



Butterflies Emerging: Women's Leadership in China

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BUTTERFLIES EMERGING: WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN CHINA

When we admire a beautiful butterfly, we seldom remember the arduous journey it has gone through to become such a beauty. A butterfly goes through four distinct and difficult phases of development, known as its metamorphosis: egg, larva or caterpillar, pupa or chrysalis, and adult. Throughout this book, we have seen how Chinese women have gone through many phases of leadership, from leadership in the home through leadership in the community and, gradually, leadership in local levels of leadership in business and government. Gradually, and with the struggle of the butterfly breaking free of the chrysalis, they are slowly moving into senior leadership roles in education, in politics, and in business, including business ownership through entrepreneurship.

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As emphasized by this book's authors, the advancement of Chinese women into leadership positions has been much more than just good luck. It has taken hard work, persistence, collaboration, political action, education, global exposure, family culture change, academic research, and so much more to get them where they are today. And these factors will continue to be needed for the beautiful butterfly to finally break free with women achieving equity in all aspects of Chinese life and sharing senior leadership roles equally with men.

But the butterfly has not yet fully emerged from its chrysalis. Before Chinese women can fully experience equity, especially in leadership, many additional steps are needed. In this chapter, I outline many of the steps that are still needed for this to occur and who might be responsible for ensuring that these changes take place. I organized this chapter into major themes included in this book: family structure; education; technology; politics, Communist party, and legislation; non-profit and non-governmental organizations (NPOs/NGOs), regional impact, globalization; corporate world, including entrepreneurship; and I added one theme that is not included in this book, agriculture.

FAMILY STRUCTURES

As we have seen, a major factor inhibiting Chinese women from moving into leadership roles has been the cultural influence on the family, primarily through Confucianism. With women having primary responsibility for childcare, eldercare, children's education, and housework, it has been nearly impossible to have sufficient time and energy for full-time work, usually essential for leadership roles. Such work is especially difficult if those roles require traveling away from the home city.

However, the strengths of cultural influences are shifting. One factor supporting this shift has been the growth in availability and acceptability of daycare and early childhood education, reducing the need for women to be constantly available in the home for childcare. While Shiyu (2021) pointed to an 11% annual growth in revenues in childcare over the past five years, fewer than 5% of families are able to take advantage of such services because of availability and cost. Associated with this is the acceptability of both daycare and long-term care for elders who are unable to be independent (Xinhua, 2021), with an annual growth rate of over 10%, beginning with an accelerated government push beginning in 2020. In spite of these beginnings, however, much more is needed. Not only are

more facilities needed, but there must be governmental support to cover the costs of such services, and trained personnel are needed, with few trained staff currently available (Habib, 2019).

Another factor has to do with shared housework. Husbands are beginning to support their wives in doing housework, but women still spend much more time in housework than do their husbands, especially in rural areas (Yang, 2017). This change will be long term, as it needs to begin when boys are young. Parents must instill a sense of equality between boys and girls in doing their housework chores. As they become older, there is a better chance that both genders will expect to share housework as adults. Further, as girls consider marriage partners, one expectation will increasingly be focused on a husband who is willing to share housework. Conversely, for economic reasons, men will expect wives to share in work outside of the home.

The Confucian value of harmony through hierarchy, as it is applied here, has put Chinese women in secondary roles, to their fathers, their husbands, their sons, their parents, and their parents-in-law. Experiencing this secondary role throughout their lives, women find it difficult to exercise authority in work roles, and to disagree with their bosses, even when they are wrong. This is another cultural influence that will be difficult to overcome. Nevertheless, if equity is really going to be achieved, families and educational settings must focus on teaching children how to disagree in a way that does not disrupt harmony. Learning to disagree respectfully with parents, husbands, teachers, siblings, and employers will be difficult, especially for older generations who will need to be charged with such a change, but disagreement leads to better decisions, more creativity, and greater egalitarianism in the workplace, community, home, and nation.

EDUCATION

I firmly believe that education is a cornerstone of change, and, on the flip side, a way to reinforce tradition and culture. Because of the size of China's population, gaining a seat in high-quality schools has been very competitive. But high quality does not have to be highly selective with the subsequent pressure that this places on students and parents for high scores on tests. Having a sufficient number of schools with virtual curricula with well-trained teachers can offer the strong educational foundation students need. And, if there is commitment to change,

teacher education programs can turn out teachers who can be change-makers, dramatically changing the culture of the country toward greater gender egalitarianism. This step will require improved teacher education programs, the building of more schools (especially in rural areas), and the implementation of a curriculum focused on gender equity. Further, teacher education can help future teachers develop two-way forms of communications in the classroom and thus help students develop critical thinking to an extent that is not possible through one-way communications, which is typical in classrooms in traditional Asian cultures.

Children frequently model what they see in the behaviors of their parents and teachers. As with many countries, women teachers dominate in elementary schools, with more men and fewer women teachers as the students age. This models inequity at an age when the students are most impressionable. Efforts are needed, then, to recruit men to teach during early years of schooling, with women being recruited to teach at later years of schooling. Effort must also be taken, either through encouragement or even through mandated quotas, to place more women in leadership roles at all years of schooling.

To achieve this equity, it is necessary that both genders be attracted to all majors without gender distinction. Career development programs will be necessary to expose both genders to a broad range of career options and, thus, university and vocational education majors. This will become easier as students are exposed throughout their education to a diversity of teachers representing all areas of potential interest to the students. Again, mandated quotas might be effective in recruiting students of both genders to all majors.

At both college and university levels, students should be encouraged to participate in study abroad programs, opening their homes to international students while they travel to other countries to experience their cultures and educational systems. Given the size of the Chinese educational system, it is unlikely that a large percentage of students will be able to participate in such programs. However, expanding cultural outlooks through such programs will enhance cultural understanding of other countries and of the Chinese culture for students from other countries.

School is also a place where leadership skills can be developed and nurtured. Encouraging girls to participate in athletics can give them confidence in their abilities. Participation in school government and extracurricular activities can be very successful in laying the foundation for leadership. Debate clubs, political and ideological organizations, and

special career focused clubs (similar, for example, to the Future Farmers of America; Distributive Education Clubs of America; Business Professionals of America; Future Business Leaders of America; Family, Careers, and Community Leaders of America; and Skills USA) can all be extremely useful in career development. Girl Guides exist in China, associated with the UK, as are the Girl Scouts, associated with the USA. All of these organizations can be effective in creating leadership opportunities for both genders (through scouting programs), but especially for girls when equity exists in these activities throughout their schooling. While the government may wish to rebrand the scouting programs for both genders, having these programs and encouraging participation can be effective leadership development tools.

TECHNOLOGY

It is a truism to suggest that we live in a technological world. Our experiences during these past two years of the Covid-19 pandemic have shown how technology can fill the void when in-person meetings and classes cannot be held. As mentioned earlier, virtual classes can also be a way for China to compensate for the shortage of buildings in which to hold in-person classes, especially in rural areas. For this to be effective, however, students must have access to the necessary technology, which is not always the case, especially for students from low-income families. High-quality virtual classes also require teachers who are competent in teaching in a virtual environment. Quality teacher education can assist in ensuring that this is possible.

But, beyond virtual learning, technology is important in almost every aspect of our lives and will become increasingly important, especially as artificial intelligence takes a firmer grip on society. We see the importance of technology in all disciplines, including the arts. One of my sons is a graphic artist. Some of the artwork he has produced that are my favorites were produced through technology. I do not even begin to understand how he does it. A friend is a music professor and composer; he does all of his composing through synthesizer technology. Musical instruments can all use some form of technology. Research and development, with its accompanying innovation and creativity, requires technology. Fashion, cooking, manufacturing, military, natural resource discovery and extraction, transportation of all sorts (including automobiles), law

enforcement, medical sciences, athletics, ad infinitum, can all require technology. Perhaps expertise in technology is not required to use all of these technologies, but it is certainly necessary to create them. China is second only to the USA as a leader in such creation (van der Merwe, 2021). With China's dominance in AI, and its rapidly growing applications, it becomes extremely important that young women approaching the job market have familiarity and comfort with AI.

One of the concerns highlighted earlier in this book preventing women from moving into high-level management is the need for such leaders to travel, sometimes long distances, raising concerns about safety for women who aspire to leadership roles. With the increasing reliance on technology for conducting business at a distance, this concern is being increasingly diminished. Without leaving her home, women leaders can conduct their business virtually. In fact, in some companies, this has become the norm for the long term.

Social media have imprinted themselves, in varying degrees, on all of us. These have had mixed impact on our lives. The struggle among greater information versus misinformation versus disinformation has created both societal and business dilemmas. Hacking has become common, not just for large corporate and governmental organizations, but also at the individual level. Phishing, spams, invasion of privacy, and other technological crimes, or at least discomforts, are everywhere. What can be done about these problems? Professionals in this field need to have a high level of ethics. Technology is a field in which gender distinctions should not exist, though they continue to exist. Thus, with the application of technology in every field, opportunities for women to excel have become unlimited. And, with these expanded opportunities has come unlimited opportunities for women to occupy top-level leadership roles in every field in every organization.

POLITICS, POLICIES, AND LEGISLATION

As with many other countries in Asia, even in those in which mandates have been put in place, China has not been very successful in recognizing women as political leaders. Not one woman has served on the seven-member Politburo's Standing Committee from the beginning of the country in 1949 (James, 2021). Vice Premier Sun Chunlan is the only woman on the Politburo, a 25-member panel that reports to the Standing Committee (James, 2021). Beyond the national level, things do

not get much better. James (2021) quoted 2021 statistics showing how far women still have to go:

- While 10% of provincial, municipal, and county-level leadership positions are supposed to be reserved for women, quotas are rarely met due to a deep-seated preference for men.
- Women occupy a mere 9.33% of county-level posts as head of government or party secretary, falling to 5.29% in cities and 3.23% at the provincial level. (2nd set of bullets)

Given that government mandates (quotas) do not appear to have been effective, what can be done to change this situation? A major cause for this ineffectiveness appears to lie in the early age of mandatory retirement at age 55 for women in office jobs and 50 for blue-collar women workers—ages established 70 years ago (Sun, 2022). Given the length of time it takes for local and regional leaders to move through the layers of leadership, by the time women have reached the point where they could take a national level of leadership, it is time for their retirement (James, 2021). To overcome this problem, either general or specific exceptions to this requirement need to be removed or increased.

Of the 92 million members of the Chinese Communist Party, fewer than 30% are women (James, 2021). As the CCP is a major pool for recruiting leaders, women automatically receive fewer opportunities for leadership development. To change this, the first step would be for the CCP to take an intentional step in recruiting women into membership and then focusing on moving women members into influential positions.

Another point highlighted by James (2021) is that Chinese women are typically placed in leadership in sectors from which there are few opportunities for promotion, such as education, social work, propaganda, and administration. In comparison, men are placed in sectors with high possibility of promotion, such as the military, internet censorship, and policing. Given experiences in other countries, it is not necessarily the case that Chinese women do not want to work in these fields. Thus, the government can act to ensure that women are recruited into all sectors, allowing them to move into occupations where promotions become more likely. As women move into promotions in sectors viewed as critical to the country's welfare and safety, they are then more likely to move into high level positions in government and in the Party.

There is much that remains to be done through legislation. First, companies have shown reluctance to hire young women because of the possibility of pregnancy. They do not want to pay them during maternity leaves, especially as the period of their maternity leaves has continued to extend. If the government were willing to pay employers, at least partially, for maternity leaves, companies would be more likely to hire women. Second, the cost of childcare has become high, especially as families have been encouraged to expand their family size. Subsidizing companies that put nurseries or daycare centers in company buildings would assist companies extensively, while at the same time saving mothers time, allow for on-site nursing, and give mothers greater peace of mind as a parent.

Another form of government subsidy that would help women move into management roles would be providing companies with bonuses for every woman hired and every woman moved into a higher position. If companies saw a direct financial benefit to hiring and promoting women, they would be much more likely to do so.

It seems absurd in today's world to think that women need to retire at a younger age than men. At age 55, the average Chinese woman will live an additional 24 years, two more years than a Chinese man will live at the same age (Macrotrends, 2022). The same is true around the concept of risky work and prohibiting women from such work, even though it pays generally much higher. People should be hired for their skills and abilities. If a woman can perform in a risky occupation, such as a police officer or firefighter, why should they be prohibited from doing so? There may always be fewer women than men in these positions because of their demands physically, but, if a woman can carry a 50-pound bag down three flights of stairs, a standard test for firefighters, then why should she not be trained to become a firefighter? So, removing restrictions on risky work will benefit women in the workforce.

Another factor that inhibits women from moving into management roles is the cultural practice of conducting business over meals and drinks after work. Companies have a role to play in thwarting such a practice, but it could also be reduced if labor laws required companies to pay employees overtime whenever they are performing their job, even if it is informally over dinner and drinks or while playing golf.

While not requiring new legislation, there are many laws that would help women at work that are simply not practiced and not enforced. One of these has to do with the prohibition from asking about one's marital status and plans and whether one has children, is pregnant, or is planning

on becoming pregnant. In spite of its illegality, it is almost universal in practice (Yi, 2019). The dark side of this, however, is that companies may avoid the law by simply not recruiting women.

NGOs/NPOs

In many countries globally, women have developed their leadership skills by undertaking such roles in non-government (or non-profit) organizations (NGOs/NPOs). The same is proving to be true in China. By working at grassroots levels in their communities, women have been able to work closer to home and develop leadership skills in a friendlier, more inviting environment.

To increase these venues throughout the country, opportunities for such organizations to be initiated must expand. While there may be some concern on the part of the government that such organizations will threaten the established order, regulations can be put in place to control this to ensure that NGOs/NPOs do not challenge the power of the government. Further, the government can provide leadership development to the leadership of such emerging organizations, thus strengthening the organizations and also preparing these women leaders for leadership roles in industry, in government, and in the Party.

REGIONAL IMPACT

There are two ways to view how China, and its women leaders, can have a regional impact: within regions of the country and within its geographic regions globally.

As women assume leadership roles (in NGOs/NPOs, industry, and government), they are able to access their social networks to improve their success in whatever organization they are offering leadership. By accessing these networks within their country, they are able to draw on more experience and expertise, while at the same time being able to influence others around their country. To maximize this impact, women must be intentional about connecting with their networks and expanding them.

Likewise, they can impact women leaders in countries around the world as their networks expand outside of China. This may require that women leaders attend professional conferences that are held both within their country and outside. Because leaders are likely to attend conferences that are close to home, their impact is likely to expand within their

in-country region. Chinese women who attend conferences held in the Asian region are more likely to influence and be impacted by women who are also in Asia. And, of course, international or global conferences give Chinese women leaders an opportunity that extends beyond their region. This impact can be enhanced if women leaders present or, even better, deliver a keynote at such conferences. Another way to become noticed within the region is to publish in practice or academic journals or books. These tactics must be intentional as part of a woman's career path planning.

As Chinese women are faced with many of the same challenges as women in other parts of Asia, especially those in South Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, collaboration, both in business and personal development, can have a huge payoff. Again, such efforts must be deliberate.

GLOBALIZATION

Extending the circle further, globalization has the potential for helping women in China to move into leadership roles. First, this happens as companies in other parts of the globe enter the Chinese market. For example, as companies headquartered in the USA move into China, they institute human resource practices and begin to influence the company culture to become more egalitarian in relation to gender. Second, while interacting with companies outside of China in which women experience more opportunity for leadership, Chinese women can identify role models of how this has been done. It might even be that such companies mandate certain behaviors in Chinese companies before non-Chinese companies will interact with the Chinese companies in doing business.

Among the many ways in which Covid-19 has influenced the world of business, it may have limited the opportunities for Chinese women to move into leadership roles in China. Business has declined as a result of the lockdowns. There have been disruptions in the supply chain. As a result, opportunities that might have developed for Chinese women to move into leadership roles may not have been realized. On the other hand, as companies have had to resort to doing business virtually, women may have had experiences that might not have been possible if they had continued working on site, thus improving their opportunities for doing things they would not otherwise have done globally, opening opportunities for leadership experiences.

CORPORATE WORLD, INCLUDING ENTREPRENEURSHIP

If an organization is serious about supporting working women and moving women into leadership roles, then the culture of most organizations must change. And the source of the culture in most organizations lies at the top. Thus, CEOs, or at least the people in the C-suite of organizations, must be committed to having this happen in their organizations. Culture is often determined by how people at the top behave. If they make disparaging comments about women in the organization, others will feel that this is appropriate behavior and will follow suit. On the other hand, if women are invited to participate equally in a meeting, and if their contributions to a discussion are honored, without interruption, then the organization will learn that this behavior is also expected of them. If inappropriate behavior is addressed immediately, then the organizational members will learn that they must avoid such behavior themselves.

Listening to women in the workplace, either through periodic surveys or in group interviews, top management will soon learn (once trust is established) what issues still need to be addressed for women to feel safe and have barriers to leadership addressed. This will not be easy, as several aspects of the Chinese culture that are embedded into organizational culture are the sources of barriers to women in leadership. These include the Confucian concept of hierarchy with men being above women, so-called respect in which women must allow men to speak and then invite them to speak, interruption of women being acceptable, while interruption of men by women is not, and so on.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter with the suggestion that government legislation could reduce the number of informal, after-work meals and drinks, so, too, could the corporate culture encourage the reduction of such meetings. Not only will this reduce the pressure on all employees, but also, and especially, women, to participate in such meals when they are uncomfortable with this practice; it will also encourage all employees to return home to have dinner with their families, enhancing family life.

With the change in inheritance laws, more and more, daughters and wives are inheriting businesses from their fathers and husbands (Chen et al., 2018). Nevertheless, barriers continue to exist for women in entrepreneurships. Because it was not automatically assumed that they would take over the business, they often have not had the same experiences as men would have had in being prepared for business management. Further, because they are unlikely to have a social network of men, who

are likely to be their suppliers and clients, it is more difficult for them to develop their markets and their supply chains. With time, this will change, but it will take time. Chen et al. (2018) found that women's leadership in entrepreneurial family firms differs from men's; women are likely to be more participative in decision making, more attuned to work-family balance, and more dependent on family resources. This may be difficult for employees in early stages of the business, until they become comfortable with such a management style.

AGRICULTURE

Because we were unable to recruit authors competent to write about Chinese women in leadership roles in agriculture, we do not have such a chapter. However, the role of women in agriculture is much too important in China to ignore.

Traditionally, women in rural areas were thought of as *left behind* as their husbands moved into cities for better-paying jobs, leaving their wives, children, and elders behind to cope as best they could. However, this concept has now been re-imagined (Zhang, 2020). As China struggles with its food supply security, women are no longer finding themselves left behind, but they have found ways to exert leadership in agriculture through both production and distribution.

By moving to an organic farming model, and by using some of the techniques from the west, women have established peasant farmer cooperatives, sell their produce in farmers' markets, have explored the concept of farm to consumer buying clubs by selling boxes of products directly to consumers, and selling fresh produce directly to restaurants, among other community-initiated concepts. As such, they are no longer dependent on their husbands sending money back home or returning home without financial support. Another way in which women are exerting leadership in agriculture is through university-farm partnerships to research ways to increase yields while using less fertilizer and pesticides.

Too often, discussions about agriculture ignore the contributions that women make throughout the agricultural cycle. As is becoming increasingly clear, such discussions in China cannot ignore women's contributions. Chinese women are increasingly taking leadership roles in improving China's agriculture.

CONCLUSION

In spite of all of the work that has gone into the production of this book, and in spite of the hundreds of references that the authors have researched, I still do not know everything that confronts Chinese women searching for management opportunities in China. Neither, then, do I know what might be done to change things for the better for women, nor how likely it is that any of our recommendations might be implemented. Therefore, I close with a quote from Doyle (2019):

Most of what we do know is that we don't know hardly anything, which cheers me up wonderfully. The world is still stuffed with astonishment beyond our wildest imagining, which is humbling, and lovely, and may be the only way we are going to survive ourselves and let everything else alive survive us too. (p. 121)

Just as a chrysalis ultimately gives birth to a butterfly, and just as a woman gives birth usually after extensive pain, it is our hope that the pain of this work and the beauty of what has resulted will give birth to extensive change for Chinese women as they move assertively into equity and positions of leadership.

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