wb&utm_medium=en
- Xie, Y., & Zhu, Y. (2016). Holding up half of the sky: Women managers' view on promotion opportunities at enterprise level in China. *Journal of Chinese Human Resource Management*, 7(1), 45-60. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCHRM-11-2015-0015>
- Xue, F. (2008). *Women's status in higher education: Where are women presidents in Chinese universities* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation)? University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway.
- Yan, S., Wu, Y., & Zhang, G. (2018) The gender difference in leadership effectiveness and its Sino-US comparison. *Chinese Management Studies*, 12(1), 106-124. <https://doi.org/10.1108/CMS-07-2016-0148>
- Yang, X. (2008). The average age of university presidents in China is 52. *People's Daily* (p. 11).
- Yang, Y. (2011). Gender and engineering career development of hotel's employees in China. *Systems Engineering Procedia*, 1, 365-371. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sepro.2011.08.055>
- Zhang, G. (2015). *The Management Essence of "the Analects of Confucius"*. Beijing: China Machine Press.
- Zhang, L. (2005). The particular career experiences of Chinese women academics. In F. Du, X. Zheng, & I. Y. Taehakkyo (Eds.), *Women's Studies in China: Mapping the Social, Economic and Policy Changes in Chinese Women's Lives* (pp. 71-114). Seoul: Ewha Woman's University Press.
- Zhang, L. (2010). A study on the measurement of job-related stress among women academics in research universities of China. *Frontiers of Education in China*, 5, 158-176. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11516-010-0011-4>
- Zhang, Y., & Foo, S. F. (2012). Balanced leadership: Perspectives, principles and practices. *Chinese Management Studies*, 6(2), 245-256. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17506141211236686>
- Zhao, J., & Jones, K. (2017). Women and leadership in higher education in China: Discourse and the discursive construction of identity. *Administrative Sciences*, 7(21), 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci7030021>
- Zhao, K. (2008). *Life cycle and career patterns of academic women in higher education in China today* (Unpublished Masters dissertation). The University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway.
- Zimmer, B. (2015, April 3). The phrase "glass ceiling" stretches back decades; A possible start: A conversation between two women in 1979. *Wall Street Journal*.