

How Female Students Are “Educated” to Retreat from Leadership: An Example from the Chinese Schooling Context

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Abstract

Women’s continued under-representation in leadership positions is well documented. This article asserts that part of the reason for this can be found within educational settings. Chinese educational environments are examined using secondary data analysis, and it is argued that a) the protective approach that teachers adopt towards female students, b) the reserved and unworldly female images exhibited by textbooks, and c) the improper view of leadership that girls tend to develop through classroom-based leadership experiences combine to damage girls’ leadership potential. These mechanisms are usually unintentional and hard to detect, which means that part of the solution lies in promoting the awareness of teachers and educational leaders. Meanwhile, it is important to note that this issue is not merely about equal treatment for both genders; rather, it is broadly linked to our construction of leadership as a concept. Ultimately, the educational setting is expected not only to produce an equal number of “great women” and “great men”, but also—partly through its explorations of how to cultivate the female version of a “great man”—to contribute to updating and advancing the “leadership” concept and practice as a whole.

Keywords: gender; leadership education; sociology of education; Chinese educational context

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Introduction

Both globally and within the Chinese context, women are significantly under-represented in leadership roles. Although some take the perspective that women are socialised against developing leadership attributes very early on in life (Nkomo and Ngambi 2009), there are also sufficient reasons to assume that girls may gradually withdraw from leadership roles as they mature. A number of studies have pointed to the fact that girls are fully capable of assuming leadership roles in childhood (Li et al. 2007; Shin et al. 2004; Sun et al. 2017; Yamaguchi and Maehr 2004), and, in certain cases, being a girl is in fact associated with being a leader (Li et al. 2007). Yet, by the time young women have transitioned into adulthood, they are under-represented in leadership positions (see, for example, Hoyt and Johnson 2011). From this standpoint, women seem to have grown out of leadership.

Several factors that contribute to this phenomenon are worth exploring. Like any social phenomenon, girls' gradual withdrawal from leadership roles may be the result of many causes. Because schools are both where children develop leadership-related qualities (Brungardt 1996) and where they learn to conform to gender norms (Paechter 2007), it is assumed here that part of the answer lies in the educational setting. This article draws on data gathered from existing research in Chinese academia to explore how educational settings, despite the intention to cultivate more female leaders and challenge the status quo, end up preventing female students from taking up leadership roles.

Theoretical Framework

Gender, Gender Roles and Leadership

Gender has been regarded as both an essence and a social construct, with the former emphasising the natural dimension and the latter the environmental and social elements (Giraldo and Colyarb 2012). Although biological factors do play a part in gender identity, gender-relevant behaviours are learned from other members of society (Bandura 1977). From this perspective, gender is more than a fixed, predetermined trait, but is a social construct continuously shaped by external forces. The presentation of a gender role is not expressive of a construct that already exists but is purely performative; it is "real only to the extent that it is performed" (Butler 1988, 527). Gender-related acts performed by people in their everyday lives are essentially what gender is, and the repetition of these acts, risen out of habits or fears of being sanctioned, in turn reinforces the illusion that gender is an entity. This leads to further performances. Fundamentally, gender-related acts exist before gender itself. Without any mystical, pre-existing force, gender acts are both the effect and the cause of the phenomenon.

Based on the perspective that gender is a performance, it is thought that in addition to more direct and explicit factors (for example, not receiving a sufficient educational level required for leadership roles), women are prevented from becoming leaders due to the gender-related roles assigned to and expected of them. Early socialisation compels

young females towards roles such as mothers and wives and directs them away from leadership positions (Nkomo and Ngambi 2009). The attributes associated with being female and those associated with leadership differ, meaning female leaders are faced with role conflicts and may be penalised for violating their gender roles (Baker 2014).

Consistent with this framework, the premise of this article is that female students retreat from leadership not because females essentially lack leadership qualities, but because they are educated to *perform* in a non-leader-like role. The gender-related attitudes and behaviours that girls believe are expected of them, instead of gender *per se*, are responsible for their retreat from leadership.

The Reproductive Effects of Education

On the one hand, one of the basic premises of education is that it can foster positive social change (Dewey 1916). On the other hand, the ineffectiveness of education in this regard is also well documented (Coleman et al. 1966). Many theorists maintain that the education system, rather than breaking the status quo, in fact often leads to the reproduction and reinforcement of the current social order, albeit this is often not planned or intended (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Willis 1979). Within the educational system, because all the standards and actions are already shaped by, and are therefore beneficial to, the privileged, those with a less privileged status are subject to a hidden form of oppression. In this article, it is argued that in educational settings today, although female students are explicitly encouraged to break down the “compliant-girl” stereotypes and take up leadership positions, the potential for them to do so is nonetheless hindered, or even sabotaged, during the educative process that is supposed to empower them. The productive effects of education are also demonstrated here.

Gender, Leadership, and Education within the Chinese Context

In terms of gender and leadership, the Chinese context shares some similarities with the overall global context. Within China, despite there being various institutions that encourage women to develop leadership skills and apply for leadership roles, female leaders are significantly fewer in number compared to their male counterparts, and this holds true at various levels (Dong 2016). Additionally, in addressing the problem of women’s under-representation in leadership, the role of education is greatly emphasised. A series of educational programmes (Du 2013; Zhang, Zheng, and Guo 2013), some of which have been backed by the central government, have been established to cultivate women leaders. These educational programmes have achieved significant results, albeit they mainly address the explicit and ignore the implicit; that is, they regard the role of education purely as directly imparting leadership orientations to women—without touching on the implicit messages inherent in the general educational process.

In relation to the current study, what may be specific to the Chinese context is that explicit messages regarding how females are directly taught to take up (or give up) leadership roles may be augmented and focused on, rendering the implicit part, that is,

how females are inadvertently and unintentionally educated out of leadership, all the more overlooked. Consistent with the Chinese socialist-feminist tradition in which women's welfare is pursued from the top down rather than the bottom up (Croll 2013), scholars have noted that, in seeking to cultivate women leaders through education, the approach that suits China's sociopolitical situation is to seek support from a higher political power within the country (Du 2017; Zhang, Zheng, and Guo 2013). The higher political power is expected to enable circumstances that directly and specifically empower women in leadership roles, which is a valid, situation-appropriate approach for its own sake, and yet reflective of how wider Chinese society has a linear way of thinking in relation to education and women's leadership abilities in general. This not only renders the analysis of implicit messages all the more timely, but also indicates a contrast: the situation in which female students are inadvertently educated out of leadership through everyday practice constitutes a sharp distinction to that in which a large number of educational programmes are designed to empower women so that they can attain and retain leadership roles.

The Current Study

Methodology and Data Source

This article draws data from pre-existing studies, relying mainly on data that was presented in research papers and theses. This choice comes from the nature of research within Chinese academia: most research, including that which draws from the relatively rich data set, does not disclose or share its raw data, and this is even more common in the case of qualitative research. The limited access further renders the re-use of data necessary and justified. Although the data available for secondary analysis is relatively limited, analysis is nevertheless made possible by the existence of a large amount of research that features abundant details. Among the chosen articles are published academic papers that provide illustrated observations and degree dissertations (authorised or approved by formal institutions) that, due to less stringent restrictions on word count, often contain substantial details and in-depth depictions. Articles have been accessed via the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), one of the most comprehensive databases of academic articles written in Chinese, and Muduo Search, a database that includes many dissertations.

Data Selection and Article Selection

Any secondary analysis needs to consider the consistency of the data sources; because researchers are immersed in data and are heavily influenced by broader contexts, secondary analyses based on qualitative studies must pay attention to the original context of each specific data source (Irwin 2019). As the current study aims to investigate the development of women's leadership qualities in Chinese education, the primary criteria for data selection are a) the articles must feature *empirical* research that was conducted within or directly addressed the educational landscape of mainland China, and b) the articles must, either strictly or broadly, address issues that are relevant to the development of leadership skills in female students. To avoid obvious

complications relating to the contexts and positions of researchers, this study narrows the data sources to articles written in Chinese by Chinese scholars. In addition, the data sources must have been published between 2001 and 2020. The year 2001 was chosen as a starting point because that is when gender issues in educational settings were first addressed at a micro level in official documents in China.¹ Forty-eight articles were eventually included for analysis.

Data Analysis and Presentation

Thematic analysis was employed to make sense of the data. The lead researcher followed the six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the data; generation of initial codes; searching for potential themes; reviewing and refining the themes; defining and naming the themes; and producing written accounts of the themes. The first stage (familiarisation with the data) took place during the article screening. The second round, which was accompanied by note-taking that would later help in generating initial codes, occurred after the article screening. After those two rounds, a series of preliminary codes were summarised, listed and repeatedly reviewed. As a result, several patterns emerged: a) the articles as a whole tended to reach the general consensus that female students are discouraged from taking up leadership roles or developing leadership qualities; b) the articles as a whole tended to portray the aforementioned *educated-out-of-leadership* process as unintended, unexpected and hidden (these articles were generally informed by a sociological perspective); c) a wide variety of mechanisms contribute to the *educated-out-of-leadership* process. Using these three patterns as a foundation and building on the researchers' existing knowledge of theories relevant to the topic (for example, the different ways of making sense of *leadership* within academia), three main themes, which are presented in the later sections, were identified. Before these three main themes are presented, the frameworks that inform the development and presentations of the themes are outlined.

Leadership: What It Means and What It Implies

In today's academic world, there are various types of leadership positions and styles, each with its own set of orientations and implications. While the usage of the term varies according to the specific situations being studied, and it is impossible to find a single definition (McCleskey 2014), a review of its usages will nevertheless help us to get at its core meaning.

First, to clarify what leadership is, it is important to trace how it used to be defined, and how it developed over time. As is concluded by Silva (2016), at the earlier stages of human wisdom, the term "leadership" was mostly seen as an individual quality. The ancient thinkers, such as Confucius and Plato, put major emphasis on the characteristics and behaviours of leaders and leadership as a "great man" exercising his powers, as

¹ In 2001, the Chinese government first announced through formal documents that awareness of gender equality should be included in school curricula (The State Council of China 2001).

represented by Carlyle et al. ([1841] 2013), who maintained this idea, even in the nineteenth century (Silva 2016). It was only after World War II that the term transcended the domain of individual traits and began to be viewed as a social process (Silva 2016). When this change occurred, the interaction between the leader and the follower, rather than the leader himself, became the central focus. For instance, Tannenbaum, Weschler, and Massarik ([1961] 2013, 24) define leadership as the “interpersonal influence, exercised in a situation, and directed, through the communication process, toward the attainment of a specified goal or goals”.

However, even as the view of leadership was transformed to be more social-oriented and the importance of individual leaders seemed to be downplayed, it is imperative for us to note that “the leader” never disappeared; instead, the concept re-emerged in the hidden form of “exerting influence”. The above-mentioned definition by Tannenbaum, Weschler and Massarik ([1961] 2013), along with those offered by other post-War scholars (Stogdill 1950; Zaleznik 1977), used the term “influence” to characterise leadership, and the literature of the last decades continued to describe leadership as an exercise of social influence (Murphy 2011). Even in the cases where both the leader and the exercise of influence are not mentioned in a literal sense, such as phrasing leadership as “taking responsibility and initiative for the functions that must be fulfilled” (Sun et al. 2017, 213), their presence is nevertheless implied. The more social-oriented views of leadership do not dismiss leaders as less significant; rather, they modify the previous version of leadership—that leaders have a series of fixed, isolated qualities—and are more involved in social action. Following this line of thinking, the leader and the influence upon others are two irreplaceable elements of the leadership concept. Originally, leadership emerged as an individual; then the leader began to exert influence.

So what does all of this imply about leadership? First, leadership, in its most primal form, exhibits the image of an individual who, rendered visible by his personal qualities, stands out markedly against the crowd. This ancient version of a superior man condescending over the mediocre masses is out of sync with modern society, but it represents the roots of leadership and therefore says a lot about it. The first thing our ancestors noticed about leadership was the leader’s individual traits, which must have been dazzling enough to feature the whole concept. To lead, there must be people who are out there to be seen, who distinguish themselves from the rest and step onto the stage, either literally or metaphorically, for a short period of time or for their lifetime. Second, to constitute leadership, the man who successfully stood out must not stop there, but continue to influence, that is, effect changes among, the group. To do so requires extending a part of one’s property (ideas, goals, action plans, etc.) onto other people, which means that, rather than sitting in the confines or comfort of his own territory, the leader must look outward and make connections with the outer domains. To sum up, leadership implies that people (as leaders) stand out and extend/expand outward.

The above is not meant to introduce a cynical or backward view of leadership; it is merely an attempt to establish the more fundamental elements of a concept that bears a

vast range of representations today. In contemporary times, there have been numerous proposals for redefining leadership (Blackmore 1989; Levitt 2010; Perreault 2001), which in a way serve to instill a certain amount of humanism into the concept and move it away from the ancient “great man” version. However, the very act of calling for redefinition indicates that the more humanistic views, though perhaps starting to gain ground, are not yet a reality. It is important to note that the intention here is to gain insights about what leadership was/is likely to be, rather than to dictate what leadership should be. Apart from this, of equal importance is that the seemingly backward view of leadership as presented above, albeit lacking in humanistic elements, is not meant to be the exact opposite of the modern version. Claiming that to be leaders people have to stand out and exert influence in outer domains does not imply that leadership positions are in any way permanent, or that there can only be one leader in a certain context. Nor does it mean that the relationship dimension of leadership is unimportant, or that the acceptance of followers is not of vital significance. Leaders must distinguish themselves from others and exert their power; whether they do this in a dictatorial or democratic manner is not inherently relevant here. Two elements are highlighted and deemed fundamental, but this does not deny the possibility that other elements can be added to constitute an improved form a leadership.

The Seeds of Leadership: How One Develops into a Leader

The seeds of leadership take root early in life (Murphy 2011). To develop into a leader, one needs both baseline characteristics and learning experience (Murphy 2011; Popper and Mayselless 2007).

Baseline Characteristics

A series of personality traits have been shown to be associated with developing leadership skills. One of the most frequently mentioned characteristics is extraversion, with much research (Antonakis, Cianciolo, and Sternberg 2004; Ilies, Gerhardt, and Le 2004; Judge et al. 2002; Reichard et al. 2011) showing that being extraverted is linked with assuming leadership roles. In fact, certain findings (Judge et al. 2002) even indicate that extraversion may be the single most consistent predictor associated with leader emergence. Additionally, a longitudinal study has proved that there is a significant relationship between extraversion earlier in life and leadership emergence afterwards (Guerin et al. 2011). What exactly is extraversion? As proposed by Jung ([1921] 2009), it is an outward orientation of energy flow, enabling people to put their focus on the outer world. Present-day psychologists deem it to be based on the approach/withdrawal dimension (Guerin et al. 2011), implying that extraverted people welcome, rather than retreat from, outer stimuli. Thus, it is perhaps not hard to understand that traits such as openness to experience, self-confidence, proactive orientation, caring for others—which are largely in line with the implication of extraversion—are all well-documented personality traits related to becoming leaders (Popper and Mayselless 2007).

Besides personality traits, another important aspect of leadership characteristics is the motivation to lead (Avolio and Vogelgesang 2011; Murphy 2011), which is argued to have its roots in childhood (Gottfried et al. 2011; Popper and Mayseless 2007). Motivation towards leadership includes several aspects (Chan and Drasgow 2001), and empirical research has indicated that only the intrinsic motivation to lead—namely, the enjoyment of leadership *per se* instead of external considerations—is a predictor of taking up leadership later in life (Gottfried et al. 2011).

How do we understand the above baseline characteristics in relation to leader development? Extraversion, confidence, and proactiveness put a person into a central, visible position, and their openness to experience, as well as the tendency to act with much energy and zeal as part of being extraverted, contributes to their expansion and asserting influence. Care for others, while considered a much more delicate quality, is also a form of moving outward and making a difference in the outer domain. All these qualities combine to fit the prototypical image of a leader—that is, as discussed above, a person who is inclined to stand out against the crowd and expand themselves. Other than this, the intrinsic motivation implies that a person is not thrown into this situation accidentally; they instead actively make it happen and relish the experience of leading.

Learning Experiences

While baseline characteristics provide the foundation, learning experiences are what trigger them into action. Both vicarious learning and experiential learning are crucial in terms of leadership development (Popper and Mayseless 2007).

Vicarious Learning

Vicarious learning (that is, social learning) refers to the learning that originates from the observation and imitation of a role model (Bandura 1977). It is argued that leaders or leadership behaviours that we encounter earlier in life shape our leadership-related practices later (Adler 2011; Popper and Mayseless 2007). Also, it is important to note that vicarious learning is not limited to observing people in real life (Kazdin 1976); symbolic models, such as the figures in books, also count (Decker 1986), and even fairy tales or animated characters can help children understand leadership-related concepts (Murphy 2011). One of the implications of developing leadership through vicarious experience is that serious consideration should be given to what the role models are like, as well as to the modelling processes (Popper and Mayseless 2007).

Experiential Learning

The experiential learning of leadership refers to the learning that occurs in real-world leadership experiences. This does not only happen in formal workplaces or in adulthood; school settings as well as family, peer groups, and communities usually offer young children good opportunities to try out leadership (Brungardt 1996; Popper and Mayseless 2007). Experiential learning is highly relevant to the development of leaders because it gives feedback, the accumulation of which has much to do with one's

leadership self-efficacy (Popper and Maysseless 2007). In terms of this, it is proposed that attention should be paid to the leadership intervention programmes provided for children and adolescents (Murphy 2011).

Educated to Retreat: How Educational Settings Hinder Females' Leadership Development

In educational settings, both the baseline characteristics that girls tend to develop and the learning experiences (vicarious and experiential) girls usually have contribute to girls' eventual withdrawal from leadership roles.

The Dark Side of Privilege: Living Behind a Protective Shield Discourages the Development of Leadership Qualities

It is proposed that, in school settings, children are generally expected to establish themselves not as boys and girls, but overwhelmingly in the institutionally guided role of students (Paechter 2007). This applies perfectly to the Chinese classroom setting, where academic achievements and discipline are paramount. This means that, within the school system, girls will not be degraded as long as they prove themselves to be qualified students. In fact, similar to the West, Chinese scholars have begun to argue that the nature of present-day educational systems works to girls' advantages (Li 2010; Zhao and Sun 2010). However, it is imperative to note that girls gain advantages because they happen to be the students the system prefers, not because they are girls. Gender itself is not a privilege, nor does it inherently imply any; either through the willingness to conform, or through the capability to earn higher grades, girls have earned, instead of having simply received, their privileges.

If there is any gender-based privilege, it is that girls are well cared for and protected. A variety of studies point to the fact that teachers take girls' feelings much more into account compared to boys' feelings (Chen 2004; Huang-fu 2014; Kong 2012; Li 2013; Lv 2013). In one study, teachers reported that when arranging seats, they are fully conscious of the need to be considerate of girls' needs, while with boys this does not matter much (Kong 2012). In another study, teachers admitted that they avoid criticising girls if possible, since they are not deemed as tough as boys are; also, the researcher observed that in classroom settings, if girls fail to answer a question correctly, teachers are more likely to give feedback in a gentle and reassuring way (Huang-fu 2014).

While there is no denying that the awareness of the need to protect students is, in itself, a beautiful thing, the fact remains that the protection enjoyed by girls alone functions as a kind of differentiation mechanism and has certain unpleasant implications (Chen 2004; Huang-fu 2014; Kong 2012; Li 2013; Liu 2005; Lv 2013). One of these is that girls tend to grow more fragile in character (Kong 2012); another less examined but equally noteworthy effect is that teachers may develop a preference towards boys because they are viewed as able to be criticised and easier to deal with (Huang-fu 2014). In accordance with this, it is claimed that in the teaching practice teachers tend to be polite

and avoidant towards girls, whereas with boys the interaction is much more natural (Shi 2004). Following this line of thinking, the worldwide well-documented phenomenon that boys receive more attention than girls is perhaps not only about boys needing the attention while girls do not—it may well be that, in an effort to avoid hurtful interactions, teachers withhold negative attention or attention that has the potential to be interpreted as negative by girls.

But even negative attention is, in essence, a kind of attention, which is at times preferable to no attention at all. Any form of attention positions the person who receives it in a central state, thus highlighting and rendering marked their existence. It conveys the message that one is important, while offering the chance of practising being visible, of being seen. Living behind this protective shield, girls end up losing quality opportunities to observe and evaluate the experiences of being the focus of attention.

Furthermore, in real-life circumstances, it is hard to tell whether “negative attention” is in fact a double-edged sword or a downright favour. An “ethnographic study” (Chen 2004) recorded an episode that took place in a Chinese primary school classroom in which the teacher needed a “negative example” to highlight a point. It was an example of a mathematics question that contained pitfalls, and it was expected that the unfortunate “negative example” would hopefully make all the typical mistakes in front of the whole class and render the teacher’s subsequent teaching more impressive. The teacher looked around the classroom, thinking it was better not to embarrass a girl, and picked a boy. The boy played the role perfectly, with the teacher jokingly scoffing at him, and the whole class kindly laughing at him. The researcher maintained that this process greatly enhanced the bonds between the teacher and the boy, and thus the protection imposed upon girls is not necessarily a privilege, but rather a deprivation of more diversified interaction with teachers. To take this a step further, for girls it is not only bonding opportunities with teachers that are being taken away; it is also the chance of getting out of a comfort zone and being fully exposed—the chance of putting oneself out there to be seen, as well as to observe what will happen next, be it good or bad.

The “protective mindset” towards girls also displays itself in less obvious forms, with equally disturbing implications. One is that, when instructing a boy, teachers are much more likely to withhold the correct answer and let the boy struggle on his own, whereas with a girl, the correct answer may be offered directly or in advance (Li 2013; Lv 2013). Girls are blessed with a sense of security during this process, but also receive implicit encouragement to simply sit still and wait for help. For the boys, a spirit of exploration is cultivated, albeit only through less direct ways, such as solving problems in textbooks, whereas for girls, such chances rarely exist. And in terms of building a spirit of exploration, an episode in a Chinese primary school recorded by an ethnographic study shows that teachers believe *Robinson Crusoe* is a must-read for boys because they are supposed to be daring enough to take risks (Meng 2009). When the researcher suggested that girls should also be daring and tough, one of the teachers replied, “of course girls can read it too, it’s just, for boys, it is a must-read” (Meng 2009, 72).

Boys, in educators' perceptions, should grow up to be Crusoe, with the spirit to conquer a desolate island and the charisma to be a public hero. Girls, on the other hand, are better off living sheltered lives. Female students are, of course, not excluded from reading Crusoe's story, but it does not really belong to them. They are in nature the witnesses, not a potential part of the great deeds. Taking a less metaphorical perspective, it can be argued that although every student is encouraged to pursue outstanding performance due to the great intensity of competition in the educational sphere, girls are still educated to do this in a less "adventurous" and more "introverted" manner than are boys. Even when boys and girls compete within the same system, it is implied that girls should stay demurely in their inner world while boys go out into the field and leave a mark on others.

Protection is, by its nature, a restriction. Some older female students are more conscious of this and clearly equate being a girl in school with being restricted (Jiao 2007). Others may be less aware of this, but phenomena such as girls behaving much more passively than boys (Liu 2015) and girls refraining more from answering questions in fear of making mistakes (Chen 2004) indicate that the privilege of being protected has turned against them. Even in the intellectual domain, female students tend to act "narrowly", often not because they are genuinely narrow-minded but because they deem it the right persona to take on (Jiao 2007). However, this does not mean that these approaches towards girls do not nurture preferred behaviour. An episode recorded in a primary school (Chen 2004) depicts a scene from a competition in which, when boys answered questions, the girls observed quietly, and when it was the girls' turn, the boys went out of their way to interrupt them. The girls demonstrated good manners and, in this case, we certainly want the boys to learn from the girls; however, the boys who were ill-behaved nevertheless demonstrated the inclination to fight for the central stage, seeking to alter the setting through their own actions. This mode of acting will not make decent leaders; yet it nevertheless fits the prototype and exhibits certain potential. The girls, on the contrary, stayed within the confines of the rules and probably counted on the teachers to stop the boys—it is difficult to imagine that a future leader will grow out of this type of behaviour.

The Disempowering Messages from Textbooks: Female Figures Are Not Prone to Leadership

The phenomenon that women are under-represented in textbooks is frequently discussed in China (Chen 2009; Feng 2008; Hu 2005; Li 2011; Li 2012). In terms of leadership-related issues, females are put in a disadvantageous position in a variety of ways.

One of the most frequently mentioned issues is that women appear less often in textbooks than do men. For example, one study shows that the percentage of female figures in senior-school Chinese-language textbooks ranges from 25.8% to 34.3% (Li 2011). Superficially, these facts are irrelevant to leadership issues. However, all the chosen images, negative ones included, emphasise the subjects' genders. Even an evil character possesses the virtue of having done something that renders himself noteworthy, not to mention that the majority of images in textbooks display people with admirable

qualities. People tend to identify with and compare themselves to people of the same gender (see Miller 1982 and Wood 1989 cited in Lockwood 2006), which means that boys are very likely to sense their own presence through textbooks, while girls are reduced to being the witnesses of other people's actions. If girls do not have enough chances to recognise themselves in the great deeds of role models, they will not be reminded that they, too, are meant to get out of their comfort zone and achieve something.

Furthermore, there is the more directly relevant issue that leader figures in textbooks tend to work against females. First, in both history and Chinese-language textbooks, the number of female leaders is significantly smaller than that of male leaders (Hu 2005; Li 2011). This is somewhat understandable considering that the material in textbooks is limited by real-world situations (Hu 2005); historically, women indeed constitute a much smaller proportion of leaders, and quality articles depicting female leadership may not exist in abundance. However, the fact that it is understandable does not deny the unfavourable consequences it causes. Second, even in the rare cases where women are leaders, the ways they are portrayed tend to be less than pleasant. Females' leadership practices are typically narrated in a negative tone, with derogatory phrases and depictions of adverse consequences (Feng 2008; Hu 2005). Due to a lack of available evidence, it cannot be decided whether this is more a reflection of reality or a result of bias; yet, in either case, the fact remains that female learners are not likely to feel inspired by the texts.

Apart from leader figures, those who excel in other fields or in other ways can also trigger a desire to make a difference in the world, and they are related to leadership development. In terms of this aspect, females are again, and perhaps more overwhelmingly, put in a disadvantaged position. Not only are there far fewer outstanding female figures in textbooks, but also, when females are glorified, they receive their glory not as fighters or professionals—as males do—but as mothers, wives, and daughters (Li 2011). Moreover, it is interesting to note that when the great female scientist, Madame Curie, makes her way into Chinese textbooks, her role as a mother and wife, rather than that of a professional, becomes the focus of the narrative (Li 2012). While men are depicted as busy conquering the outer world, it is implied that females' way of self-realisation is through household affairs. Of course, as an individual choice, the latter mode of living is equally applaudable, yet the fact remains that concentrating only on the family domain is hardly what we should instil in people if we are to cultivate future leaders.

Occasionally, there are female figures who take part in revolutions. However, in one case, it is obvious that the text portrays female characters as in need of males' guidance and persuasion to participate, and their love for their country is more of an extension of their love for their husbands than a broader concern for public welfare (Li 2011). In another case, although the female fighter's image is by itself intense, she is nevertheless

commemorated, and therefore represented, by a male writer.² In reaction to these examples, it is lamentable that when male and female figures appear in the text, the male is virtually always the dominant party (Chen 2009).

And what about the general image of female figures? It is noted that females are overwhelmingly portrayed as victims, either victimised by men or by the social order (Li 2011). This is good in the sense that females' subordinated position is highlighted and will hopefully trigger some thoughts from learners; but the tearful, vulnerable images still give out the wrong impression in terms of fostering leadership qualities. Also, there is the interesting phenomenon that, in one case where the female victim has the courage to articulate the injustice she has suffered, she is only able to pinpoint her mother-in-law as the perpetrator (Li 2011), implying that even when females try to defy current orders and effect change, they are only doing it in a narrower way—by going against a (female) family member.

With the above being said, it is incorrect to assume that females are not at all appreciated in textbooks. On the contrary, females are frequently celebrated as innocent, pure, and authentic (Li 2011; Li 2012). While these features are sincerely worshipped by men and may have a more general aesthetic value to learners, the downside is that they create the myth that the attractiveness of females comes from their inclination to stay out of worldly affairs. How, then, will girls begin to want to assume leadership when they believe they are admired for not having a care in the world?

The Counter-Effectiveness of Leadership Experiences: More Training Does Not Equal Better Future Chances

As for leadership practices in classrooms, it is not uncommon to see girls outshining boys in terms of possessing stronger motivation and earning a larger number of leadership roles (Wang 2003). However, this does not necessarily mean that girls have gained any leadership-related advantages.

When teachers “employ” girls to be peer supervisors, they mainly take the perspective of “functionality”—that is, they expect girls to substantially contribute to maintaining classroom order. On the contrary, when dealing with boys, the educative value of leadership often becomes the focus. In one study (Wang 2003), teachers generally deemed girls to be better class monitors because they are able to discipline themselves, indicating the expectation that girls as small leaders should play a real part; however, when girls were not present and there were only boys, the teacher tried to give out the leadership opportunity as a kind of reward—the one with the best behaviour could be the class monitor. In another study (Liu 2015), when girls were no longer regarded as competent, teachers turned to the boys as a matter of course. The implication of this is

² This refers to the article, “In Memoriam of Miss Liu Hezhen”, by the Chinese male writer Lu Xun. It is included in several versions of Chinese-language textbooks.

that girls may see leadership as a service-oriented activity, while boys may be inclined to consider it a temptation, a form of hard-won respect.

Following this line of thinking, it is perhaps not hard to understand that girls will easily give up leadership opportunities. A senior-high-school teacher (Cai 2006) recorded an interesting episode that took place in her class. Upon entering the twelfth grade, the female peer supervisors handed in resignation letters almost simultaneously. The teacher talked to them, and it turned out that the reason they decided to quit was that they wanted to focus more on their studies. A similar mentality appeared in another study (Gong 2012), with a girl who declined the class-monitor post claiming that she worried more activities would distract her, and that even if she was not class monitor, she would still like to help others. For girls, leadership roles seem to mean nothing other than selfless dedication, with no inherent pleasure, no benefits *per se*. Without an intrinsic motivation, a mere sense of commitment is not enough to keep things going, especially when schoolwork grows more demanding over time.

Moreover, the fact that girls are somewhat “over-represented” in lower classes may not mean anything substantial because the whole “classroom leadership system” is, by its nature, unhealthy. It is ultimately the preferences of teachers, rather than democratic systems, that determine the leader; accordingly, to become a leader, the willingness to conform outweighs other aspects (Du 2013). Also, because in some cases the class monitors are directly assigned by teachers, those who cherish the ambition will have to continually discipline themselves and wait to be discovered (Li 2016). Rather than striving to be active, confident, and charismatic, the potential leaders learn to restrict themselves, please others, and wait for recognition. In one study, the long-time class monitor (a female) was exactly portrayed as rule-abiding and lacking in verve (Li 2016). Under the current dynamic of classroom settings, girls may receive leadership roles because they are tractable and well-behaved. Yet what about years later, when the dynamic and atmosphere begin to change? It is hard, after all, to imagine an adult nominated as a leader simply due to their well-behaved nature. That is to say, superficially girls are blessed with more leadership-related experiences than boys in early-year school settings, but upon closer scrutiny, those experiences do not really lead to real-life leadership opportunities in the future.

Conclusion and Implications

The study investigated how, in ways that are not intended, female students are held back from becoming leaders. In terms of baseline characteristics, the protective mode that educators adopt towards girls deprives these students of their chances to develop attributes such as extraversion and openness. In terms of vicarious learning experiences, the role models illustrated by textbook analyses not only convey the message that females seldom become leaders, but also that females in general are less visible, less accomplished, and are better off retreating into a reserved and limited mode of being. As for experiential learning processes, while girls enjoy more leadership experiences, what they learn from these activities is that leadership is wholly about self-sacrifice

without a trace of intrinsic pleasure, and that the right way to earn a leadership role is to stay compliant and passive. All these observations suggest that girls are educated to be reserved, passive, and unmotivated, which is basically the opposite of the stand-out-and-assert-influence image that is typical of leaders.

The most obvious and self-evident implication of this is that educational leaders and teachers should be aware of these mechanisms and try to modify their behaviour accordingly. Instead of being particularly protective towards girls, they should encourage them to step out of their comfort zone and influence others. Instead of simply choosing the most compliant girl to be the class monitor so that she can be of some help, teachers should recognise the educative value of this issue and turn it into an opportunity for students of each gender to develop a proper understanding of leadership. Textbooks, of course, need to be revised, and if this takes too much time, teachers should at least make explicit to pupils the biased nature of the teaching materials.

But it goes further than that. While girls are educated to be lacking in extraversion and openness, which are crucial to the “great man” image, the way they are treated may at the same time endow them with certain advantages. For instance, living behind a protective shield, despite its harmful effects, promotes inner security and reduced aggression, which may prove beneficial or even vital in the course of exercising power. Other than this, girls’ tendency to view leadership as a selfless dedication instead of a self-serving opportunity, although increasing their chances of quitting, once addressed properly can turn into a powerfully humanistic force. Advantages such as these, though not the main focus here, need to be recognised in relation to leadership. As stated previously, while the willingness and capability to stand out and actively exert influence are fundamental, leadership is not necessarily limited to that. The need for an improved form of leadership calls for new elements, and females’ characteristics may contribute to our ideas of what those new elements can be. One broader implication of this is that, to train more female leaders, it may well be our whole construction of leadership, rather than merely the characteristics of females, that should be changed (Levitt 2010; Lips 2000). Another implication, which is more relevant to the educational field, is that not only should girls be treated equally so that they have equal access to the “great man” mode, but also how the current treatment of girls can help update the “great man” image should be explored and taken advantage of for the benefit of all people, as well as for the advancement of the leadership field. If the protective approach contains certain merits, rather than totally withdrawing it from girls so that they can be tougher and more leader-like, we should apply parts of it to both genders and see whether this cultivates improved, more empathetic leaders. It is hoped that education will produce “great women” as well as “great men”. It is also hoped that the “great woman” is not merely a replica of the “great man”, and by cultivating “great women”, something new can be integrated into the concept and practice of leadership.

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