

# **WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP IN SPORT ADMINISTRATION IN CHINA**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Chinese female athletes have made a substantial contribution with regard to China's rise in status to become a leading sports nation, and a significant example for the emancipation of women in China (Leung, 2003, Dong 2001, Brownell 1999). However, when looking at leadership in sport management and administration, there are still few women at the higher levels (Zhang 1995). As Leung (2003) argues, this phenomenon is, of course, supposed not to occur in a country with a strong commitment to women's emancipation, such as China. Therefore, it is important to try to understand why and how this situation has occurred. Given this context, a study was designed to explore and explain why women are underrepresented at the top levels of sport leadership in sport, and particularly in relation to the Olympic Movement in China. The exploratory study reported in this paper therefore seeks to understand what the career paths of women sports administrators look like; to explain how women gain the work roles in sport management which they do; to gain insight into women's experiences in such roles; and to identify ways in which underlying structures and individual and group tactics and strategies facilitate and / or constrain the advancement of women's leadership.

## **METHODS**

Prior to empirical work being undertaken on women's careers in sport management in China, two systematic reviews of the literature were undertaken (of the literature in English, and of that in Chinese) in order to develop an understanding of the ways in which writers from Anglo-Saxon and Chinese language traditions conceptualise gender disadvantage generically, and more specifically in sporting and management contexts. The findings of the two systematic reviews highlight differences in the way feminist arguments are received and employed in the different language and cultural traditions, and this provides a context within which to evaluate women's career histories in sports administration and management in the upper echelons of the General Administration of Sport and in the Beijing Olympic Games Organising Committee.

Nineteen career histories of individual women were collected by the technique of the Life Story Interview, which allows the interviewees to voice and interpret their own experience in relation to career development. The structure is thus largely dictated by the respondent. All interviews were conducted in Beijing (1-30 April, 2006) and interviewees were drawn from different contexts in terms of level of leadership, function of department / institution, educational background, and sporting histories. Critical Discourse Analysis was employed in the analysis of the interview data in order to evaluate not only the ways in which the women constructed the stories of their own careers, but also the ways in which the relationships between structures and agencies were articulated.

## **RESULTS**

Factors which have emerged in the preliminary analysis of these life stories include the following: The career paths of individual women could be characterised by the social conditions associated with their age cohort. Similarities within age cohort, therefore, identified, albeit with some diversities.

Education was a key element to construct the foundation for future career development. The nature of the subject matter studied at university strongly influenced recruitment to a relevant functional department in sport. However, the choice of field of study at university often influenced by certain key people (e.g. parents,

teacher) and the most popular subjects at that time. Both these opinions and hot choices were associated with family background and ideology of sexual segregation.

Guanxi, the system of 'clientelistic' social relations, plays an influential role in career development. Guanxi relations are the basis of social interaction, especially in business. Partners or supporters will only be gained if appropriately introduced by 'Guanxi' related contacts (Gold, Guthrie, and Wank 2002). Being introduced and connection are important for gaining promotions or assistance in a way which is unrecognisable in the West. Furthermore, Guanxi is a gendered set of relations, in that women are less likely to benefit from such male oriented social networks.

The phenomenon of the glass ceiling is evident in women's leadership at a range of levels and at various points in the career in progress e.g. initial recruitment, further advancement. Selection criteria for posts at a lower level tended to be more clearly specified in terms of expected competencies, but at higher levels where selection took place by reference to less specific or more implicit criteria, women's success in gaining promotion was more limited.

The advancement of women's leadership, both explicitly and implicitly, is a often simply a competition between women themselves rather than with their male counterparts. Women, to some extent, were reported to contribute more to the reproduction of gender segregation than men do.

## **DISCUSSION**

While the emphasis of Communist Party ideology and rhetoric has been on equality of opportunity, there is evidence in women's discourse of the continuing impact of gendered structures on women's experience of sport management and access to senior decision-making roles. It is evident also that such structures are constructed by both men and women in the ways in which gendered expectations of those in certain roles are articulated.

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