



# On becoming a leader in Asia and America: Empirical evidence from women managers<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

In concordance with recent calls for cross-cultural leadership research as well as research on women leaders, this study investigated how women in Asia and the U.S. become leaders and how they enact their leadership. In-depth interviews with 76 mid- to upper-level female managers in Asia (China, India, Singapore) and the U.S. were conducted. Analyses revealed that a simple dichotomy of “Asian” versus “Western” leadership did not appropriately describe the data. Rather, factors such as achievement orientation, learning orientation, and role models emerged as crucial success factors for advancement to leadership positions across continents. However, the particular meaning differed between countries. Furthermore, with regard to women's leadership style differences between Asian countries were more salient than between Asia and the U.S. Implications for leadership theory and practice are discussed.

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## Introduction

Asian economies have become increasingly important global players (Cappelli, Singh, Singh, & Useem, 2010), and Singapore's economy is one of the most innovative (The Global Innovation Index, 2012) and competitive (Global Competitiveness Report, 2012–2013) economy worldwide. As a result, there is a necessity to learn more about the way business works in Asia, particularly with regard to leadership, one of the major determinants of organizational success (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005).

Although cross-cultural leadership research has flourished in recent years (e.g., House, Dorfman, Javidan, Hanges, & de Luque, 2014; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004; Javidan, Dorfman, Howell, & Hanges, 2010), the clear demand for cross-cultural analyses of leadership persists (e.g., Bryman, 2004; Gardner, Lowe, Moss, Mahoney, & Coglisier, 2010; Lau, 2002). In particular, more research on the specific facets of leadership in India (e.g., Palrecha, Spangler, & Yammarino, 2012), China (e.g., Chan, Huang, Snape, & Lam, 2013), and Singapore (e.g., Toor & Ofori, 2009) has been called for. Furthermore, even though leader emergence has received attention in recent years (Javidan & Carl, 2005), the emergence of women leaders has been understudied in general (Gardner et al., 2010), and in cross-cultural leadership research in particular (Bullough, Kroeck, Newbury, Kundu, & Lowe, 2012).

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Thus, the purpose of this research is to investigate how women emerge as leaders in China, India, and Singapore, and how the success factors and barriers compare to those reported by women leaders in the U.S. Second, this research aims at analyzing how women in these countries lead and whether their leadership styles are more similar among Asian countries than between Asia and the U.S.

## Women leaders in Asia and America

Although the number of women leaders in business organizations has more than doubled over the last 30 years, women are still underrepresented in managerial positions worldwide (Catalyst, 2012). Compared to the U.S. and Europe, the proportion of women on corporate boards and in executive committees in Asian countries is even lower. On average, women account for only 6% of seats on corporate boards in the ten largest economies in Asia and 8% of members of executive committees, compared to 15% and 14% in the U.S., respectively (McKinsey & Company, 2012). There are, however, significant differences between Asian countries. While women hold 8% of corporate board seats in China, and 7% in Singapore, the number drops to 5% in India. Similarly, women make up 9% of the members of executive committees in China and 15% in Singapore, but only 3% in India (McKinsey & Company, 2012). As women evidently constitute a minority in leadership positions, the factors that impact their emergence as leaders—success factors as well as barriers—are important to understand.

### *Success factors for advancement*

In an early approach to explaining how women advance to leadership positions, Ragins and Sundstrom (1989) distinguished between factors at four levels of analysis: (1) individual, (2) interpersonal, (3) organizational, and (4) social systems. The *individual level* focuses upon the resources of an individual, such as achievement orientation or career aspirations. The *interpersonal level* focuses on relationships with subordinates, peers, and in particular supervisors. Since personal relationships may serve the function of role modeling, we also consider role models on the interpersonal level (cf. Gibson, 2004). The *organizational level* captures practices related to selection and promotion. The *social systems level* focuses on society at large and comprises factors such as gender stereotypes.

Investigations of the success factors for advancement to leadership positions based on this model point to the particular importance of career encouragement (Tharenou, Latimer, & Conroy, 1994) as well as managerial aspirations and masculinity for women (Tharenou, 2001). However, it is unclear to what extent these findings from Australia apply in Asian cultures, especially since the female gender role in Asia has been described as being dominated by traditionally feminine role expectations (e.g., taking care of children; Lyness & Judiesch, 2008).

### *Barriers to advancement*

The barriers to women's advancement can also be grouped into individual, interpersonal, organizational, and societal level factors: Women's lower levels of self-confidence or propensity to assert self-interests (individual level) and a lack of access to powerful networks or the absence of role models (interpersonal level) as well as biased recruiting and selection practices in organizations (organizational level) have been discussed as major barriers (see Peus & Traut-Mattausch, 2007, for a summary). Among the factors that have been regarded as most obstructive for women's advancement to leadership positions are gender stereotypes (see Heilman, 2012, for an overview). This is due to the fact that stereotypes operate at the social systems level and thereby influence the lower levels.

### *Gender stereotypes*

Gender stereotypes are generalizations about the attributes of men and women that are shared in a society. They have both descriptive components (i.e., how women and men *are*) and prescriptive components (i.e., how women and men *should or should not be*; Eagly & Karau, 2002). The lack of concordance between the attributes women are thought to possess and the ones that are regarded as necessary for leadership positions (Heilman, 2012) result in *negative performance expectations* for women, diminishing their chances of being hired into such jobs and negatively affecting their performance evaluations (Heilman & Haynes, 2008) or important career decisions (e.g., consideration for international assignments; Stroh, Varma, & Valy-Durbin, 2000). Due to prescriptive gender stereotypes women in leadership positions face a *double bind*: In order to be regarded as competent business leaders, they are required to show agentic behaviors (e.g., assertiveness, ambition); however, in order not to violate the prescriptive stereotypes associated with their gender role, they must also show communal behaviors such as being warm, sensitive, and caring (Johnson, Murphy, Zewdie, & Reichard, 2008). These same prescriptive stereotypes imply that women should take care of their families; however, *caregiving roles* are seen as incongruent with leadership roles due to the long work hours and high levels of commitment required (Byron, 2005).

Cross-cultural comparisons of stereotypes pertaining to women, men, and managers are scarce. However, some evidence points to the fact that the think-manager-think-male phenomenon is evident in the U.S. as well as Asia (Schein, 2001), but that it might be more pronounced in Asia. Initial research points to the fact that women in Asia particularly struggle to combine family and work commitments (e.g., Lyness & Judiesch, 2008).

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