Winter February 26, 2010

Chinese Women Developing Leadership: Case Studies in Higher Education

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/susan_madsen/174/
Organizational leaders in various sectors (public, private, and social) across the globe often acknowledge the importance of preparing both men and women for strong, competent leadership. To assist these organizations, researchers (e.g., Bass, 1990; Bennis, 1989) have been conducting leadership studies for decades in various disciplines (e.g., education, management, psychology) to better understand this complex phenomenon. Kowske and Anthony (2007), Ardichvili and Manderscheid (2008), and Madsen (2009) have also highlighted the importance of studying leadership development within the human resource development (HRD) arena in the U.S. and beyond. Yet, studies in these disciplines on developing women leaders are just emerging as an important focus of researchers and practitioners in many countries and regions throughout the world. It has become immediately evident, however, that this phenomenon is multifaceted and often particularly challenging because of the 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). This is most definitely the case in the journey toward understanding how to develop women leaders within China.

Although there are currently women leaders in China, little has been published that helps practitioners understand how to develop future women for leadership positions. 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. Yet, studies that explore the developmental experiences of those who have succeeded within a culture are critical to discovering how to help other women nationals develop leadership.

To conduct such a study focused on Chinese women leaders, I used a qualitative research approach to conduct in-depth interviews with college/university administrators in two major cities within the Sichuan province of China. 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. 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. This is a start.

In telling these stories, this paper discusses their development of knowledge, skills, abilities, and competencies required for successful leadership within their college or university settings. Hence, the research question for this study was as follows: What are the experiences of Chinese women college/university administrators in developing leadership throughout their lives? This study 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 (e.g., family, siblings, influential individuals, schooling experiences, activities, transformational moments, employment, career paths, and struggles/difficulties). Questions created and used by Madsen (2008) in three previous studies on women leaders were used to guide the interviews, and each interview was audio taped, transcribed, and analyzed based on generally accepted data collection procedures.

This research study was framed by Jack Mezirow’s (1991) transformational learning theory. He defined learning as “the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation, and action” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 1). Merriam and Caffarella (1995) stated that “transformational learning theory is about change—dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live” (p. 318). Clark (1993) argued that “Transformational learning shapes people; they are different afterward, in ways both they and others can recognize” (p. 47). Mezirow’s theory is about how adults make meaning from and interpret their experiences, and the process of transformational learning is anchored in life experience. Transformational learning focuses on three core components (Merriam & Caffarella, 1995; Mezirow, 1991): mental construction of experience, critical reflection, and development/action. For an individual to “transform” through a learning experience, she would need to have opportunities to fully engage in all three of these core components throughout the learning process. Development is about improving and changing oneself in someway, and leadership development is anchored in this
change. Hence, transformational learning provides an effective theoretical framework for studying the lifetime development of leadership in women from various cultures (e.g., China).

In sum, through the transformational learning theoretical lens, this paper will explore how successful Chinese women leaders within higher education developed leadership throughout their lives. It will discuss how they developed the knowledge, skills, and competencies required for successful leadership within their current settings. This paper also outlines implications to HRD specifically related to leadership development research and practice in China. It will also provide some lessons learned regarding collecting qualitative data through interpreters. Importantly, by understanding these influences and implications, practitioners will receive insight regarding how to design more effective personal developmental interventions for Chinese women.

References


