Female Professors Developing Intellectual Leadership in Hong Kong: Considering Disciplinary, Institutional and Gender Factors

Nian Ruan[1*]

[1]*University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, China*

[*]Corresponding: nianruan@connect.hku.hk

Abstract

Women scholars' participation in higher education has been on the rise, but many obstacles (such as the gendered nature of knowledge and sociocultural gender bias) still prevent career advancement. Intellectual leadership in universities constitutes the key competence for academics. It implies faculty members' capacity to influence the innovation of science and technology, the growth of institutions, and changes in society and culture. Compared with women's formal leadership in academia, little is known about the development of their intellectual leadership. This doctoral project applied a multiple-case study of twenty-two female full professors in Hong Kong. An integrated theoretical lens was used, referring to cumulative advantage theory (Merton, 1968, 1988), the four-role framework of intellectual leadership (Macfarlane, 2013), and cultural factors affecting gender equality. This study reveals that disciplinary characteristics, neoliberal and managerial practices in universities, and patriarchal culture interplay and shape women scholars' paths of accumulating intellectual capacity.

Keywords: academic career, female professors, higher education, Hong Kong, intellectual leadership

Introduction

It has been well recognized that women leaders in universities are underrepresented worldwide, but female scholars' intellectual leadership development is understudied (Morley, 2015; Oleksiyenko & Ruan, 2019). Intellectual leadership is one type of informal leadership, similar to and different from

formal administrative or institutional leadership (Bolden et al., 2012). Intellectual leadership focuses more on motivating, mentoring, inspiring, and contributing to the academic community and the public by exercising intellectual power (e.g., Kuhn, 1963; Macfarlane, 2013). However, with the massification and marketization of higher education, intellectual leadership is threatened. Research (especially newly developed and interdisciplinary studies) that requires a longer time and has limited market value is discouraged. Hence, intellectual leadership deserves more scholarly attention (Baert, 2018).

Gender equality in higher education has been constantly debated concerning the a) the under-representation of women's leadership and the gendered university environment (e.g., Burkinshaw & White, 2017; Luke, 1998; Morley, 2013); b) internationalization of higher education focusing on quantity and numbers, and reinforcing the masculine organization practices and culture (e.g., Baker, 2012; Aiston & Yang, 2017); c) sociocultural stereotypes of gender roles hindering female scholars' development (e.g., Mafarlane & Burg, 2019; Heijstra et al., 2017).

Disciplinary discourse constitutes a critical factor for scholars' intellectual leadership development. Knowledge is created and divided into different academic tribes and territories (e.g., Becher & Trowler, 2001). On the one hand, men scholars dominated most academic disciplines (including those in social sciences, as discussed in Tight, 2008) so the standard of academic excellence is inevitably masculine (Gumport, 2000). As Clark (1986) stressed, novelty and innovation in humanities and social sciences disciplines is sharply distinct from those in natural sciences. In these soft or less "codified" research fields, the recognition of scholarship also depends on researchers' social background and status (Merton, 1979). Hence, knowledge is biased and gendered (e.g., Gilbert, 2010). Women scholars are regarded as less legitimated in some male-type research fields (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2013). Female-type studies are seen as less valuable (e.g., Ecklund et al., 2012; Ruan, 2019), and women scholars are prone to be under stricter scrutiny (Baker, 2012; Lincoln et al., 2012).

As a former colony and a current global city, Hong Kong has been affected by Western and traditional Chinese cultures, which connote different patriarchal legacies (e.g., Luke, 1998; Lee, 2003). With Hong Kong's highly market-oriented and competitive higher education system (Mok, 1999), it is meaningful to investigate scholars' intellectual leadership from the institutional, cultural and gender perspectives. This study tries to address the following research question: How do women scholars develop their intellectual leadership across disciplines at different stages of their academic career?

Theoretical Lenses and Methods

The fusion of three analytical lenses was used. Firstly, Merton's (1968, 1988) framework of cumulative (dis)advantage was put forward to comprehend the skew distribution of recognition and rewards among scholars. It allows me to make sense of female scholars' cumulating advantages despite the possible obstacles brought about by gender biases. Second, Macfarlane's (2013) model of intellectual leadership in four roles—knowledge producer, academic citizen, boundary transgressor, and public intellectual—demonstrates a comprehensive portrait of a professor's functions in two aspects: academic duties and academic freedom. Third, the influences on women's careers and lives by patriarchal legacies in both Western and Confucian heritage culture (e.g., Tu, 1998) were analyzed. How individual women augmented their intellectual leadership in various academic roles was analyzed within the framework.

This qualitative study adopted the multiple-case study approach. By analyzing regional policy documents and academic profiles and conducting semi-structured interviews - qualitative data of twenty-two professors (fifteen in non-STEM and seven in STEM disciplines) were collected. Participants were selected based on three standards: a title of "full professor," indicating their seniority and excellent academic records, individual research impacts (e.g., publications and citations), and their participation in research, mentoring, teaching activities, and service. The qualitative data analysis software NVivo 11 was used. I conducted single-case analysis and cross-case analysis under the

integrated framework. In each case, three themes of data—the perception of intellectual leadership, cumulative advantages, disadvantages and counteraction—were extracted and coded from the angles of institutional, disciplinary, and sociocultural gender roles. These coded themes in all cases were juxtaposed and compared, then categorized according to participants' views on intellectual leadership and their paths to intellectual leadership roles.

Findings and Significance

Findings demonstrate that female scholars' paths to develop intellectual leadership are diverse, saliently linked with their academic domains. Four patterns of women professors' intellectual leadership formation emerged from the study: 1) *strategic gamers*; 2) *persistent navigators*; 3) *unconventional fighters*; and 4) *opportunistic achievers*. The first type of women professors obtained recognitions fast and achieved rapid growth in their early academic career, while the latter three categories of female academics gained rewards and recognition in their middle or senior career stages.

Strategic gamers, mainly in the hard and applied sciences, augmented intellectual leadership in the role of *knowledge producers* in Macfarlane's model. Gaining degrees at the most prestigious universities, they secured important research grants and published high-quality papers at young ages. This group of women professors and the elite scientists in Merton's study were alike. Except for some concerns about the performance-oriented environment in Hong Kong's higher education, they thought the current system was fair for women.

Persistent navigators, mostly in pure and soft disciplines or interdisciplinary fields, usually had a less smooth early academic journey. They regarded the neoliberal practices in academia and institutional authority as detrimental for intellectual development. The achievements of female professors doing "feminine" or "marginal" research might be under-appreciated. Struggling to meet their university's requirements (e.g., publications and grants for the university ranking), they needed to navigate their way to overcome these barriers and protect the space for research that they were

passionate about. Meanwhile, they paid more attention to moral responsibilities as *academic citizens* and accumulated some advantages in this role.

Unconventional fighters, often in newly developed fields or relatively controversial studies, openly criticized managerialism in higher education and gave examples of its negative impacts, especially on women scholars. Prioritizing social impacts (as *public intellectuals*), they were active in institutional leadership roles and made wider connections in the government, industry, and the community (as *boundary transgressors*). Because the goals that they pursued were not readily appreciated, they sometimes experienced hardship and received recognition at a later life stage.

Opportunistic achievers usually worked in applied fields such as education and medical science. Having a strong intellectual curiosity, they entered academia at a mature age with several years of practical experience in their respective fields. They were more apt to balance personal research interests, institutional needs, and family responsibilities. Departmental and institutional leadership opportunities helped them advance in their academic career and accumulate merits in the role of *academic citizens*.

Except for *strategic gamers*, most female professors considered gender a negative attribute for their intellectual leadership development. Women scholars who worked in soft and pure disciplines, non-mainstream research domains, and used qualitative methods experienced the double stress of surviving in Hong Kong's highly competitive academic culture and the gendered university environment. In this Hong Kong-based study, many participants pointed out that being an academic mother significantly slowed their career progress. However, those who were ethnic Chinese were prone to accept the gendered divided labor and regarded family responsibilities as women's individual obstacles, reflecting the influence of modernity and traditional culture in East Asia (Lee, 2003; Jackson et al., 2013).

This study investigated female professors' intellectual leadership development in various academic research areas in Hong Kong's public-funded universities. The research exhibits the intertwined advantages and disadvantages for women faculty members regarding their disciplines, institutions, and gender. It emphasizes that both Western and traditional cultural perspectives on gender can shape women scholars' academic careers in Hong Kong. The managerial and neoliberal practices in Hong Kong higher education have raised various obstacles for intellectual leadership, on top of which patriarchal culture has exerted greater stress for academic women. The study calls for enhancing the academic ecological environment for women and other disadvantaged members.

Author Note

Nian Ruan is a Ph.D. candidate at the Academic Unit of Social Contexts and Policies of Education in the Faculty of Education at the University of Hong Kong. Her research focuses on higher education policies, academic careers, women scholars' leadership, Chinese international student mobility, and teaching and learning in higher education in mainland China and Hong Kong.

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