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‘Women Managers’
Workplace Relationships:
Reflections of Cultural
Perceptions of Gender’

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Abstract

This paper is based on comparative survey research of more than 400 men and women managers and qualitative interviews with 45 women managers in Hong Kong and Britain. The study's findings show that although women managers in Hong Kong and Britain encountered many of the same circumstances in their careers, they experienced, interpreted and responded to them rather differently. This paper argues that a part of the explanation for different interpretations and responses to the same experiences can be found in the opposing meanings given to the notion of equality which are related to the social understanding of gender differences. This paper examines how differences in the meaning of equality and in the relationship between men and women can be seen manifested in women's workplace relationships.

Introduction

Existing literature on women in management portrays very specific images of successful women. For example, White, Cox and Cooper (1992) describe the successful woman as likely to be an only child, or have an elder brother, and to have had difficulties bonding with their mothers. White et al suggest that whatever the parental / child relationships were they served to "facilitate the development of a separate sense of identity, or a 'positional identity', which is based on the individual's abilities and attributes" (1992; 213). However, these are accounts of successful western women managers which, it is argued here, cannot be applied to women managers universally. In order to examine the variation of experiences, this paper compares women managers' interpersonal encounters at work in Hong Kong and in Britain. It is argued that in Hong Kong workplace relationships are highly gendered and that whilst the innate differences perceived to exist between men and women can be a hindrance to the career they can also be a support. The Hong Kong women felt that whilst undoubtedly being female hindered them in both recruitment and promotion, 'gentlemen' would also avoid giving them a 'hard time' thus making their working lives in some ways 'easier'. The women expressed annoyance at the overt discrimination that existed but accepted that 'life works in this way' and that they benefited from the system that simultaneously disadvantaged them. Likewise in Britain, it was also seen that being female made promotion and recruitment to senior levels harder than it was at the lower levels and certainly harder than it was for men. However, in Britain this was a major bone of contention and taken as evidence of continued discrimination, of a labour market organised to favour men and a work system the women felt they were constantly fighting against.

This paper argues that whilst similar events may be encountered in the two cultural environments these are interpreted and responded to rather differently. Thus the paper questions the appropriateness of problematising patriarchy and inequality as if they were experienced uniformly and questions whether one culture should impose a particular understanding of oppression upon another that does not identify these issues as problematic.

Following a brief explanation of the methodology used the paper examines the relationship between men and women in Hong Kong and Britain as the context for the subsequent discussion of workplace relationships and their meaning within women managers' working lives.

Methodology

The study comprised two distinct stages. The first stage explored, through a questionnaire, the careers, attitudes and backgrounds of men and women managers. A postal questionnaire was distributed in Britain whilst in Hong Kong a telephone questionnaire was conducted in Chinese. The second stage consisted of qualitative interviews with a sub sample of women questionnaire respondents in order to examine their understandings, explanations and interpretations of their own careers and career choices.

One thousand five hundred managers in Britain (both male and female) were contacted by questionnaire, 288 responded (19 percent response rate). Nationalities other than English, Scottish and Welsh were excluded from the sample resulting in 237 usable responses, a final response rate of 16 percent. In Hong Kong a random sample of 251 male and female managers were contacted by telephone. One hundred and sixty four agreed to be interviewed. Individuals were selected for the analysis only if they were Hong Kong Chinese (so excluding expatriate managers). 142 met these criteria, representing a response rate of 65 percent.

Two issues require discussion before we proceed. The first issue concerns the low British response rate and the second concerns the different methods of data collection used in Hong Kong and Britain. The low response rate in Britain, although disappointing, was not surprising. There was no means of follow up as the questionnaires were distributed via an Institute of Management (IM) newsletter resulting in the researcher not having access to individual names and addresses. Consequently subsequent reminders to chase non responses were not possible. In addition the sample had recently been involved in an IM survey (Coe 1992) on a similar subject and therefore might be suffering 'questionnaire fatigue'. Although the self selected response might collect particular types of respondents and exclude others this should not pose problems for the results as the survey makes no claims to be representative. Rather the intention of the survey is to compare women in similar situations in the two societies in order to make comparisons of the two cultures and between men and women in each. Table 1 provides descriptive profiles of the two samples.

TABLE 1: DESCRIPTIVE PROFILE OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE SAMPLES

		Britain n=237 %	Hong Kong n=142 %
Sex	Male	49	42
	Female	51	58
Marital Status	Single	19	36
	Married/living as married	75	63
	Divorced/Separated	6	1
Parental Status	No children	44	58
	Children	56	42
Educational Level	Secondary	30	16
	Post secondary	34	30
	Degree	21	34
	Postgraduate	15	20
Organisational size	less than 50 employees	10	13
	51 - 500 employees	33	29
	501 - 1000 employees	11	21
	more than 1000 employees	46	43
Sector	Public	33	10
	Private	77	90

Although the low response rate demands cautious interpretation of the results and can lead to only tentative suggestions, the low response rate should not be seen as invalidating the study. Furthermore, the second stage provides the opportunity to add qualitative depth to the quantitative results by establishing what the figures really mean in terms of the women's lives. Therefore the questionnaire results are used to gain a broader picture of the patterns of attitudes but the actual depth of understanding and the meaning for women's lives is gained through the qualitative second stage.

Different methods of data collection were used in Hong Kong on the advice of local researchers who suggested that a response rate of one to five percent could be expected from a postal survey where there was no particular incentive to return the questionnaires and no means of follow up. Telephone interviews enabled a higher response to be achieved. Therefore although different methods were used this was the only practical means of obtaining similar information on the broad patterns of attitudes held by men and women.

Those selected for the qualitative interviews were all the female questionnaire respondents willing and available to be interviewed during the periods designated for the research. Twenty two in depth interviews were conducted in Britain and twenty three in Hong Kong. The interview focused on the women's narratives of their careers; what they saw as the sources of influence and hindrance; the particular events and experiences encountered and the reasoning behind the choices they had made. In the following sections the findings of the study and their implications are discussed. In order to maintain anonymity the names of the interviewees have been changed.

The meaning of equality and perceptions of the differences in the social roles of men and women

The more traditional environment of Hong Kong suggests that we might expect there to be greater distinction between the social roles attributed to being a man and those attributed to being a woman than there is in Britain. Perceptions in Hong Kong are that women are more likely to have the temperament necessary to be full time housewives than men to be house husbands, and that women are less likely to make as good senior managers as men (e.g. Chow 1993, Siu and Chui 1993). There is a perception (including amongst the managerial community) that men and women are quite different in terms of personalities and abilities. Despite these differences between the sexes, in a recent study Luk found that 82% of a sample of 142 Hong Kong women managers believed that women did not have to act like men in order to succeed (Luk, 1993). Luk's research supports this paper's central argument that in Hong Kong equality and difference do not seem to be incompatible.

The British sample's perceptions of men and women were quite different from those evident in Hong Kong. The perception was that as a society became more 'civilised' and 'advanced', then equality would be greater. Equality to the British sample meant, not simply 'of equal value', but the same, no difference. Apart from biological differences, men and women, in terms of temperament, personality, skills and abilities, would be as likely to be similar to each other as they would to any other person of the same sex. Equality to these women meant having the opportunity to do everything that men do. Underlying this belief is the idea that basically "men and women are all from one race" "we're all human". Table 2 illustrates the British perception that biology is less of a determinant of differences between men's and women's capabilities and the Hong Kong view that these innate differences are more important.

The perceived differences between men and women and the subsequent relationship between them is crucial to this study. If women's ideal is that they should be treated and behave exactly as men (as if they were men) and so have the same chances, opportunities, stresses and pressures, then, if men are believed to be favoured in recruitment or promotion practice, women understandably feel aggrieved. This research shows that in Hong Kong, however, it is accepted that the nature of society and the nature of men and women's roles within it mean that preferential treatment for men will sometimes occur. What this means for women is not that they should enter into conflict with men, or with those promoting them, but that they must try harder.

TABLE 2: QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS: THE SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS AND STEREOTYPES OF WOMEN IN WORK AND SOCIETY

	Britain n = 237 %			Hong Kong n = 142 %		
	total	male	female	total	male	female
There are some occupations to which women are suited but men are not	a: 63 d: 27	: 74 : 18	: 52 : 36	: 86 : 11	: 85 : 15	: 87 : 9
There are some occupations to which men are more suited than women	a: 67 d: 26	: 80 : 15	: 55 : 37	: 92 : 7	: 90 : 10	: 93 : 5
Management tends to require skills that men have more often than women	a: 14 d: 79	: 16 : 72	: 12 : 85	: 47 : 48	: 55 : 40	: 42 : 54
For various reasons women tend not to make as good senior managers as men	a: 13 d: 73	: 16 : 61	: 10 : 85	: 51 : 44	: 55 : 43	: 48 : 44

a = agree

d = disagree

“At first in our organisation it was quite hard because mainly in our Chinese style man is more important than woman. In Chinese culture our organisation is quite traditional style in this. So you want to build up your role to top level men need to give 20% effort to do the job. I must pay 30 or 40% on that job and that job must be much better than the men. If you can only do the very same they will give the recognition to the man not the woman”

(Kit chun - Hong Kong)

Whilst far from ideal for women this is accepted as ‘the way life works’. This has been further illustrated in earlier research in Hong Kong. Luk (1993) found that 40% of women managers agreed or strongly agreed that “women should be more competent and work harder to keep pace with men” (Luk 1993).

Women in Hong Kong expect to be treated differently from men. They expect to be treated like a ‘lady’. It is expected that ‘gentlemen’ treat ‘ladies’ with respect. Women managers in Hong Kong expect to be valued but they do not wish to be treated like men. Men and women were in agreement to a large degree as to what constituted ‘ladylike’ behaviour and what the behaviour of a ‘gentleman’ was.

“If your superior is a guy and you are a girl I think they tend to make things easier for you...They never try to argue with you if it is not a critical issue, they try to make it pass. Maybe they are gentlemen”

(Man Yee - Hong Kong)

“Most, at least the supervisors, the managers, the chef are all men because of the working environment. Because working in a kitchen, in a Chinese kitchen is extremely difficult. All the year through the temperature in a Chinese kitchen is always around 40 to 50 degrees Celsius. I think for western style it’s different but we like hot food so we cannot offer any air conditioning in the kitchen, in a Chinese kitchen no way. Otherwise the food gets cold very quickly. So the temperature is always at 40 to 50 degrees in the kitchen. It’s... no way for a women to work there it’s impossible. ...I think they [men] physically they can stand the kind of temperature, the kind of working environment.”

(Hau Ling - Hong Kong)

The Hong Kong women managers suggested that employers believe work is a choice, a pastime for women whereas for men, as the pillar of the family, work is essential. If a man does not work the family will have no income. If a woman does not earn an income then she still has her husband to support her.

“For example in selecting and promoting an executive when two possible candidates are of equal basis the management would tend to select the male because in their mind a man is the pillar of the family and then working women are just taking it for a pastime. He, the management, would think that with good academic qualifications a woman will be married to a good man with good social standing. So you should provide more opportunity to a man rather than a woman because she’s well taken care of already by her family...because the man is of course the master of the household. He has to take care of the whole family.”

(Siu Ping - Hong Kong)

These different interpretations have emerged from cultural, practical and historical roots. In Hong Kong’s collective culture self identity is formed through contact with a group, the family and close family friends (Bond 1991, Redding 1990). Having access to a wide variety of skills and abilities means that the family unit is best equipped for survival. Varied roles therefore may be beneficial to survival and so differences will be valued (Hofstede 1984). In Britain’s more individualistic environment, the focus on the individual results in value being determined by individual achievements and abilities. Consequently if particular abilities or characteristics are lacking then that individual may be viewed as less valuable. Therefore for women to be seen as being of equal value to men they must demonstrate that they have the same abilities as men. Thus we can see the cultural logic behind the evolution of particular attitudes to gender roles and equality.

As a consequence of the relative agreement between men and women on gender roles in Hong Kong (illustrated in table 2), the women were not ‘fighting’ for contested ground, which seemed to typify how the British women felt about their situation. Contrasting with Hong Kong, the British responses reflected the constant power struggle that has been extensively depicted by western writers as characteristic of women’s work place relationships (e.g. Epstein 1981, Marshall 1984, Davies 1985).

The British sample portrayed a world in which men’s interests and women’s interests are often in direct contradiction; where the achievement of one sex’s goals is to the detriment of the other’s goals. Consequently, struggle and conflict are inevitable as each group (heterogeneous as they may be) set out to achieve particular goals. Research on work place interaction between men and women and on sexual harassment uses phrases such as how men use violence to ‘keep women in their place’ (Walby 1988), seeing women as ‘intruders’ in a ‘male world’ (Collier 1995), women as ‘victims’ (Collinson and Collinson 1992, 1996) or “...sexual harassment constituted an exercise of gendered power by men...” (Collinson and Collinson 1996; 50) or Cockburn’s 1991, ‘In the Way of Women’. This language expresses the conflict that is perceived to exist between men and women. Collinson and Collinson (1996) found that sexual discrimination and the conflict and hostility it generated were central to a significant number of British women managers’ experiences. This picture provides a stark contrast to Hong Kong where, although women felt it was harder for them to achieve senior positions than men, their response was pragmatic (working harder) rather than ideological (raising issues of discrimination and women’s rights).

Politicisation of women’s rights is not an issue for the majority of Hong Kong’s population. Although there is general interest in equality and improving the situation of women, Hong Kong is relatively apolitical (Pearson and Leung 1995). The number of ‘women’s groups’ in Hong Kong is increasing. However, these tend to be organised around practical issues rather than based on any particular ideology (Lai et al 1997). Two women’s groups in Hong Kong did develop based on western feminist ideology but they were both short lived (Chan 1987). Following their investigation of women’s groups throughout Hong Kong, Lai et al argue that...

“Women’s groups in Hong Kong do not insist on a clear theoretical orientation. They do not specify what theoretical beliefs they hold, nor do members of any one group have a commonly agreed orientation. Instead they work on practical issues to improve the plight of women.”

Lai et al 1997;278

Even amongst the small number of more ideologically oriented groups in Hong Kong, Lai et al (1997) suggest that women are still unable to identify themselves with any line of western feminist thought. Since the basis of women’s issues in the two societies are so different, application of a western feminist perspective to women’s experience in Hong Kong is inappropriate.

Work place relationships

This section explores different levels of work place relationships to illustrate how these different attitudes to gender and equality are manifested in women’s experience of work.

Boss/protégé relationship

Bosses provide support but can also act as barriers to career progression. In Hong Kong the subordinate/boss relationship tended to be a positive experience. Bosses provided support, encouragement, opportunities and were role models from which the women felt privileged to learn. The significance of the boss and his or her importance for the protégé’s career has been suggested previously. Luk (1993) found that 66% of the Hong Kong women managers in her sample stated that their good relationship with their boss was a contributory factor explaining their promotion.

In Britain there was evidence of the same supportive dimension in the bosses’ role as in Hong Kong. However, there was also negative influence from sexist bosses who destroyed confidence, limited opportunities or were perceived to be ‘woman haters’. Many of the British interviewees had bosses who were particularly memorable because of their support and encouragement. These were considered unusual, whereas in Hong Kong this was the expected relationship between boss and subordinate. Some status was derived simply from being the protégé of a respected senior member of the organisation. In Hong Kong the respondent’s career might be closely tied with that of her boss so benefiting from the boss’ success.

“When I tendered my resignation I have been persuaded to stay by very senior people including the deputy chairman. But I was determined to go because I can see that my career development will...I will face... that it won’t be a very smooth path because I was then engaged in the sort of China project launch but ____ was so conservative with their business in China that I don’t see any future in the business that I was in. So in order to further my experience in that particular sector I decided to go to join ____ together with my boss..”

(Siu Ping - Hong Kong)

It appears that within relationships that work well there is a loyalty that, in a situation of rapid labour turnover, goes beyond the boundaries of a particular organisational or job context.

Generally the boss/subordinate relationship is far cooler and more formal in Hong Kong than in Britain. However, within this there is genuine concern and affection as well as continuing loyalty. In Britain the relationship is more participative, warmer and less deferential.

"I had a boss who I could just sort of bounce into and say 'Look you know I've got a problem, how do I sort it out? This is what I'd like to do - why can't I?' and she'd say 'Well why can't you? - Do it' Whereas before it was 'No you can't do that you've got to go through various committees' and all this. She really just kick-started everybody into a very positive frame of mind and under her leadership, the unit really turned into a nice place to work. There was no fear. Once upon a time if you smiled at the wrong time in the morning the boss would have you over the carpet."

(Gabrielle - Britain)

In Hong Kong the boss/protégé relationship is characterised by distance and respect. The high concern with relative status (Hofstede 1980) combined with a consensus, as opposed to the conflict oriented culture, (Trompenaars 1994) is visible in the nature of this relationship and the way it was spoken of. The harshest criticism voiced in Hong Kong was that one boss ...

"did not treat me as he should".

By contrast in Britain open hostility was considered perfectly acceptable.

"He was a complete chauvinistic pig".

In Hong Kong discriminatory or sexist attitudes are accepted as the reality. Sexist behaviour does occur but there are perceived to be more important things to be concerned with. In Britain most women seemed to have some kind of experience of discrimination which had affected them negatively.

"I worked for a man who was a male chauvinistic pig of the worst kind. I mean he just was...Then the boss of the establishment, I think he had a back injury or something but he was off for a long time, several months. I'd been doing two nights a week and I was visited by some of the headquarters people who said can you do some overtime and I said yes fine and went in 4 nights a week and I ran the place, I ran the discos I organised everything, ran it. In the meantime my colleague carried on doing what he'd always do which was all the sports outside. I did this for eight months I suppose, just ran the place, never thought anything of it...When the boss came back and we all settled back down to where we were they decided that they would appoint a deputy leader. And I thought great, this is fine, and I began to see some sort of career progression and I thought yes I could actually get into this and I'll be deputy and then when the post comes up I could apply for Leader position. So I applied and there was no interview, nothing happened and then I was told that they'd given it to this chap who did the sports. And when I said "well why?" I was told "well, you know, you shouldn't really be doing all these hours you've got your kids to look after, its not fair on your husband...Now when I look back on it I think "why didn't I make him pay for it?" but I made a lot of it in that I went stark raving bonkers and told him what I thought about it and told him where to put his job and that was the end of that."

(Margaret - Britain)

Many of the British women identified chauvinistic attitudes amongst their bosses which they suggested permeated the entire organisation.

"...we've got five directors and six on the management team. Of the directors three of them are male chauvinist! One's a woman anyway and the other is pretty good. Management team; of those that are married one is extremely good, and the other again is a chauvinist...I'm the only woman on the management."

(Sue - Britain)

Other instances occurred in which bosses were perceived to bully staff, which undermined the confidence of the women concerned and for some resulted in their resignation.

"I had a really bad experience with a previous boss who was a real bully. He was unbelievable. On reflection I don't know how I stuck it as long as I did...He liked to bully women basically. With guys he didn't have a problem - he was having an affair with the administrator, the lady that looked after management development left the December after he started and rejoined in another department in January, another lady instructor, he bullied her so much she freaked out in her hotel room, refused to come in. I mean he was a really evil guy on reflection. How I stuck it as long as I did I don't know. I decided I was in such a state, I actually decided I was going to resign...He just undermined your confidence all of the time. He would just shout orders "you will do this - you will do that" and if he wasn't happy with what you had done - even if it wasn't your fault or whatever, he would just stand there and shout at you, often in front of customers. It was very hard to describe really. My life was just so that I didn't want to walk through the door in the morning and I was sort of panicking every second of the day and checking and double checking I had done everything...I was in shreds and I thought if I don't get out I'm going to be totally in shreds and it will finish me - simple as that. So I resigned and started looking for another job and that's when fortunately I got the call from here. I actually had two job offers...It was strange really because the salary packages and that were more or less equal. The only thing I had to choose ...one was taking me down the avenue I was already on and the other was taking me in a totally new direction. And the end result was quite simply I thought I had got to go and do what I had been doing then to prove to myself I can do it....So he has had a very significant affect because I think that in the long run whilst I have really enjoyed this and I do enjoy what I'm doing...in the long run I would have liked to have taken the other avenue."

(Lizzie - Britain)

"When I was in _____ the senior manager, and he was a male chauvinistic pig...He was terrible. He didn't like women at all and he, there were two women in fairly senior positions - one girl was a manager and I was then a supervisor. And he would have meetings with the men managers and supervisors and not ask us. We used to stand outside the door "what's going on, what's going on?" and we'd find out later that this was a managers meeting and we were not there. ...He said to me when I was leaving "oh yes it's better for a married woman to work closer to home". I thought "oh your true colours are coming out now". What difference does it make if you're married? Why should you work closer to home?... If you're not in a meeting when things that are relevant to you are being discussed... If you're not present at the meeting and things are being decided or even just discussed, you can't be there to put your view point forward and it's really difficult if you're not there....He'd go out of his way not to ask us because we were women I'm sure."

(Sian - Britain)

These kind of instances were not uncommon in Britain. The argument is not that it is easier for female managers in Hong Kong nor that sexist behaviour does not occur in Hong Kong. Rather, it does appear that these behaviours create less strong reactions and are not considered as important an issue in Hong Kong as in Britain.

"In _____ the Director, 55 or 56, he is kind of old fashioned and I think he would like that a women should stay at home as his wife does. He has not treated me as good as he should but maybe because of the age difference and sex he always treated me like I am too young to make those decisions, "you are not mature enough", I was not as experienced as he was...He was at that time about to employ an accountant to be his assistant and he told me that it must be a man. I say 'why?' He said "a woman has to take care of family. She would not be so devoted to her work and what about if she got pregnant and then I have to give her 10 weeks maternity leave and all those casual leave for her to see Doctors and for medical check ups." It's ridiculous to

even think about but he is such an old fashioned man. I had to work very hard to lead him to think in the other ways, educate him. Even though she might get pregnant and give her maternity leave. Even a man may need to change job if his wife got pregnant and he got another child to support he has to change to another job. There is no guarantee if it is a young guy, old guy, young woman, old woman or whatever. There is no guarantee."

(Man Yee - Hong Kong)

Women managers in both Britain and Hong Kong saw being able to "speak up to their boss" as important. In Britain 'speaking up' included pointing out and condemning sexist behaviour even when it resulted in becoming branded as "feminist". Being labelled as a feminist was viewed as an intended insult. As found in previous research, the label 'feminist' was something to be avoided (Collinson and Collinson, 1996), and was seen as being offensive as a term indicative of aggression and irrationality. In Hong Kong, however, 'speaking up' was about contributing to the system, not fighting it, by presenting new ideas and offering suggestions concerning organisational effectiveness rather than pointing out discriminatory or unfair practices.

Peers

In Hong Kong it is at peer level that most overt hostility occurs. Peer relationships can be characterised by competition. Consequently if one is promoted over another or one appears to be treated differently they may be looked at with "strange eyes". Jealousies emerge and assertions may be made as to how legitimately a female got to the position she did.

"Men tend to appreciate my career more than women...Most of the jealousies I can feel [are] from women whether they are more senior or junior than me...All sorts of words behind my back I know...Mostly jealousy because they thought she must have... how should I say this... have a way to please the bosses..."

(Siu Ping - Hong Kong)

This is interesting as a manifestation of the lack of trust for those outside the family, close knit group or when there are not the guarantees of a personal relationship (Redding 1990). Some of the difficulties that arose for the women in Britain were not so much a result of deliberate hostility on the part of their male colleagues. Rather problems stemmed from the different interpretation of the same behaviours. A man might be behaving in what he thought was a polite and appropriate manner but the woman on the receiving end actually felt that she was undermined by that action. This is a further reflection of the lack of a consistent understanding between men and women in Britain in terms of beliefs regarding what constitutes male and female gender roles. As a result of traditional stereotypes no longer being openly acceptable, men and women at work may feel unsure of their ground, not quite clear how they should treat each other.

"There is one kind of situation that I often encounter. That is when you walk into a meeting or you arrange to meet someone, a male colleague to discuss a particular topic, you know like resources or whatever it is and they greet you by commenting on your dress or personal appearance. You wouldn't do that to a male, you wouldn't. It's interesting, cos a man would do that to a female. I mean even if it's very complimentary they'd say "gosh you look really nice today" or "that's a lovely perfume you're wearing" and yet it automatically puts you in a different relationship than the one which you expect to be in as colleagues. I mean I wouldn't go up to a man and say "I really like the smell of your aftershave", not unless I was particularly attracted to him! I certainly wouldn't do it in a business context where it's actually a business environment! But a male, some males not all of them, but some males would never actually see that it was changing the whole nature of the relationship between two colleagues... and then you have to try to turn the relationship back again and get it on a professional footing as two colleagues of equal standing. I'm not saying they do it consciously, but...."

(Cheryl - Britain)

In summary, in Britain there is an uncertainty of how to treat men and women, perhaps because the demands of 'equality' are to be treated 'the same', and there is deep reaction every time this is believed to be breached. In Hong Kong, by contrast, there is less tension between men and women because there is greater agreement on the ways in which the sexes differ and which jobs are more suitable for one sex than the other. This did not prevent exasperation at the persistence of traditional stereotypes which were thought 'ridiculous' but none-the-less a fact of life.

Subordinates (and styles of management)

There are four main characteristics which differentiate the Hong Kong women managers from their British counterparts in terms of their relationships with their subordinates.

Firstly, as with all the levels of work place relationships, the relationship in Hong Kong is more formal than in Britain. In Hong Kong all the relationships tend to be considered relatively formal whilst in Britain the degree of formality varies as a result of factors such as the sex of the subordinate.

"I have three people who report absolutely directly to me if you see what I mean. Two of them are men and one's a woman. And certainly with the woman I'm much more inclined to sit and have a chat with her about some things you know whereas I'm not... I'm certainly not unfriendly to the others I mean we sit and chat about things but I s'pose I always feel slightly inhibited you know. It's more difficult to say well "and what are you up to at the weekend then?"...With the men when we do talk I do ask "how are the kids? and what's happening?" and we chat but it's not quite the same...it's very hard to say it's personalities or whatever. I mean I don't go around thinking oh this is a man or this is a woman I'm just aware that's the case..."

(Carolyn - Britain)

Secondly, management style varied. In Hong Kong the 'us and them' attitude between managers and managed that others have identified (e.g. Hofstede 1984, Redding 1990) was evident. Those who tried to move away from the expected formality encountered problems.

"I think may be because of my education...well maybe now people are more open...but I can say things out more openly and that has not necessarily won me a lot of friends. I am actually making obstacles for myself because I say things openly with open heart and that doesn't mean it will be appreciated. People don't usually say anything out, especially Chinese, if they appreciate it they put it in their hearts, if they were angry they put it in their heart...they hide everything."

(Lai Fai - Hong Kong)

In Hong Kong the relationship is benevolent with the respondent trying to do the 'right thing' by their subordinates, look after them but also discipline them when necessary. The benevolent, father like boss figure described in many portrayals of Chinese management (e.g. Redding 1990, Sheh 1995 and Whitley 1992) seems ironically also to typify female managers' behaviour as well as men.

In Britain there was greater interaction between organisational levels. In Britain treatment is based on developing relationships which gradually minimise boundaries of status and seniority. In Hong Kong the role demands and deserves respect, as opposed to the individual, and boundaries remain readily observable.

The third characteristic concerns the respondents' perception of relationships within their organisation. In Hong Kong each relationship is seen in connection to others, not just their own relationship with someone beneath them but rather how they relate to their subordinates and boss at the same time, whilst also seeing their boss' relationship with their subordinates. Thus if their reprimands are not successful then there is no hesitation or reticence in going to their own boss to "sort them out". The whole

organisation relates to each other as a single unit of clearly connected layers. This can be seen in the quotation from Lai Fai below. In contrast in Britain the relationships tend to be seen in isolation as distinct from what the organisation as a whole is about.

Finally the women managers in Britain and in Hong Kong thought (for different reasons) that it was easier to manage men than to manage women. In Britain it was felt that men were easier to manage because they were seen to be less questioning than women. In Hong Kong men were easier to manage because the socially acceptable behaviour towards 'ladies' required men to be polite and respectful.

"Most of them employed in the plant are male. They don't say a lot of rough languages in front of me. They would try to phrase it more gently even when they were complaining. But if I were a male they would just blah, blah, blah. You know let it go out all the way. And I think they also trust me a little more than say if a man would go in. I think...they feel I am sincere. Not that a male is not sincere but maybe their way of presentation will be a little different...I think some of the employees will perceive a male will always kind of come in and see and pick out the things you do wrong and then they are not as offensive when a female comes through. They don't feel as threatened in a way or they don't feel that they have to build up a certain type of defence system. Now when it comes to the office its a little bit different...there's a lot of ladies and I hear feedback. They were threatened in a way because you know...the same sex you feel threatened. I cannot put it into words but I see reactions from them...they try to put you down not showing co-operation just to see how far you can go...I don't think they understand that mutual respect is the key word and I'm not going to pick on them but if I do see things are not going and there will be a more efficient way I will mention it to them and if they do not listen I would go higher. They wouldn't [be the same with a man] because its like a power... a type of image"

(Lai Fai - Hong Kong)

The Hong Kong women managers suggested that most difficulties from subordinates came from either moody or jealous women. It was suggested that because they were the same sex they were treated with less respect. Dealing with men on the other hand, in a society where there were clear social expectations in terms of the correct behaviour between ladies and gentlemen, made for an easier relationship which all understood.

Conclusion

This paper has compared workplace relationships of women managers in Hong Kong and Britain. It has been shown that within formal workplace relationships culturally different conceptions of the meaning of 'equality' help us to understand the varying responses and interactions of the women involved. In Hong Kong women are not fighting to become the same as men. Rather they would like a general recognition that feminine qualities, though different from masculine ones, are equally valued. The result is that workplace relationships are structured by the expectations of ladylike and gentlemanly behaviour. The emphasis on difference has resulted in women finding the relationships with male colleagues, bosses and subordinates easier because of the clear social expectations regarding how men and women should interact. What are more complex are the relationships with other women which are more tense precisely as a result of their sameness.

In Britain the relationships are different as a result of an alternative view of the expected relationships between men and women. This perception is manifested in the conception of equality which also differs from that held in Hong Kong. The emphasis in Britain is on men and women being the same. Although men and women may, through socialisation, develop different traits both sexes are believed to have the potential to be successful in any aspect of work. As a result equality is not about *valuing differences equally* but rather is concerned with *being treated the same*. Since men and women in Britain are both perceived as having the capability to fulfil any work role, they come into competition with each other as they contest the same ground. Thus workplace relationships develop around inherent tensions. It is this tension and emphasis on a particular conception of equality that forms the basis of women managers' work place relationships in Britain.

These different foundations have resulted in different experiences of work. Women have made greater inroads into management in Britain than they have in Hong Kong. Extensive and overt discrimination against women remains in Hong Kong. However, the different conception of equality means that British women managers face more conflict and tension in their management roles than do their equivalents in Hong Kong. Understanding this context is crucial to understanding the experience of women managers and means that a universal approach to attaining equality or to the identification of women's issues is inappropriate.

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