Asian Women in Management, cracking the glass ceiling?

KIM, So Won

Abstract

Research on the corporate Asian woman has been limited as most studies on women in management have focused within the Anglo-Saxon and European contexts. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to present a general overview of Asian female managers and compare it to their western counterparts. Similar individual, organizational and institutional career barriers have been found in the Asian context. However, the institutional perspective seems to play a larger role in the representation of Asian female managers. Through the cases of South Korea and China, we illustrate the impact of socio-cultural context on women's career.

Reference

KIM, So Won. *Asian Women in Management, cracking the glass ceiling* ?. 2007

Available at:
http://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:5728

Disclaimer: layout of this document may differ from the published version.
ASIAN WOMEN IN MANAGEMENT, CRACKING THE GLASS CEILING?

Sowon KIM
ASIAN WOMEN IN MANAGEMENT, CRACKING THE GLASS CEILING?

Sowon Kim*

HEC, University of Geneva, Switzerland

* Address correspondence to Sowon Kim, HEC – Management Studies, 40 Blvd Pont d’Arve, 1211 Geneva 4, Switzerland. Email: Sowon.Kim@hec.unige.ch.
ABSTRACT

Research on the corporate Asian woman has been limited as most studies on women in management have focused within the Anglo-Saxon and European contexts. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to present a general overview of Asian female managers and compare it to their western counterparts. Similar individual, organizational and institutional career barriers have been found in the Asian context. However, the institutional perspective seems to play a larger role in the representation of Asian female managers. Through the cases of South Korea and China, we illustrate the impact of socio-cultural context on women's career.

Key words: women in management, career advancement, career barriers, Asian women in management, South Korea, China
INTRODUCTION

In the last four decades women have achieved virtual parity in the workforce. However, the number of women who have reached top management positions in the corporate world has lagged far behind. Most studies on women in management have largely focused on western (i.e. Anglo-Saxon and European) contexts. Therefore, examining Asian female managers may be relevant as there is a lack of knowledge on the segment of women in top management positions, which also represent the fastest growing segment of Asian elites (O’Shea, 1997). The aim of the paper is to bring a deeper understanding of the representation of women in Asia; what is the current situation of Asian women in management? Do they face similar challenges as those of their western female counterparts? We answer these questions by first examining the theoretical framework that explains the low representation of (western) women in managerial positions. Second, we shift to Asia and present the current situation of women managers to compare them to their western counterparts.

WOMEN IN MANAGEMENT

Since the second-wave feminist movement\(^1\) initiated in the United States in the 1960s, women’s participation in the labor force has increased significantly. Today, women represent around 40% of the global workforce (ILO, 2004)\(^2\) and has accounted for 15.5% of labor growth from 1990–2000 (Fullerton & Toossi, 2001). Women have achieved virtual parity with men when entering organizations, but their careers start to lag behind to those of their male counterparts within five to six years (Catalyst, 1998). As such, women correspond to 20% of managerial positions (public, private and legislative) worldwide and merely 1-5% of top management positions (Wirth, 2001). For example in Fortune 500, 9.4% of U.S. women

\(^1\) The period of the second-wave feminist movement was concerned with the issue of economic equality (including the ability to have careers in addition to motherhood, or the right to choose not to have children) between the genders and addressed the rights of female minorities. Prior to this period, the first-wave feminism focused upon absolute rights such as suffrage (which led to women attaining the right to vote in the early part of the 20th century).

\(^2\) The percentage corresponds to 70% of women in developed countries and 60% of women in developing countries.
hold higher positions than vice president, there are 15.6% U.S. female corporate officers (i.e. executives who are board-elect or board appointed), 14.6% U.S. women board members and 12% of these companies still have no female directors\(^3\) (Catalyst, 2007).

Comparable figures have appeared in other studies. Women executives in Fortune 100 accounted for 11% in 2001 (Capelli & Hamori, 2005). Furthermore, female executives represented 7.34% in a study of the largest 1000 companies during the period 1990–2003 (Hillman, Shropshire, & Cannella, 2005). However, only 13 out of Fortune 500 and 25 out of Fortune 1000 companies are led by women (Fortune, 2007). Otherwise stated, though women achieved considerable progress by their higher participation in the work force, their progress in getting to top management positions has been less impressive. Thus, climbing up the corporate ladder for women continues to be a struggle worldwide.

**Explaining the under representation of women in management**

In literature, three main perspectives intend to explain the under representation of women in top management positions: the person centered perspective, the organization centered perspective and the institutional perspective (Adler & Izraeli, 1994; Fagenson, 1990, 1993; Tharenou, 1997, 1998). The first perspective analyses the individual in relation to the requirements for management positions. It explains that women’s lack of managerial traits, competence and career aspirations are the main reasons for their slow advancement. The second perspective examines how organizational practices (i.e. performance evaluations and training) and group dynamics (e.g. networks) may contribute to disadvantage women as they have fewer opportunities to move up and less power which implies limited access to information and resources. The third perspective focuses on the impact of societal and/or cultural values on the organization’s perception of women in top management positions.

We further examine these perspectives.

\(^3\) 71% has 1-2 women directors and 17% has 3 or more directors.
It's the woman!

The person centered perspective states that women are under represented in top management positions because of their lack of managerial traits, competence and career ambitions. The common belief in 1970s -- women simply don’t posses the qualities demanded to be a leader -- continues to prevail despite the rise of women into more powerful positions. Managerial traits have been largely identified with male traits -- dominant, achievement-oriented, ambitious, aggressive, self-confident and rational. On the other hand, female traits have been associated with being affectionate, emotional, friendly, mild, sensitive, and warm (Bem, 1974). Although the reasons of the differences remain under debate, by and large these stereotyped traits, which also apply across different cultures, still prevail (Catalyst, 2006; Schneider, 2005). Despite little evidence that men are more task-oriented and women are more relation-oriented as managers (Eagley & Johnson, 1990), women managers may have more difficulties in making it to the top because male and female stereotypes have been exported into the managerial arena and consequently women are perceived as being poorly fit for the role of a manager (Catalyst, 2006; Green & Cassell, 1996; Schein 1973, 1975; Schein, Mueller, Lituchy, & Liu, 1996). Indeed, female managers who display male traits are criticized for not behaving femininely enough; however, those who display feminine traits are criticized as not being assertive enough to be good managers (Antonakis, et al. 2005; Eagley, Makhijani, & Klonsy, 1992; Fiske, Bersoff, Borgida, Deaux, & Heilman, 1991). Women are situated in a double bind situation; accordingly, they may need to juggle and display different traits at different stages in their careers. Female managers may first need to display more male

4 The Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) is a widely used self-report measure of perceptions on gender roles. BSRI was developed in the 1970s from the ranking results on desirable traits of men and women by 200 Stanford University undergraduates (most white and middle classed). The test includes 60 descriptive adjectives from which one third are masculine, one third are feminine, and the other third are neutral traits.

5 On the one side, evolutionary psychologists argue that men and women differ because of their innate biological predispositions, thus men and women are born different (Buss, 1995). On the other side, it is argued that men and women are different because of the tendency to occupy different social roles and socialization (Eagley & Wood, 1999).
traits until their credibility is relatively well established, and then they may need to display
more feminine traits in order to avoid criticism related to their gender as successful women
are more likely to be targets of more interpersonal hostility due to gender stereotypes
(Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004).

The second argument to explain women’s under representation in top managerial
positions is their lack of line experience and competences to do the job.

A comparative study on viewpoints between CEOs and women managers shows that
68% of CEOs attribute lack of general management or line experience as being the number
one reason of barrier for women’s career advancement (Catalyst, 2003). However, women
attribute 47% to the same reason. While women do acknowledge lack of line experience, the
argument is different. Their lack of line experience is more likely a result of organizations’
unwillingness to offer positions of responsibility rather than a source of slow advancement.

One of the reasons that women are less entrusted with difficult tasks may be related
with perceptions of female competence as being less competent than their male counterparts
(Heilman, Lucas, & Block, 1992; Stroh, Brett, & Reilly, 1992). Three experimental studies
found that women are rated less competent, less influential and less likely to play a leadership
role in team tasks unless information about individual performance, task structure, and prior
work competence are provided (Heilman & Haynes, 2005). As such, women may need to
continuously outperform in order to prove themselves with regard to their male superiors,
peers and subordinates (Catalyst, 2003; ILO, 2004). In fact, studies on women in executive
positions have found the pressure for women to constantly outperform their male colleagues
(Duffy, Fox, Punnett, Gregory, Lituchy, Moserrat, Olivas-Luján, Bastos, & Miller, 2006;
Mainiero, 1994). The third argument to explain women’s low representation in top
management positions is their lack of career aspiration or ambition (Eddleston, Balridge, &
Veiga, 2004). It is hypothetically believed that women are less ambitious than men (Maddok & Parkin, 1993; Van Vianen & Fischer, 2002). However, it is uncertain whether women are less ambitious because they have a tendency to downplay their ambitions due to societal expectations or because they are born with low levels of power needs (Fels, 2004; Veroff, McClelland, & Ruhland, 1975). Furthermore, research on women and power states otherwise; some studies show women have higher power needs than men (Chusmir, 1985) and others show that men and women have equal power needs (Cook & Mendleson, 1980; Harlan & Weiss, 1980; Van Wagner & Swanson, 1979). Inconsistency in findings may result from the different understanding of the concept of power. For men, power has a “control over” connotation; for women power is defined as influence (Groshev, 2002). As such, it is not deducible to state that women have less career aspirations than men. In fact, a study of more than 900 senior-level men and women from Fortune 1000 companies found that both have equal desires to have the CEO job (Catalyst, 2004).

The person centered perspective is useful in understanding how differences that may exist between men and women may have become the source of stereotyped male and female traits which have been exported to the managerial arena. However, this perspective is weak defending why regardless the lack of evidence in different levels of competence, ambition and management styles between men and women, female managers are still under represented in top management positions.

It's the organization!

At the time when most studies on women’s slow advancement were justified by their lack of appropriate characteristics such as masculinity and/or human capital such as education and work experience, Kanter (1977) brought forward situational factors as being the main contributor to constraining women’s career progression. Her proposal -- women’s limited access to informal male-dominated networks which may serve as critical channels of
information -- is one of the obstacles for women’s advancement, has been confirmed by other studies (Brass, 1985; Davies-Netzley, 1998; Ibarra, 1993, 1995; Lyness & Thompson, 2000; Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989; Metz & Tharenou, 2001).

Performance evaluations are important in that they play a key role in decisions of promotions and thus, managerial advancement. However, given the political nature of organizations (Ferris, Russ, & Fandt, 1989; Ferris & Buckley, 1990; Pfeffer, 1992), empirical evidence shows that political processes may affect human judgment i.e. performance evaluations and promotions, and therefore career progression (Cleveland & Murphy, 1992; Ferris & Buckly, 1990; Ferris, Fedor, & King, 1994; Judge & Bretz, 1994; McFarland, Ryan, & Kriska, 2003; Wayne & Liden, 1995). Furthermore, stereotypes and other biases often influence ratings (Ilgen, Barnes-Farrell, & McKellin, 1993). In fact, research shows that women advance at a slower rate than men (Roussell, 1974) and need more promotions to reach the same rank as men (Flanders & Anderson, 1973). However, there is no consistency in research whether gender affect performance appraisals (Alimo-Metcalfe, 1994; Lyness & Heilman, 2006; Shore & Tashchian, 2003; Thacker & Wayne, 1995; Wexley & Pulakos, 1982), although there is evidence that women are more likely to be rated lower in male-typed jobs (Landy & Farr, 1980). On the other hand, female managers may be overrated when they exceed in powerful, male stereotyped jobs as success was not expected from them (Nieva & Gutek, 1981).

Research shows that training and development programs benefit employees by increasing their skills (Gritz, 1993), salary (Mangum, Mangum, & Hansen, 1990; Arulampalam & Booth, 2001), and career progression (Tharenou, 1997, 1994). A study of gender comparison in training participation shows that there are no differences between men and women (Arulampalam, Booth, & Bryan, 2004). In fact, more than gender per se, it is work status that impacts the amount of training received (Arulampalam & Booth, 1998).
Hence, individuals that have full-time contracts receive more training than those with fixed or temporary contract. Men with temporary contracts are more penalized than women by getting less training; however, women are more penalized than men by getting less training in part-time jobs. Given that women largely occupy part-time jobs mainly due to family demands (Euwals & Hogerbrugge, 2006), women are less trained than their male counterparts due to their work status.

Research has shown that networks advance careers (Arthur, Claman, & DeFillippi, 1995; Burke & McKeen 1990; De Janasz, Sullivan, & Whiting, 2003; Gould & Penley, 1984; Ibarra, 1995; Jansen & Vinkenburg, 2006; Metz & Tharenou, 2001; Podolny & Baron, 1997; Ragins, 1989; Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001; Singh, Kumra, & Vinnicombe, 2002; Wanberg, Welsh, & Hezlett, 2003). Therefore being part of networks is fundamental for career progression. Powerful networks are more likely to be male-dominated as top management positions are mostly populated by men. Women, therefore, have difficulties accessing to these networks not only because of the existing stereotypes on women but also because of their “outsider”/outgroup (being female) status.

Ingroup/outgroup differentiation emerges from social categorization of the self and others, wherein being a member of a group is defined by the subjective perception of the self as a member of a specific category (Tajfel, 1982). Therefore, when individuals assimilate the self and others into ingroup/outgroup prototypes, depersonalization -- process in which an individual is no longer considered as an individual but a category -- happens (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Turner, 1985). As such, the presence of an outgroup member in ingroup circles may lead to intergroup polarization (“we” versus “they”) when both groups interact and compete for limited resources. As such, ingroup cohesion increases under perceived threat from outgroup (Dackert, Jackson, Brenner, & Johansson, 2003). Furthermore, the presence of an outgroup member in ingroup circles may lead to tokenism (representatives of their minority
status) (Kanter, 1977). Given their outgroup status, tokens may have a complying attitude and may adopt particular behaviors such as conflict and risk avoidance, low participation in group discussions and therefore, difficulties of integration within the group.

Ingroup members are more likely preserve a strong group identity (“we”) through homophilious practices involving specific methods of recruitment, socialization, and inclusion/exclusion behaviours. Homophily may give ground to exclusion and segregation on the basis of dissimilarity (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001), although it may also induce to positive outcomes such as friendship, advice, support, and sharing of information between similar members of the homophilious group (Krackhardt, 1992; Ibarra, 1993). Nevertheless, homophilious ties are not impermeable. They can be overridden when organizations promote development of cross category relationships (Bacharach, Bamberger, & Vashidi, 2005; Polzer, Milton, & Swann 2002), individuals have experience interacting with those who are different from themselves (Westphal & Milton, 2000), possess specialized skills, or have strong mentors (Roth, 2004) defined as individuals who can provide career support (e.g. information and resources, challenging assignments, visibility/exposure) and/or psychosocial support (e.g. acceptance, confirmation, and friendship) (Kram, 1983; Noe, 1988; Ragins & Cotton, 1999). Furthermore, mentors can legitimize an outsider’s status through mentors’ own ingroup status and influence (Burt, 1998). Having an ingroup “ally”, therefore, may relate to greater acceptance of outgroup members (Pettigrew, 1997). Accordingly, it may be crucial for women to have powerful individuals (sponsors/mentors) who endorse their careers and facilitate the integration into the male-dominated networks. In fact, there is empirical evidence that women more likely benefit from sponsors than men (Johnson & Scandura, 1994; Ragins & Scandura, 1994; Tharenou, 2005).

---

6 Homophily refers to the tendency to prefer similar others (Lazarfeld & Merton, 1954).
The organization centred perspective sheds us light into how organizations may contribute to disadvantage women. However, research in managerial practices remain rather inconsistent as some studies show that there are no differences between how men and women are evaluated and others provide evidence of discrimination against women. Research, however, is consistent of the importance of networks and mentors in women’s career advancement.

**It’s the society!**

The institutional perspective focuses on how the existing a priori of a societal or cultural impacts the organization and thus, on the perception of women in top management positions. Organizations are located in societies with particular cultural values, institutional practices, ideologies and stereotypes regarding appropriate sex-roles and behaviors which affect its internal structures and processes (Adler & Izraeli, 1994; Fagenson, 1990, 1993; Martin, Harrison, & Dinitto, 1983; Ragins & Sundstrom 1989).

In order to understand the differences between genders, Ragins and Sundstrom (1989) propose a four-level analysis model\(^7\) in which three levels (individual, interpersonal and organizational) are embedded within a stereotyped social system. Factors of the social system such as sex-role socialization, gender-roles, stereotypes, and role-conflict can for example influence occupational choices before entry into a specific organization. Likewise, Fagenson (1990, 1993) introduces the concept “gender-organization-system” (GOS) to underline the interaction between the person, the organization and the context. For example women’s behaviors may be shaped by societal values and the institutional context which may be contradictory to the expected managerial behavior within an organization. This may therefore disadvantage women in the corporate world as they are more likely to be perceived unsuitable for the job. Furthermore, for example maternity laws and affirmative action laws for women’s

---

\(^7\) The four levels are: individual, interpersonal, organizational and social-systems.
equality at workplace can influence the way women are treated and viewed as organizational members (Fagenson, 1990).

Given the barriers to advancement, women increasingly leave the corporate world to start their own business and become entrepreneurs (Mallon & Cohen, 2001; Mattis, 2004; Winn, 2004). Therefore, the outflow of highly qualified women from the corporate world translates not only to talent drain for organizations, but to society in general as not all women who exit organizations become entrepreneurs. As such, organizations accelerate their initiatives in advancing women’s careers in order to manage their talent. In fact, more and more organizations progressively implement organizational impression management strategies at their recruitment phase in order to attract more women and racial minorities because of their awareness in the changing demographics of the world, and tightening labor market (Avery & McKay, 2006)

Based on this theoretical framework, we now examine Asian women managers.

ASIAN WOMEN IN MANAGEMENT

Asian markets are becoming increasingly important for multinational companies. After a decade of the East Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, East Asia has re-established itself as the fastest growing region in the world. In 2006, the region’s growth accelerated to reach 8.1% (World Bank, 2007). People’s incomes are beyond where they were before the crisis and over 100 million across East Asia left the “extreme poor” status since 2000. In less than 5 years, it is predicted that 95% of East Asians will be living in middle income countries (World Bank, 2007). The fast growth of Asia Pacific is marked by: Japan’s transformation in the 1960s, followed by the rapid development of the four Newly Industrialized Economies (NIE) -- Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong -- in the 1970s; the rise of foreign investment and

---

8 Organizational impression management (OIM) applies the individual level impression management to the organizational level. It refers to "any action purposefully designed and carry out to influence an audience’s perceptions of an organization" (Elsbach, Sutton & Principe, 1998: 68).
deregulation in Southeast Asia countries -- Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand -- in the 1980s; and currently China’s unparalleled growth since the 1990s along with India’s emergence.

Asia has been identified as a strategic region due to its economic dynamism. By early 1990s western firms explored its markets and by late 1990s companies integrated rapid expansion in the region as their main strategy (Lasserre & Schütte, 2006). Consequently, demand on managerial talent throughout the region has been on rise (Adler, 1993; August & Tuten, 2003; Yukongdi & Benson, 2005).

The representation of Asian women in management

There has been a gradual increase in the female share of the labor market in Asia (Yukongdi & Benson, 2005). Labor participation in Asia varies among industries -- for example, women represent 38% of the workforce in manufacturing and 64% in community, social and personal services sector. Moreover, workforce participation also varies among economies as it ranges from as low as 31% (India) to as high as 40% (China). Economies with lowest percentage of women managers are found in India (Budhwar, Saini, & Bhatnagar, 2005), Korea (Kang & Rowley, 2005) and Japan (Yuasa, 2005). Conversely, highest numbers of women managers are found in Singapore (Lee, 2005) and Thailand (Yukongdi, 2005) where they make up to 25%. Still the share of Asian women managers is relatively low compared to their western counterparts; Over 50% of women in the US occupy professional and managerial positions, more than 40% in Eastern Europe and greater than 25% in Western Europe (Wirth, 2001).

There is a slow acceptance of Asian women in management positions due to their rise in higher education levels, labor force participation, and changing industrial structure. Furthermore, growth of the region’s dynamic entrepreneurialism and family-owned

---

9 Studied economies include China, Hong Kong, India, Japan, Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and Thailand.
10 In fact, Asia has the lowest number of women professionals and managers in the world (comparison includes US, Europe, Latin America and Africa).
businesses enhances women’s participation in the business world (Adler, 1993). However, institutional factors which impact organizational practices e.g. recruitment, socialization (training) and promotions, also stagnate women’s participation and career advancement (Benson & Yukondgdi, 2005). For example, most Asian countries are collective and family-oriented (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). Therefore, women are often considered as the key caretaker of the family (husband, children and elderly) and housework (Ng & Chakrabarty, 2005). Consequently, women’s sphere of action is within the limit of the private arena while that of men is in the public field. Women may be involved in the public sphere only as an extension of their roles in the family (Shamsul-Haque, 2003). Accordingly, success is defined for women in terms of family (e.g. having a husband/children, having a healthy family) while for men in terms of career (Yukondgdi & Benson, 2005).

Examples within the institutional context which may impact organizational practices are cultural and religious traditions (Adler, 1993). Confucianism, predominant in China, overseas Chinese community, Korea and Japan, is a concrete illustration in which women’s role is historically predetermined. According to Confucian philosophy, a woman is considered as virtuous if she is shy, unassertive, has no ability and is obedient to men throughout her lifetime (i.e. to her father, her husband and her son). Such belief and mindset which have characterized Eastern societies and shaped its societal structure have also been exported into the managerial arena. Not only are women perceived as being inadequately fit to managerial positions due to stereotyped images of a manager identified with male traits (Schein 1973, 1975; Schein, Mueller, Lituchy, & Liu, 1996) but also the institutional context plays a strong role in defining women’s supposed function. It is therefore, unsurprising to understand that Japanese and Korean women are rarely perceived as an authority figure or a business leader (Adler, 1987), which may well explain the reason why both countries have one of the lowest percentages of female managers.
The case of South Korea

Korea is an interesting model to examine. South Korea has created its economic wealth in the last twenty years and has developed from a traditional Asian society to a modern industrial country. The economy of Korea is the third largest in Asia and the twelfth largest in the world in terms of market exchange nominal GDP as of 2006. Post the Korean War in 1950s, South Korea grew from being one of the world's poorest to one of the richest countries. The nation’s per capita gross national product has grown from around USD 100 in 1963 to USD 20,00 in the next 40 years (CIA, 2007). Up until the 1990s, South Korea has been part of the Four Asian Tigers and a Newly-industrialized country but upon entering the 21st century, South Korea gained developed status and is defined as a High Income Nation according to the World Bank. According to reports by the OECD (2001) and the World Bank (2000), Korea sustained economic loss due to unproductive utilization of female labor.

Korean women have been perceived as those who need protection (i.e. mother, wife, daughter), but seldom as those who deserve respect and admiration. This perception remains due to the cultural context of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy (adopted during the Choson dynasty 1392-1910 and practiced over 700 years). Consequently, although women workforce participation has gradually increased, a large majority is found in medium-to-low status occupations (e.g. secretaries and clerical assistants) (August & Tuten, 2003). Women’s participation in labor market increased from 34.4% in 1960s to 49.7% in 2001 (KNSO, 2001). However, among college-educated women, less than 30% are employed and also tend to occupy marginal jobs and less than 8% of women are in management positions (Ihlwan, 2001).

Occupation of managerial positions depends on the size of the company; the larger the organization, the fewer the women. Businesses with over 500 employees (e.g. chaebols or conglomerates) have 2.9% women managers; middle sized companies of 100-500 employees
have 4.2% and (Kang & Rowley, 2005) and start-ups or small companies (that have known a fast growth since year 2000) with 10-100 employees have an average of 7.4% women managers.

We have stated above that higher education levels increase the number of women in management positions increase. This is in line with the human capital theory which defends that higher education leads to higher income and thus, higher probability of employment. However, research on Korean women shows a paradox. Married Korean women with higher education increase the probability of non-employment (Brinton, Lee, & Parish, 1995; Cameron Dowling, & Worswick, 2001). The share of Korean women who possess a tertiary degree (i.e. graduate studies) has risen significantly from 23% in 1980 to 77% in 1998 (versus 54% to 87% for the share of Korean men) (Berik, Rodgers, & Zveglich, 2004). Therefore, a higher number of Korean women should be in the workforce; however, this is not the case (Cameron et al., 2001). The main reason may be the indirect effect education has on employment via the husband’s income (Brinton et al., 1995). In Korea, educated women are more likely to use her educational credentials to compete in the marriage market for a husband who can provide an adequate income. As such, success in the marriage market will free the woman from working in the lower-status, lower-income jobs available in the labor market for women. In fact, the female-to-male wage ratio in Korea remains amongst the worst in the world based on ILO’s standards (Monk-Turner & Turner, 2000). In 1988, men enjoyed wages that were 208% of women’s wages. After a decade, the difference decreased to 165% (Monk-Turner & Turner, 2004). Furthermore, over 60% of women in the corporate world leave work after marriage because of reasons such as childrearing and societal expectations of childrearing (Choo & Koo, 1983; Lee & Jang, 2001).

Governmental policies have also shaped women’s employability. In 1970s Korean government focused on the development of bright entrepreneurs (who later became the chaebols) through foreign loan privileges, tax advantage, import license and domestic
protection (Lasserre & Schütte, 2006). The success and prestige of chaebols enhanced their reputation as being the best firms to work for, enabling to recruit top talent from the best universities. As demand for education increased universities expanded, leading to a “diploma disease” phenomenon in 1980s in which overeducated people were left without jobs. Consequently, married women were pressured to resign from their white collar jobs for men (Brinton et al., 1995).

The case of China

On the other hand, acceptance of women in management positions has been more favorable in China despite being the source Confucianism. Efforts made by the Chinese Communist Party to promote women’s liberation even before the founding of the Republic in 1949 counterbalanced the 2000 year Confucian values in which women’s inferiority was a fact (Chow, Zhang, Wang, 2004). Marxist analysis of “the women question” became part of the party’s official ideology, illustrated by the Maoist slogan, “women hold up half the sky”. Therefore, the achievement of a high rate of women’s participation in employment owes much to the State effort. Chinese women were given equal status as men in economic, political, cultural, and social life. A succession of progressive regulations and official policies aimed at promoting equal opportunities and protecting women’s rights and interests in their work place, family and social life have been supported (Cooke, 2005). For example, China included provisions on the protection of the equality of women in the Marriage Law, Law of Inheritance, and the Civil and Criminal Law. Mass education and media mechanism have also been set up to promote equality and to encourage women to gain independence from men (Keith, 1997). Currently, over 5,000 women’s organizations represent Chinese women’s view and publicize current problems specific to women.
By the numbers, Chinese women affirm their advanced status compared to other eastern countries: Chinese GDI rank is higher than the HDI rank by five points\(^{11}\) (UNDP, 2004), indicating the highest amongst the 144 studied countries and the estimated female to male earned income is 0.66 (UNDP, 2004). Yet, a closer look at Chinese women managers reveals that they equally experience the glass ceiling as their Asian counterparts (Cooke, 2005; Korabik, 1994) as most organizations still have few women in upper management ranks despite the rise in the number of women entering the workforce (Leung, 1998). Reasons may be found at the individual, organization and institutional levels. For example, equal rights were granted by the State only 60 years ago. Therefore, Chinese continually follow Confucian values in which perception of male superiority remains unchanged. In fact, equal rights granted to Chinese women are not based on differences between men and women but rather on the sameness between the sexes in which masculinity is the norm. Furthermore, organizations have done little to eliminate discrimination and negative stereotypes against women which -- equally faced by their western female counterparts -- limit their inclusion to dominant male networks.

The institutional context may also favor women's advancement. A concrete example is Buddhism. In Thailand, the existing religion kept men fully occupied with leading the spiritual life which was considered as more important than any other activities. Consequently, men detoured from economic activities leaving Thai women to pursue business activities (Siengthai & Leelakulthanit, 1994). Therefore, women as business leaders are not a novelty. Such context which largely shapes perceptions of individuals may explain why Thailand has

\(^{11}\) HDI is the human development index, which measures the average achievement of a country in basic human capabilities. It indicates whether people lead a long and healthy life, are educated and knowledgeable and enjoy a decent standard of living. HDI is a composite of three basic components of human development: longevity, knowledge and standard of living. Longevity is measured by life expectancy; knowledge by a combination of adult literacy (two-thirds weight) and mean years of schooling (one-third weight); and standard of living is measured by purchasing power, based on real GDP per capita adjusted for the local cost of living (purchasing power parity, or PPP). GDI, gender-related development index, measures the same variables as the HDI except...
one of the highest numbers of women managers in the Asian region (Yukongdi, 2005) albeit low compared to other regions of the world.

The institutional perspective explains well the case of women in Asian societies as their collective and patriarchal values have a non negligible impact on the role of women in general and thus women in management. Societal values and norms have a direct impact on organizations but they too form individual perceptions which in turn also affect managerial practices. Globalization and modernization has to some extent influenced the role of women, however the impact seems to be limited in collective societies as reflected by having the lowest number of female managers in the world.

**CONCLUSION**

Studies of Asian women in management positions have been limited. Therefore, the purpose of this paper has been to situate the representation of Asian female managers and compare it to their western counterparts. Asian female managers face similar individual, corporate and institutional barriers as those experienced by western women managers (Budhwar, et al., 2005; Chan & Lee, 1994; Cheng & Liao, 1994; Cooke, 2005; De Leon & Ho, 1994; Kang & Rowley, 2005; Korabik, 1994; Lee, 2005; Mansor, 1994; Ng & Chakrabarty, 2005; Siengthai & Leelakulthanit, 1994; Steinhoff & Tanaka, 1994; Yuasa, 2005; Wright & Crockett-Tellei, 1994). In fact, Asian women are far from breaking the glass ceiling. Through the cases of South Korea and China we found that their first and foremost challenge remains getting recruited, having interesting jobs and remaining in companies even after marriage and children.

The three perspectives seem to fit the Asian context, although the institutional perspective-- as we have seen with the concrete example of Confucianism-- appear to play a

---

that GDI adjusts for gender inequalities in the three aspects of human development. If the difference between HDI and GDI is positive, GDI rank is higher than the HDI, a negative figure is the opposite.
stronger role in East Asian societies. Therefore, future research could focus more on the institutional role by underlining the process of its impact (e.g. societal values and governmental policies) on organizations and individuals' perceptions. Research could also examine empirically the characteristics of Asian women executives and how they have successfully reached the executive suite. Furthermore, future research could also compare empirically in which ways western societies have been more successful than eastern societies in increasing the number of women managers.
REFERENCES


Antonakis, J., Angerfelt, M, and Sivasubramaniam, N. 2005. When they were good they were very good indeed but when they were bad they were horrid! Biasing effects on ratings of leadership. Paper presented at Women as Global Leaders Conference, Dubai, UAE.


