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Chinese Women Administrators in Higher Education: Developing Leadership Throughout Life

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The development of leadership has been a critical concern of many organizational leaders in various sectors (public, private, and social) across the globe. To better understand this complex phenomenon, researchers (e.g., Bass, 1990; Bennis, 1989) have been conducting leadership studies for decades in various disciplines (e.g., education, management, psychology). Yet, studies in these disciplines on developing women leaders are just emerging as an important focus of researchers and practitioners in many countries throughout the world. In many regions it has become evident that the process of developing women leaders is particularly multifaceted and challenging. There are numerous complexities inherent in understanding women's developmental backgrounds and journeys (e.g., culture, traditions, religion, values, backgrounds, education, work-family issues, self-concept, gender barriers, expectations, previous opportunities, perceived future opportunities) that play a critical role in this challenging task. This is most definitely the case in the journey toward understanding how to develop future women leaders within China.

Although leadership research with Chinese participants has been published in various journals throughout the past decade or so (e.g., Chan, 2007; Kowske & Anothony, 2007; Ling, Chia, & Fang, 2000; Mok, Fan, & Pang, 2007), little of it has been focused solely on women. Admittedly, there is some literature on Chinese women and leadership (e.g., Aaltio & Huang, 2007; Granrose, 2007; Xian & Woodhams, 2008), however, nothing can be located on the journeys of women administrators in developing leadership throughout their lives. Yet, researchers (e.g., Madsen, 2007) have successfully argued that “Understanding the influences, backgrounds, and career paths of women who have succeeded in obtaining and maintaining powerful position of influence within higher education is essential in deepening and broadening our understanding of leadership development as a whole within higher education” (p. 184). Bennis (1989) stated,

There are lessons in everything, and if you are fully deployed, you will learn most of them. Experiences aren't truly yours until you think about them, analyze them, examine them, question them, reflect on them, and finally understanding them. The point, once again, is to use your experiences rather than being used by them, to be the designer, not the design, so that experiences empower rather than imprison. (p. 98)

He and others have outlined the important link between understanding one's own personal journey and the effective learning, growth, and development of self. On a broader scale, educators, researchers, and practitioners focusing on the development of Chinese women administrators for colleges and universities can benefit from understanding the journeys of already successful leaders. Understanding elements of the lifetime development of successful female administrators can help them design and develop more customized and effective leadership development programs, strategies, and opportunities for women. Results can also be used to help design opportunities for girls and young women as they are preparing to lead in various settings later in life.

The purpose of this paper is to present findings of a qualitative research study on how Chinese women—throughout their lives—developed the knowledge, skills, abilities, and competencies required for successful leadership within their college or university settings. Hence, the primary research question for this study was as follows: What are the experiences of female Chinese college/university administrators in developing leadership throughout their lives? This article reports the influences that the three women felt were most important in assisting them to prepare for their current leadership roles and responsibilities. This included their experiences during the different phases of their lives (i.e., childhood, youth, young adulthood, and adulthood) and with a wide variety of possible influences. This article in no way attempts to share all of the themes that emerged, but it focuses on the most pronounced. The following literature review will provide a brief background for many of the themes that are presented in the findings and discussion section: family, childhood, and youth experiences; childhood/youth personalities and individual characteristics; college experiences; career paths and opportunities; and leadership perspectives and styles.

Literature Review

Past research from other cultures (although also limited) explores the influence of family, childhood, and youth experiences on the development of leadership. Lorenzen (1996) stated, “a person's inner sense of authority will be developed during childhood in the system of family relations, when the parents express their expectations, ideas, and emotions to their child” (pp. 25-26). Coutu (2004) conducted an interview with Manfred F.R. Kets de Vries who said that women leaders had drives that “spring from childhood patterns and experiences that have carried over into adulthood” (p. 67). Other western-based studies on women leaders have found that supportive families are important in encouraging women to achieve as foundational elements of success (Hartman, 1999) and that stable family environments help build feelings of competency that are critical to the general development of girls who become women leaders (Wells, 1998). Stephens (2003) found that the leaders she interviewed remembered having “strong voices and a keen sense of competency as little girls” (p. 51). Matz (2002) found that “women, whose self-confidence had been instilled mostly by their parents, with mothers rated slightly higher than fathers, never lost it” (p. iv). The profound influence of mothers in the lives of daughters who became leaders is well-documented (e.g., Coutu, 2004; Hojaard, 2002; Madsen, 2008, 2009; Robinson, 1996). The impact of other types of influences (e.g., individuals, activities,

opportunities, and schooling) during childhood and youth is also addressed in literature (Cubillo & Brown, 2003; Klenke, 1996; Madsen, 2008).

Literature was not located on the personality and individual characteristics of Chinese women leaders while they were young. However, studies have been published on various childhood aspects of U.S. women leaders in academic settings. Women leaders were found to have a variety of childhood and youth personalities. Some were outgoing and bossy while others were bashful and reserved. Some said they were extraverts, while others said they were introverts. However, Madsen (2008) reported that all in her sample were “obedient, respectful, reflective, smart, self-directed, helpful, and concerned about pleasing and meeting the expectations of respected adults” (p. 32). All of these women did report some insecurity or lack of confidence in certain areas, but each had high self-esteem in other situations (e.g., academic, musical, speaking). A number of researchers have found that women leaders throughout their lives were driven to achieve and accomplish (Baraka-Love, 1986; Hennig & Jardim, 1977; Stephens, 2003; Wells, 1998). Some research has also reported that women leaders had strong desires for leadership responsibility as children and youth (Robinson, 1996). Finally, a critical finding of Madsen (2008) in much of her research on women leaders is that they had strong qualities early in life for observing and reflecting that led to critical learning and growth experiences.

College can be an important time for women to develop leadership. Guido-DiBrito and Batchelor (1988) stated that college can be a “particularly critical role as a laboratory for leadership development in which students learn, are tested, succeed, and sometimes fail” (p. 51). Madsen (2008) reported that during college U.S. women college and university presidents in her sample were very active in a wide variety of campus activities, community volunteerism, student association or residency hall leadership, honor societies, projects and research with faculty, student government, and student organizations. As is critical for developing leadership, the college years were important for the women to find their voices and also find out more about themselves (Cooke, 2004). The women in Madsen’s (2008) sample also reported being deeply influenced by a host of individuals during those years (e.g., faculty members, academic leaders, peers, family members). Regarding college degrees, Walton and McDade (2001) studied women chief academic officers in the U.S. and found that most had doctorate degrees. Madsen (2008) found the same in her sample of women administrators and also wrote that over half of her sample had obtained degrees in education fields.

The topic of the career paths of Chinese women higher education administrators is a new area of inquiry. However, some research has been published on women from other cultures. For example, Madsen (2007; 2008) found all U.S. women university presidents in her sample had informal career paths. None of these leaders planned to end up in leadership positions, and many planned to be educators/professors throughout their careers. They were very hard workers and excelled in nearly everything they did; others saw their leadership qualities and invited and/or encouraged them to move into leadership positions. Each woman in Madsen’s study had a different informal career path based on opportunities and influential individuals and encouragement. Although some did not confront severe gender barriers, all shared stories of difficulties and challenges. There are a few studies on Chinese women in business fields (e.g., Aaltion & Huang, 2007; Xian & Woodhams, 2008) that show more formal and purposeful career paths for women and definite career challenges in terms of emotional costs and work-life

conflict. These researchers admit that career management for women in China is a complex and challenging process.

There are some conflicting views of the state of women and leadership in China related to career opportunities within that culture. Less than a decade ago, Frank (2001) found that Chinese college students perceived women as “more incompetent, slower, weaker, more a follower-than-a-leader, more lenient, more democratic, less active, and more friendly than male management” (p. 316). Yet, in 1997, Chen, Yu, and Miner reported that the overall managerial motivation of Chinese women was as high as that of Chinese men, and that this motivation was positively related to the job level of the Chinese women. Granrose (2007) conducted a study on gender differences in career perceptions in China and concluded that women and men are fairly equal when it comes to contributing to the family, collectivism as their career goal, using loyalty to superiors, and networking as career tactics (p. 9). On the other hand, Xian and Woodhams (2008) stated that “not only are they [Chinese women] required to scythe a path through socially-bound value systems that serve to oppress the career activity of women at work, but they also have to deal with potential conflict within their own internal culturally-bound value system” (pp. 420-421). These researchers argued that when scholars study the careers of Chinese women they “should recognize the differences in the way that men and women plan and evaluate their careers related to their internal culturally-bound beliefs” (p. 421). Researchers have reported conflicting views on Chinese women and various elements related to management and leadership.

Ling, Chia, and Fang (2000) conducted research with a goal to identify an implicit theory of leadership among Chinese people. Their sample of 622 participants from five occupation groups answered 163 items related to how each one was characteristic or uncharacteristic of a leader in China. They discovered four separate dimensions to describe Chinese people’s conceptualization of leadership, which were very different from Offermann, Kennedy, and Wirtz (1994) findings with U.S. participants. First, Chinese participants expected leaders “to be willing to be a public servant, to have integrity and honesty, to be consistent in word and thought, to be willing to search for truth, to be fair, to serve as a model, and to be willing to accept criticism from others and from him- or herself” (p. 736). Hence, personal morality and virtue was the most important feature of leadership. The second factor was goal effectiveness. A Chinese leader should have a broad vision and the ability to strategically plan for the future. He or she should have a keen sense of perception, keep an open mind, have the willpower to do what is right, to be decisive and deliberate, and have strong ability to get work done and to maximize the ability of others. The third factor is interpersonal competence, which includes the skill of dealing with the social environment. The leader should be “mature, sophisticated, straight-forward, good in social skills, and effective in persuading others” (p. 736). The leader should also have grace, good form, and be elegant. The final factor is versatility. The leader should be multitalented, have broad interests, be imaginative and willing to take risks, have a sense of humor, be easily approachable, and have a command of the knowledge. He or she should be flexible and versatile to help gain the advantage in various ways.

Kowske and Anthony (2007) studied conceptualized leadership competence in twelve countries around the globe. Some of their findings, specific to Chinese and leadership styles, are somewhat different than those just described in Ling et al.’s (2000) research. They reported that managers are expected to delegate (carry out orders by utilizing relationships) and work effectively through

others. They should have high technical and vision leadership, be technical and functional experts, and focus on results because “their primary driver is responding to orders deriving from higher organizational levels” (p. 36). They are expected to ensure that tasks are done right. They also reported that managers in China are expected to do less coaching and mentoring than those in other countries and there seems to be less emphasis on acting with integrity as well. They have more directive leadership styles, so often they do not communicate directly with those who report to them (high power distance). They have strong preferences and expectations for hierarchy and bureaucracy.

Research Methods

To conduct this preliminary study, I used a qualitative research approach to conduct in-depth interviews with Chinese women college/university administrators in two major cities within the Sichuan province of China in September of 2008. Prior to my trip I worked with campus contacts to set up interviews with women leaders on their campuses. Although I hoped to interview more women, two interviews were arranged at one campus and one interview at the second site. Two of these women had prominent vice president level positions at their institutions, while one served as a dean on her campus. I have conducted a multitude of similar studies with women for years in the United States and the UAE, but this was the first time I had used translators and had multiple people in the room during the interviews. Although not ideal circumstances for in-depth research interviews, the open-ended questions provided an opportunity to discover what influences they believed were important in developing leadership.

I used a combination of two research approaches to conduct this study. First, I utilized the multiple-case study to design this qualitative interview project. Miles and Huberman (1994) and Denzin and Lincoln (1994) suggest this approach as beneficial in gaining intrinsic understanding and insights into a specific phenomenon as a process. This research used case study narratives and analysis to illustrate how three women leaders within these higher educational settings developed leadership throughout their lives. This multiple-case study design allows for the analysis of three stories, which provides at least some initial exploration of this phenomenon through similarities or differences (Yin, 1994). The intent for this particular study was not to conduct interviews until the data reached saturation and no new themes emerged. It was a pilot study intended to explore some initial themes that can be investigated in more depth at a future time with the use of an in-depth phenomenological research method and design. For the actual interview design, I also used the phenomenological research approach (Wolcott, 2001). Van Manen (2001) explained that “phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” (p. 9). Cubillo and Brown (2003) said that “telling stories makes life experiences assessable in potentially relevant and meaningful ways” (p. 283). This approach appeared to be very applicable to understanding the experiences of these women in becoming leaders.

The research instrument was developed in 2005 and has been used successfully for at least four previous studies of women leaders in the United States and the United Arab Emirates (e.g., Madsen, 2008; Madsen, 2009). The original interview questions were developed from an

extensive review of the literature and the review of other instruments measuring similar constructs. They were open-ended probing questions (with follow-up items) designed to extract all types of information about the women's experiences and perceptions. The analysis of the data included a number of detailed steps. I first transcribed the interviews and then analyzed each interview to categorize responses. I then combined all of the related responses (comments, perspectives, and stories) from the interviews into one document and categorized responses. Next, I reread each interview transcription and analysis to identify key ideas and phrases about the administrators' experiences related to each category, and then assembled all interview phrases or statements by topic. The emerging themes were then noted and highlighted in the findings section of this paper.

Findings and Discussion

Two of the participants were in their mid to late 50s, while the dean was in her mid-30s. Two were married and each had one child; the remaining woman chose not to discuss her marriage or family situations or related issues. All spoke Chinese, and one was also fluent enough in English for me to be able to conduct the interview in English. Only one interview was conducted in English. This section will present and discuss the findings of this study in two life phase sections: 1) childhood and youth, and 2) adulthood.

Childhoods and Youth

The primary themes that emerged during childhood and youth can be grouped into the following categories: mothers, other influential individuals, personalities and individual characteristics, and developmental activities. The first category focuses on the influence that the participants' mothers had in their daughters' upbringing and development. The administrators believed that who they have become definitely stemmed from the profound influence of their mothers. Interestingly, each woman spoke of the influence of the "Special Times" in either her own life or in the life of her mother. During 1966-1976 many women went to the countryside to work because of the Cultural Revolution in China. These women did not have opportunities during this time in history to attend college. There were fewer colleges and universities in China during this time as well, which limited opportunities for both women and men to become educated. Because of the lack of opportunities, lack of priority, and the revolution, the participants explained that their mothers did not receive college degrees. One participant described her mother's situation and personal characteristics:

My mother was a young adult during the "Special Times," which deeply influenced her. She had to go to the countryside to work in a factory. She didn't get an education, but she was a very hard worker. She became a leader while working in the factory. She was kind of a teacher like her grandparents. She was outgoing, optimistic, determined, and compassionate. During the special times my father stayed in the city as he was a physician and my mother had to raise my sister and me on her own. She had to do everything—work at the factory, do housework and cooking at home, take care of us, take care of neighbors, and more. She was very strong and could do anything for herself. Her independent spirit influenced me greatly. Although she wasn't able to

go to college, she loved to learn and got a good education on her own. I admire my mother so much.

Another participant stated,

My mother is very kind and friendly. We had four children in our family, and I was the oldest. My mother always had to work—even with four children. In China we depend on the mother and father's salaries. My mother worked very hard, and my father too. My mother taught us to work hard too. My mother can read and write, but she didn't have the opportunity to go to a university. She loved to learn and educated herself—she was self-educated.

These two mothers did not attend any advanced schooling beyond high school. However, the third mother did have some advanced schooling beyond high school but did not obtain a college degree. This mother became a school teacher and a principal. Her daughter described her mother as follows: "My mother was outgoing, strong, and determined. I am very proud of my mother and what she accomplished in her life...Although I wouldn't describe her as competitive, she always had a desire to do things very well."

The second category includes other influential individuals who helped the participants develop leadership when they were young. Each spoke briefly about her father and his positive influence in her lives. These fathers encouraged their daughters to become educated and competent, although two were not educated themselves. All three spoke of the hard working nature of their fathers. One participant mentioned that her father's quality of persistence in doing everything well was a quality that influenced her throughout life. Another said her father was always "very earnest when he did his work." Her father had a deep desire to do everything well, but her parents did not put a lot of pressure on their children. Instead both parents "just expected us to work very hard like they did, and we did." One administrator said that her grandmother was very influential in her development as well. She said, "My grandmother lived with us for four years. She was a very strong woman like my mother. She raised six children on her own." Another mentioned an aunt who was influential in her life primarily because of the example she set for her throughout the years.

The women spoke about influential teachers, but could not provide much detail about how specific teachers influenced them. One stated, "My primary teachers asked me to assist them in various ways, and this helped me feel that they had confidence in me even in small ways. This helped me know that I had skills that were beneficial to others." Another explained,

I was the monitor all of the way through school. Teachers and others in school gave me many opportunities. I learned that if I did well then I would have chances to do more. Others continued to give me opportunities.

The women reflected on how their teachers always encouraged them to do well. One said,

I remember clearly that I wrote an article that the teacher liked, and she asked me to read my article to the whole class. They praised me a lot for that article, and that encourage me so much.

It gave me more self-confidence. I was probably 11 or 12 at that time, but I still remember that experience very clearly. I ran home after school to tell my parents about this.

All three women had chances to influence other students because of opportunities teachers gave them particularly in primary school. Another spoke of a tutor she had during middle and high school that became important in her life. When I asked the women how high school teachers influenced them, they explained that they did not get much one on one attention. Instead they watched and listened to their teachers' actions and words; they believed this helped them learn and develop. Observation and reflection skills helped them learn from those around them. One mentioned "Everyone along the way helped me learn leadership." One of the participants did remember that a teacher invited top students to her home during the "Festival" for a celebration. She remembers receiving an invitation one year, and that was important to her.

All of the women spoke of the influence of their peers along their developmental journeys. One said, "I have had many of the same friends since primary and secondary school. When I need advice or help I can always ask my friends. Even in school, my friends would give me advice, and I think they were very honest with me to help me see different perspectives." Another woman explained, "My friends in high school became leaders as I did. We were always very open with each other and told the truth to each other. I think this was important in helping us all learn and improve." The third participant stated,

I had a lot of friends, and I think that we helped each other learn. The process of becoming a leader has been very gradual, so it is hard to figure out specifically how my friends influenced me, but I know they did. They were honest, hard working people, and I think they were open-minded people. We all had the desire to do meaningful things with our lives.

The third category in this section relates to the women's personalities and individual characteristics as children and youth. They described themselves fairly similarly. Each woman said she was somewhat shy when she was young but that she was a "top student," and the teachers liked her and gave her opportunities and challenges. Two said that they became leaders in their classes to assist the teachers while in primary school. All described themselves as becoming more outgoing as they became older (i.e., high school, college, or right after college). They also described themselves as being achievement- and accomplishment-oriented as youth and mentioned that it has continued throughout their lives. They have had a strong need to do their best, work toward goals, and achieve throughout their lives. This was even evident in the stories about their childhood and youth and was described again when they spoke about their current leadership styles. There was evidence throughout each interview that these women grew up with the ability to carefully observe and reflect—skills that have been strengthened through the years. They also enjoyed reading and thinking when they were young. Two attributed this love for reading to their mothers. One administrator said, "My mother loved reading. In primary school my mother taught me to write composition and told me about many famous books. She would get books for us to read and then talk about them with my sister and me. Both of us love to read. We are both educators." All three participants developed a love for learning, reading, and thinking critically through experiences during their childhood and youth.

The final category relates to the theme of how the Chinese women administrators developed specific competencies for leadership through activities and experiences. The one activity predominantly discussed by each administrator was the importance of individual performances in helping them develop presentation skills and confidence. It seems that the women did not have opportunities to speak in front of audiences until college, but while young they did have opportunities to do occasional individual performances in front of large groups (e.g., vocal, dramatic, piano). One explained,

We didn't get a chance to speak in public too much, but my musical performances helped me a lot with gaining confidence and preparing to speak later in life. We did many performances growing up so I learned not to be afraid.

Another said,

When I was 14 or 15 years old I learned to perform opera. I learned to not be afraid in front of people. I remember rehearsing a lot in front of people and then formally performing. It was good for me to be in front of people so I could develop confidence. Now I have to speak in front of groups often, and I think that the confidence I gained when I was young has been very important in helping me develop leadership through the years.

Although the participants described other activities, the list is much more limited than research suggests with U.S. women samples. Although these participants mentioned doing some sports (i.e., swimming, dance, volleyball, table tennis, badminton, hiking), they did not speak of being particularly competitive in nature. Past research in western cultures has found that women leaders were fairly competitive growing up. It is difficult to assess whether these women had opportunities for competition or if that was even acceptable for women in China during those years. One mentioned, "I did feel like I wanted to do things better than those around me, and I was motivated to do things better each time compared to myself. I wasn't competitive but I enjoyed being involved." The oldest participant who had her schooling during the "Special Times" in the countryside was the only one who spoke of engaging school-related activities (e.g., field trips). She spoke of a teacher taking her class to the mountains to collect the roots of plants and helping them make paint to use for art projects. To explain the lack of extracurricular opportunities in their middle and high school years, two of the participants explained that high school years in China are focused on preparing and taking the very difficult college entrance examinations. Students who wanted to go to college spent most of their time studying and preparing for these examinations.

This study found that mothers were the most critical influence for developing leadership in their daughters during their upbringings. This is similar to research on women from other countries as well (Matz, 2002). Fathers, relatives, teachers, and peers were also influential for girls and young women in the development of leadership competencies. Although opportunities for childhood developmental experiences were more limited than those for U.S. women leaders (Madsen, 2008), the specific examples shared by the Chinese women were aligned with those discussed in prior research. The finding that Chinese women were reflective, observant, obedient, self-confident in at least some areas, and achievement- and accomplishment-oriented, was remarkably similar to findings from other studies (Baraka-Love, 1986; Hennig & Jardim, 1997;

Madsen, 2008; Stephens, 2003). The finding that all three women were shy was different than other studies that found more mixed personality characteristics. A larger sample is needed to explore this phenomenon in more depth. A deeper exploration is also needed into the Chinese culture to discover whether there are expectations for particular behaviors for young girls. Their love of reading and learning early in life is also consistent with findings of other studies already mentioned.

Adulthood

During the analysis phase of the adulthood portion of this project, themes emerging in four different categories: college experiences, career paths, gender barriers and leadership motivations, and leadership styles. First, each women spoke of her college experiences in some detail. In western cultures most women leaders in higher education have graduate degrees. In this sample, two of the participants had earned bachelor degrees while the remaining one completed her education with a master's degree. All three wanted to teach after college, although each had a different major (business management, English, and Chinese). The oldest participant had to wait to attend college as she became college age during the revolution. She was fortunate to obtain a bachelor's degree during the years following the resolution, and because she was a "top student" during college she was asked to teach at the same college after she concluded her own education.

All three women said that college was a very important time for them to develop leadership. In fact, they agreed that it was during these years that they had many more opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities and various associations that gave them leadership experiences. One participant explained that "women have many chances to develop leadership for things they did not get to practice earlier in life. I did a lot of college activities like attending meetings, readings, social activities." She and her friends joined together in organizing events and trips. Another participant said, "My life changed a lot in college. I had many chances now to exert myself and get involved in many activities. I took part in writing for newspapers, which I enjoyed as I am a good writer." The third spoke of becoming involved in university associations and groups in college. She also participated in badminton, dance, and drama in college. She said, "I liked to organize events. I had a lot of ideas about how to arrange the performances and wanted things to be done right!" Although none of the women said they attended official leadership training, they felt that just being a college student, working very hard, and participating in the opportunities available to them did help them develop leadership. One administrator summed up her developmental experience in college as follows: "I did many things in college—one after another—that gave me a collection of different successes and sometimes failures. It seems that everything I did helped me learn how to make plans and schedules, how to organize, how to work with people, and other very important skills needed for leading. Each experience taught me a lot."

The Chinese women administrators provided information and insights about their career paths and perceived gender barriers. All three of the Chinese women participants went directly into teaching and education when they completed their college degrees. The first, before becoming a college instructor herself, immediately became a "student leader and was in charge of assisting teachers with student work." Before being an instructor she was "responsible for the student's education, moral education, and lectures." She also organized activities. After becoming a

teacher for many years she then became a dean and vice president. The second said, "I was a leader with students, tutor for a class, and then a teacher." She also became the head of human resources at a college before moving into a dean position. The third woman became a teacher and still calls herself a teacher. She has taught at various universities but then decided to take opportunities to move into leadership (dean and vice president) as they came along. All three spoke at length about how teaching helped them develop specific leadership skills.

All of the women said that they did not plan to become leaders (informal career paths). They planned to become teachers, but never intended to become directors, deans, or vice presidents. One vice president said,

I was able to get in my current position because I worked very hard, and the leaders admired my work and abilities. Because of this they provided opportunities for me to move into various positions. I had few struggles and barriers because others gave me opportunities. It was easy for me.

Another woman said that she always wanted to do her best, and she did so as a teacher. She said, "I was so happy that in high school I had enough competence to be able to choose to be a teacher." Others saw that she did excellent work and asked her to move into administration. The third woman said the following:

My career was not planned; it was natural. When the university needs someone to do a job, they look for people to do it. People saw that I knew how to do many things. For example, the leader of the department asked me if I wanted to do my first administrative position. For the second, others saw and asked me if I was interested in moving into positions. I remember once being told that there was a position open and that people thought I would be good. It was only when I knew that people said I would be good that I first thought about doing it. It was not planned at all. I knew I was a good teacher and was satisfied with my teaching job. I thought I would be a teacher forever.

Interestingly, all three women explained that there are many women leaders in China at each level of the organizations. One stated that "In China women are equal to men. Anything men can do, women can do too."

None of the women perceived any career barriers. They all became teachers directly out of college graduation and then moved into administration position as opportunities arose and/or as requested by others. They did not seek out leadership positions but just took natural paths and opportunities that were offered to them. The participants struggled when asked about their motivations for leadership. One said, "I did not plan to be a leader. I did the best in each position I had and each task I was given. When I do a job well I have strong achievement feelings within myself and that is what motivates me to continue. I always want to do my best." A second participant said she has a desire to make a strong contribution to the college and that is what motivates her to be a leader. The third said, "I like to lead so that I can share my values and ideas with others. I also love to accomplish goals. When I do things well I find internal satisfaction."

When the women spoke about influential people in their workplaces, they mentioned the individuals discussed in the previous paragraphs. Those that helped them develop leadership were those who provided opportunities to accept new tasks or assignment or to move into new positions. Individuals who gave them opportunities also provided them with encouragement. The encouragement and offers gave the women additional confidence in themselves and in their own management and leadership skills. Supervisors and colleagues who were “supportive” were influential in their development. The women believe that this includes those who work for them and those who give them ideas and support their decisions. One participant concluded, “All of the people I work with have helped me. Each person has helped me develop my skills in some way. Also, I watch leaders and admire what they do and how they influence. I use them as role models.” The participants did not speak of particular “mentors” in their professional workplace throughout their careers. Those who were influential were “supportive,” “encouraging,” or “provided opportunities” for them. It does seem they may have had some mentor-like relationships along the way (e.g., college years), particularly with teachers.

The final category focuses on themes related to the leadership styles of these Chinese women administrators. One stated, “I am very determined. I like to listen to the advice of other people and then combine that with my own ideas to make a final decision. I like to get together teams of people to help make decisions and to lead efforts for the college.” All of the women spoke about being very organized and paying attention to details. One woman explained her leadership style as follows:

I need my colleagues to do things well and be creative. Everybody has his or her own ideas and different skills. I like to listen to many different ideas. If I have good ideas I tell my colleagues and ask them if they are workable. Sometimes they tell me it is not a good idea. If it isn’t workable, then we will put it aside. I like to give them an idea and get feedback. I like to listen, discuss, and work in teams. I also like to set goals and accomplish them one by one. I do like to delegate some things, but other times I like to do things myself.

A theme that was missing in this sample that is somewhat predominant for similar studies in other cultures is the work-family challenges theme. This is typically a major topic of discussion in interviews from other studies, but it was given little focus on the responses of the three women in this sample. The women had only one child and therefore work-life conflict may have been minimal; yet, it is addressed in a sample of Chinese women in the IT industry as a very stressful issue for these women (Aaltio & Huang, 2007). More exploration needs to be done to understand reasons behind these findings. Also absent in this research are any specific data on how adversity, challenges, and failures have strengthened the women in this small sample. Although this question was asked, no stories or example were shared by the three participants. A strong theme that was present in the data was the critical influence college years had on the development of these women. They had life-changing experiences and opportunities they had not had earlier in their upbringings. Although this is similar to U.S. research (e.g., Madsen, 2008) the influence appeared to be much more prominent in this sample, which was similar to results on women leaders in the UAE (Madsen, 2009).

The three women in this sample seem to have lower levels of career ambitions than other samples (Madsen, 2008). These women did not seem to have the drive often seen in women from

other cultures, but they were willing to step forward and accept leadership roles when called upon. This was found, however, in at least one U.S. study on African American women (Robinson, 1996). The finding of informal career paths is consistent with women leaders in academic settings in various cultures (Madsen, 2008). The results related to the perceptions that there are not gender barriers in China is particularly interesting, as limited research in other fields in China do not share the same findings (Xian & Woodhams, 2008). More in-depth research is definitely required to obtain clarity around these and other related issues. Previous research on females in other cultures shows that as a primary strategy for career development most women leaders work hard and consistently try to do their best. This is true of this sample as well. Successful women leaders in many studies had supportive individuals around them who respected their contributions and either offered opportunities or provided encouragement for them to move into leadership positions (Madsen, 2008).

Finally, there were some interesting findings in this study on leadership style. First, an important characteristic of past research of the author in the U.S. and the UAE is that a priority of their leadership style was to assist others in developing leadership. This was not mentioned by women in this Chinese sample. One explanation can be found in Kowske and Anthony's (2007) research that noted Chinese managers are expected to do less coaching and mentoring than those in other countries. Their more directive leadership styles often mean that they do not communicate with those who report to them in the way that leaders in other countries may do so. Although some characteristics of leadership style seem similar between other cultures, the analysis of the results from this sample did find differences in communication, delegation, and perceptions of importance of teamwork and integrity. No mention of integrity was provided in the descriptions of style from this sample. Although Ling et al. (2000) found that there was a higher emphasis on integrity for leaders in the Chinese culture, Kowske and Anthony (2007) reported that the participants in their study reported less emphasis on integrity than other countries and regions.

Implications and Conclusion

There are several limitations to this study that should be addressed. First, the sample was small and inadequate for a typical phenomenological study (8-12 interviews). Hence, it is deemed a multi-case study using phenomenological interview techniques. Three interviews are not ideal, but it does provide a starting point to the exploration of how educators, scholars, and practitioners might assist in developing Chinese women for college/university settings. Second, the sampling method should be kept in mind. The interviews were arranged by contacts at the institutions, and it was clearly a convenient sample of women administrators at the universities. Ideal participants could have been excluded. Third, the three women who agreed to participate could have had slightly different experiences and perspectives than the ones that I did not interview.

Research on high level women Chinese leaders in higher education is limited; yet even rarer are studies focused on understanding the development of leadership knowledge, skills, and abilities through in-depth insights into women's experiences and perspectives. The stories of these three women with their challenges, opportunities, and experiences can inform practitioners, in part, of

the leadership development journeys of at least some Chinese women. Although these research findings cannot be generalized, it provides some insight into the lifetime developmental experiences of Chinese women administrators. There will most definitely be future opportunities for educators, scholars, and practitioners to design and implement developmental programs and initiatives for Chinese women in educational settings, and these findings can provide some important initial ideas and implications. Understanding how at least some Chinese women effectively developed leadership can give us ideas and strategies that may be helpful for developing programs that would be most successful in that culture. For example, the similarities in family backgrounds and influences of these three women demonstrate evidence of the importance of individual upbringings on personal assumptions, potential aspirations, and leadership development. It is clear that these influences have most likely continued to influence these leaders throughout their lives. By understanding these past influences and current perspectives, leadership development practitioners within higher education can design more effective interventions dependent on an individual's background and current needs. This research provides support for possible new relationships, antecedents, determinants, and mediators in the educational leadership area specifically as they relate to women. This article also brings to light the complexity of leadership development. Although this article has only addressed a few of the background elements and influences, there are many more that may influence personal and professional leadership competency development for women.

Although there are a host of implications, I will mention three. First, comprehensive leadership development programs should be developed for women (i.e., staff, faculty, administrators) in Chinese higher education institutions. There was no evidence of these types of programs, and the benefits of these types of initiatives for women in other countries are well-documented. These programs should be well-designed to include opportunities to help participants strengthen competencies they may not have developed during their upbringings. Opportunities to practice leadership skills in a variety of ways will be helpful. It appears from this research that effective coaching and mentoring relationships for girls, young women, and women may be rare. Training sessions for current women leaders on the importance of coaching may be helpful. In addition, formal mentoring initiatives should be designed with initial and ongoing training sessions for both the mentor and mentees. Second, campuses should work to strategically continue developing and refining leadership programs and opportunities for female students in colleges and universities. The college experiences in a Chinese women's life appear to be very powerful. More training, development, discussions, readings, and conversations around gender issues and future opportunities for women will be helpful in informing and motivating female students to consciously strive for leadership experiences. Formal programs should also include presentations and discussions of leadership in general as well as information about styles, motivations, and many other elements needed for a full understanding of oneself and leadership roles. Finally, colleges and universities in China should strive to have more female role models in middle to upper management. Successful women's stories should be shared and more attention given to the importance of leadership for all individuals in various life roles.

Future research in all aspects of leadership development in China is recommended and needed—both qualitative and quantitative. In addition, articles written about successful leadership programs for Chinese women educators and administrators on campuses can be very useful for future efforts of various kinds. One particular topic of interest is to explore whether the lifetime

leadership development experiences of women leaders in China are substantially different from those of male leaders. Because of the rapid changes in China, timely research topics that have immediate practical applications for the implementation of development programs in higher education are recommended.

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