

## Book Review

# Chao, C. C., & Ha, L. (Eds.). (2019). *Asian women leadership*. London: Routledge.

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This is an important interdisciplinary anthology that was long overdue. Editors Chao and Ha have put forward a volume designed to help readers grasp the various aspects of Asian leadership through a critical examination of how Asian women experience this phenomenon across various sectors. At the outset, the editors make clear the absolute need for analytical research on Asian women and leadership. Leadership research, especially, when examining specific issues faced by women in positions of command, are, generally, focused on the western world and usually conducted from western perspectives. This edited collection is a bid to make this locus more inclusive and, in the process, challenge scholastic ethnocentrism. Besides, the rise of Asian societies as economic power houses and the crucial need for better intercultural connections has necessitated an urgent need for a more comprehensive discernment of Asian management and leadership, especially, with regard to the merits and limits of how women experience leadership; not just through different professional positions but also in the ways they are represented by media and how history chooses to remember

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them.

Conceptualizing leadership can be onerous. Given leadership's preoccupation and close relationship with power and influence, delineating the role of gender within this complex mechanism certainly poses interesting challenges. This is, precisely, why this highly complex phenomenon, that may share common global characteristics while working to influence groups and members to recognize and agree with what needs to be done and facilitate individual and collective goals and visions, there is no denying that gender and culture are important differentiators. With increasing globalization, there is a greater need to understand and work effectively with such differences, and, for leaders, with greater awareness of cultural differences and increased cross cultural and intercultural communication skills. In such an atmosphere, a robust acknowledgement of the significant differences between genders and leadership styles is not only an important need but also manifestations of greater cross-cultural empathy. Extensive research has examined gender and cultural effects on the leadership process, but the role of women, here, have received insufficient attention. The logic binding the volume together is important; Asian women's participation in economic and political activities deserves more critical attention and study.

Combining four (modified) referred articles published in a special issue on Chinese women leadership in *China Media Research* and invited chapters from scholars with expertise in women leadership research from Asia and the United States, the book is divided into six sections. The first and second sections are devoted to expositions on the importance of understanding the notions and nuances connected with Asian women leadership, in general, and in academia, encompassing the experiences of Asian women as faculty and as parts of the academic publishing sphere.

This section focuses attention on Chinese women journal editors, breaking away from usual research that focuses on the domination of men in the higher echelons of academia or the disadvantaged status of women with regard to the citation of their work. It also advances notions of the bamboo ceiling that exists for Asian and Asian American women in academia and the unique institutional and cultural challenges they face. This section is particularly interesting with its spotlight on leadership styles and success experience of Chinese women academic leaders and challenges and opportunities for Asian and Asian American women faculty.

The third section focusses on politics and social movements. With its convergent theme of women in politics, this section is compelling in the different topics presented. Besides analyzing dynastic politics, where women leaders are viewed as virtuous alternatives to Machiavellian men; the role of the Chinese First lady, Peng Liyuan, who like Michelle Obama lessened gaps between presidential leadership and citizens, and how the rise of digital technology has created more nuanced ways for women to protest; this also examines the complex relationship between sisters, Soong Ching-Ling and Soong Mei-Ling, whose political beliefs and values created insurmountable divides that were never healed. The chapter on Soong Ching-Ling and Soong Mei-Ling asks, when beliefs and values differ, is enmity the only and necessary outcome. Its pertinence and relevance to the state of the world we live in certainly makes us pause and wonder.

Comprising studies from India and Vietnam, part four, is devoted to women in the media; as professional journalists and the gender stereotypes that play out with impunity in spite of the best efforts of the government. We see how women journalists in India have to fight hard every inch of the way as they work to establish their occupational identities. In Vietnam, female leaders

are defined by their private and more traditional roles no matter how outstanding they may be in public. For women, the weight of expectations is both private and professional and often both seep into each other to create complex patterns of societal expectations that are often the biggest barriers to the empowerment of women.

Women's leadership roles in business, nonprofit and rural communities are analyzed in part five, where scholars, guided by Burke's theory of pentadic criticism delve into the intrinsic motivations behind Chinese women leaders, comparing gender and career development in nonprofit organizations in China, South Africa and the US, and how leadership is cultivated among women in India battling climate change. As it points out, women in leadership may be rare in the corporate world but the nonprofit world offers a bright future for gender equity.

The sixth and concluding section highlights the role of Asian women as migrants and minorities as well as analysis on the future of Asian women leadership. This explores the fears and self-imposed barriers, women, especially immigrant women, often create in their minds that prevents them from actively seeking out positions of power and how Asian women leaders from Hong Kong and the United States illuminate how gender and ethnicity share complex influences on the ways they exercise leadership. As this section highlights, much of effective leadership lies in recognizing strength, our own as well as that of our communities.

Each of the 13 studies presented highlights concepts and experiences of leadership in different settings and, especially, appealing is the inclusion of countries like Vietnam, a general rarity in western media studies. The volume encompasses a wide span of contexts. This may be focused on leadership and gender but the voices of women from marginalized communities, like

those fighting for climate change in India, and the struggles of immigrant women find important space. This certainly does not conflate leadership with privilege. In its emphasis on the pervasive gender discrimination and under recognition of women's leadership, the volume deeply engages with uncomfortable ideas of gender injustice and prejudices that still characterize so much of the professional realm in Asia. It is this engagement, cutting across different fields, ranging from academia, activism, politics, and nonprofit among others; that fulfills important gaps in leadership and feminist research and produces research of deep probity that provides cogent insights into various norms and values that shape leadership roles and patterns in Asia. Another strength is its cross cultural comparative approach, especially, when looking at the roles of female academics in Taiwan, China and the United States, the dynastic nature of how certain politicians became prime ministers in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, the portrayal of 'First' ladies, career development in nonprofit sectors and leadership experiences of Asian American and Hong Kong Chinese women leaders. As the editors conclude, leadership is also about a chance to make a difference in organizations and society as a whole and thus, such roles should not be viewed cynically. A central takeaway is that women can be successful leaders, and that we must create an atmosphere of diverse leadership where leadership behaviors must go beyond results and performances. At the very outset, the editors have mentioned that the book aims to serve "as an invitation for a more culturally conscious discussion about women's leadership in general and Asian women leadership in particular (pg 3)." The global #MeToo movement has brought into focus certain extremely important issues regarding women and the professional sphere. To broaden margins and inclusivity, future editions can certainly look into

these concerns and as well as how LGBT and transgender women negotiate power and examine how sexuality can influence perceptions of certain groups, seeking to or in positions of power.

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