

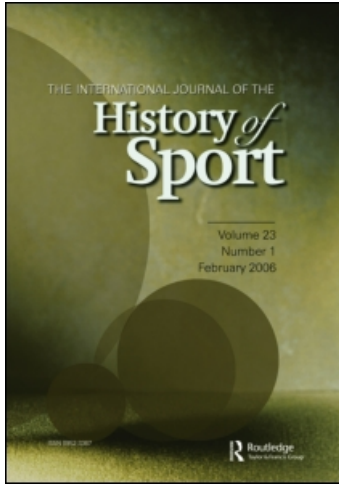
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Striving and thriving: Women in Chinese national sport organizations

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Striving and Thriving: Women in Chinese National Sport Organizations

Ying Cui

This paper examines women's position in the Chinese sports administration by studying three national sport organizations (NSOs). It is argued that the so-called gender-neutral promotion process is biased against female candidates and in the end serves the purpose of reinforcing a male-dominated upper management. Several key qualifications in evaluating candidates for promotion, such as a strategic vision, higher education and English ability, were deconstructed to unveil their embedded gender prejudice against women. It is argued that these factors play a role in explaining women's absence from senior leadership positions and their powerlessness in the national management hierarchy of Chinese sport.

In the past two-and-a-half decades, Chinese female athletes have achieved unprecedented success in the world sports arena. They not only bring tremendous national glory to their country, but also project a shining image of Chinese women. However, the exclusive male domination in the national sport administration system constitutes a striking contrast to female athletes' impressive representation and performance on the playing fields. Although female athletes outshine their male counterparts in most sports internationally, women are still substantially under-represented in management and professional positions, particularly in the decision-making bodies of national sport organizations (NSOs).

There are a number of interwoven political, economic, ideological and cultural reasons accounting for Chinese women's outstanding athletic achievements, particularly after 1978. [1] It is superficial and problematic to attribute the result to any single factor. Nevertheless, continuous government support in the form of affirmative action to promote women's participation in competitive sport should never be underestimated. However, there is little evidence that gender equality is explicitly advocated, to any significant degree, in the sphere of sport administration

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in post-reform China. Women's representation in leadership and decision-making positions is considerably marginalized. Unfortunately, very limited academic attention has been dedicated to the study of Chinese women in the realm of sport management. The gender structure of NSOs has rarely been under systematic academic investigation as a core issue in the scholarship of Chinese women in sport. The emphasis in most of the literature on Chinese women in sport is largely, if not exclusively, on female athletes on the playing fields, but not female sport administrators who strive for a position in the male-dominated national sport bureaucracy. Although women's disproportionate underrepresentation in key management posts is touched upon in some works on Chinese women in sport, [2] the issue is approached only at a superficial level. Researchers have not taken a further step to deconstruct discriminatory organizational practices that account for women's disadvantageous conditions in management. Discussions on women's experience and the construction of gender relations in national sport organizations are neglected and remain considerably underexplored. Compared with the increasing amount of research dedicated to studying women's organizational well-being in the decision-making and leadership of national and international sport, China lags considerably behind in this field of enquiry. The organizational culture embedded with entrenched and insidious gender disparity is not fully examined. Therefore, the primary purpose of this paper is to explain the underlying reasons for persistent gender inequality in Chinese NSOs and, in particular, barriers to women's promotion.

No matter what the organization, it is gendered. Most, if not all, organizations possess a distinctive gender structure, with men typically occupying the more powerful positions and women the less powerful ones. [3] Researchers have applied different approaches and perspectives to examine the entrenched and hidden gender discrimination associated with various aspects of organizational processes. A body of knowledge has been created, particularly in the past two decades. Various aspects of organizational processes that were previously considered gender-neutral, including recruitment, selection and promotion, are approached critically to uncover their hidden discriminatory nature. [4] Different solutions are proposed to improve women's organizational well-being. For instance, Martin argues that 'only large-scale, societal-level reforms at home and at work will create enduring changes', while Meyerson and Fletcher promote the application of a small-wins strategy to trigger changes both in behaviours and in understanding. [5]

McKay argues that organizations embedded with pronounced institutionalized gender patterns cannot be analysed in a gender-neutral way: 'Organizations are key sites where gender struggles take place and in which femininities and masculinities are both constructed and reproduced.' [6] Hall *et al.* further assert that 'although the proportion of women in leadership positions at the national (or international) level in governmental and non-governmental sports organizations varies from one country to another, generally speaking, women are under-represented'. [7] Despite the fact that women's underrepresentation in sport organizations has become an overt and universal issue across national boundaries, the underlying reasons attributed to the

problem vary in different cultures and societies. An increasing number of empirical studies have documented gender relations within national sport organizations in a variety of countries. Researchers use various theories and perspectives to approach the gender discourse in sport organizations. For example, Hall *et al.* applied Kanter's structure of opportunity, power and proportions and Hearn and Parkin's dialectical relationship between organization and sexuality to their investigation of the gender structure of Canadian NSOs. [8] They explained women's underrepresentation in high-level management positions as the result of 'organizational elites (males) [who] work to recreate themselves in order to retain their power'. [9] In a related study, Whitson and Macintosh developed their explanation of the gendered organizational structure and its resistance to change utilizing a theory of gender domination which 'sees social structures as constituted and reconstituted in power relations'. [10] McKay conducted a comprehensive study of affirmative action and organizational power in Australian, Canadian and New Zealand sport. [11] His analysis put the emphasis on discovering organizational barriers to women's career advancement rather than superficially locating their disproportionate numerical representation. Hovden examined some of the gendered aspects of leadership selection processes in Norwegian sporting organizations using both feminist and critical perspectives. [12] Her enquiry further demonstrates how selection criteria and selection strategy are defined in favour of male candidates in the process of hiring organization leaders. More recently, Hovden shows how two competing representations of the gender order are present in Norwegian sport organizations. [13] The dominant representation, mostly framed by middle-aged and older males, interprets the gender order as an issue outside the political responsibility of the organization. The competing representation, mostly held by women in the organization, views the gender order as a consequence of male dominance inside sports, and therefore an important and relevant policy issue. Shaw and Slack used Foucault's postmodern approach to analyse the historical construction of gender relations in British national sport governing bodies. [14] They found that in older organizations, men appear to be more influential in protecting traditional practices, while in younger organizations more equitable gender relations are present. In sum, all this work contributes to our understanding of the cultural diversity of the social construction of gender relations in national sport organizations.

As far as this study is concerned, Kanter's [15] approach provides a useful tool to understanding women's situations in Chinese national sport organizations. Firstly, she places emphasis on organizational structures and processes, such as promotion. Secondly, she develops an analytical framework grounded in opportunity, power and proportions, providing an effective means to examine so-called gender-neutral sport organizations and explain why and how women are deprived of access to equal promotion opportunities. These three variables, she argues, all play a part in the construction of gendered organizational patterns. They are interrelated with one another in a sophisticated organizational structure and collectively create an organizational environment that shapes people's behaviours and determines their

success within an organization, particularly those disadvantaged, such as women. All three factors are reflected and co-related in the promotion process and criteria for candidate selection in Chinese NSOs. Leaders possess power to influence how decisions are made, how scarce resources are distributed, and what activities are valued within organizations. However, the insidious gendered promotion criteria deny women further development opportunities at a higher level of organization hierarchy. Consequently when women are disproportionately underrepresented in the top of the administration hierarchy, their power to influence decision-making within an organization becomes limited.

Chinese sport is largely managed by the State Sport Commission (*guojia tiwei*), a government agency at the ministerial level. It is the centre of the national sports system and administers all sport-related affairs across the country. At present, the State Sport Commission comprises four different types of organizations. Its core administration body is called *jiguan*, which refers to various ministry departments. They are the basic functionaries responsible for the daily operations of the commission. There are now nine such departments in the State Sport Commission. The second group consists of 21 sport management centres, which are the executive offices for the national sport associations. Third are the research and education institutions and the final group covers other supportive and service institutions such as the Lottery Management Centre and the Sport Equipment Centre.

This study focuses on one ministry department and two national sport associations. To protect the identity of the organizations, what is presented here are composites drawn from my observation and knowledge of several sport organizations. In other words, they do not represent real organizations. The first organization is a typical small sport organization within a multi-sport management centre. Its structure is rather flat with different responsibilities roughly distributed among half a dozen full-time staff members. China is considered a world-class powerhouse in the sport, particularly in women's events. Given its strong ability to win gold medals, this organization enjoys a high status in the sport management centre. Given the short history of women's participation in this sport, there have been very few female managers in the organization's management. At the time of the interviews, the division vice-head was the only female in the executive office.

The second organization is comparatively larger with about 20 full-time employees, about one-third being female, functioning as a single-sport management centre dedicated to a team sport. This sport has a long history of women's involvement and is popular in China because the women's national team has achieved extraordinary international success. This organization has adopted a departmentalized structure and is more hierarchical when compared to the first organization. Given the outstanding performance of the women's national team, female elite athletes have a greater opportunity to enter management, coaching and officiating positions in this sport. One vice-director is a female who is responsible for men's national team, not the women's, because the women's national team is a top priority for the organization and therefore is administered by the male director.

Gendered organizational patterns also exist at the divisional level. For example, there are no women in the core business divisions such as national team, training and competition. The only woman in the competition and training division left the organization shortly before the interviews occurred. At the time of the interviews, all female staff worked in the non-core business divisions such as secretariat and accounting.

The third organization is a ministry department within the State Sport Commission, and has about a dozen full-time staff. As a functionary of the sport commission, this organization does not manage any particular sport but is responsible for the general supervision and coordination of one aspect of sport affairs. For instance, some reports from the management centres are first submitted to these departments for further recommendations and are then forwarded to the ministers for approval. In a ministry department there are generally three divisions headed by a department director and a vice-director. The vast majority of employees of this ministry department are graduates from physical education institutes, and many have a graduate degree. There has not been a female director in the department's history, and all three divisions are headed by men. Women account for one-third of the total staff and are evenly distributed among the three divisions. Two vice division heads are female and both have graduate degrees.

A total of 14 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with sports administrators, both female (nine) and male (five) from September to November 2003 in Beijing. A guideline for questions was prepared before conducting the interviews. My previous work experience in the State Sport Commission enabled me to include both current employees and those gave long service in the organizations but who had left due to retirement or were transferred before being interviewed. Research participants were interviewed at places and times most convenient to them. Twelve interviews were tape-recorded, with consent obtained from the interviewees. The time duration of the interviews ranged from 30 minutes to two-and-a-half hours. Interviewees with females were, on average, longer than those with males.

Documents were collected from the Department of Sports Policy of the State Sport Commission. Most materials are collections of research papers and proceedings of sport conferences and symposia on various subjects. I also obtained valuable materials from the female vice-minister and a female official in charge of women's work in the sport ministry concerning statistics on female administrators and a collection of research papers on women's studies. Very limited archives were available from the three selected organizations. In addition, a number of government and non-governmental organization official websites were accessed. [16] They provided a comparatively direct and reliable source of government regulations, organizational documents and historical data. Information was also obtained from a variety of journalistic sources, both in Chinese and English.

Meyerson and Fletcher argue that women's disadvantaged status in organizations occurs because most organizations are created by and for men, and are therefore based on male experience. [17] This male-based culture determines that official job

descriptions may seem gender-neutral, but the attributes required often reflect and reinforce gendered stereotypes. Hall *et al.* have conceptualized this dynamic as a self-recreation of organizational elites (males), a process that occurs in order for them to retain their power and privileged status. [18] This power struggle is clearly reflected in promotions within an organization because not only do they lead to a higher status in the hierarchy but also open routes to power, which further determines resources distribution and influences organizational values and norms.

The following sections outline the qualities identified from my research data as most salient in blocking women's promotions and constraining them from competing for senior management positions. It should be pointed out that even though some traits are seldom spelled out in official selection documents, they have a far-reaching impact on women's careers in Chinese national sport organizations.

A Strategic Vision: Leadership Qualities Defined by and for Men

The interviewees suggested that having a strategic vision and maintaining a broad perspective were regarded as the foremost qualities of senior-level sport administrators. Nevertheless, lacking a strategic vision was also the most cited weakness of female managers by most interviewees. Women in sport management were stereotypically portrayed as 'gossips, being emotional and too concerned about trivial things', the opposite of what is looked for in good leaders. Positive opinions were also voiced by men. For example, a male department vice-director expressed his analysis of the so-called female shortcoming of being a 'detail-digger': 'I can't agree with the opinion that only women focus so much on trivial things. Men are no exception and sometimes go even further than women. It's hard to say who are the champions. The stress on the sexual difference in personalities only reflects biases against females'. Interestingly, men can be even more short-sighted than women and lack a broader vision. A retired male department director once wrote in his autobiography that without the advice from a female vice-minister his career would have been completely different. The female vice-minister commented on this during her interview: 'He didn't accept the position and was very hesitant to move to Beijing. But I told him that it would be a rich experience, which could expand his vision to the national and international level. He finally agreed to transfer, which changed his life and career tremendously.'

It was recognized in these organizations that women made unique contributions to decision-making. Traits such as being attentive, careful and cautious are considered valuable to decision-making under certain circumstances. However, there is a dangerous line concerning whether these characteristics are viewed positively or negatively as women's qualifications for senior leaders. For instance, in elite sport teams, head coaches and team leaders are expected to show toughness in order to discipline athletes. In sport organizations, senior leaders should look authoritative and forceful before their subordinates. These gendered characteristics are presumably

foreign to female managers and therefore work to favour men only. When women demonstrate such leadership abilities, they are not applauded as good leaders, but are regarded as lacking in womanly charm. In the end, the inclusion of a limited number of women in senior management is legitimized by the premise that there are 'not too many of them'. On the other hand, the merit of mixed-sex leadership works to justify women's less powerful role in the sport administration hierarchy, because 'female leaders generally show less independence and self-assertiveness'.

To some extent, a strategic vision has become synonymous with the male vision in male-dominated organizational cultures. Power struggles, often concealed by male-defined leadership qualities, also explain the bureaucratic powerlessness of female managers who are promoted to senior management positions under the quota system. As Kanter has argued, 'Anyone who is protected loses power, for successes are then attributed to the helpful actions of others rather than the person's own actions'. [19] Affirmative action, intended to increase female representation at the upper levels of management through the inclusion of a mandatory minimum percentage of females to top decision-making positions, fails to reap the expected results. The main cause is due to the fact that the few women at the top cannot build a coalition strong enough to confront the power structure underpinned by male influence in promotion decisions. 'As long as organizations remain the same, merely replacing men with women will not alone make a difference.' [20]

Higher Education

Higher education now receives increasing emphasis in promotion since candidates with graduate degrees are now welcome and often preferred by national sport organizations. For example, since 2000, most newly recruited staff at a ministry department held master's degrees. However, the emphasis on higher academic training is not stressed so much for men as it is for women. This subtle disparity explains why successful career women are generally better educated compared with their male peers at the same or even higher administrative levels. Men do not need a graduate degree to be qualified for their jobs. In contrast, women need hard evidence to prove their competence as leaders. For example, among the 14 interviewees, only one man had a master's degree. In comparison, three women finished their graduate studies, but all were deputy division heads, lower than any of the men interviewed. On the other hand, the evidence shows that education is still a barrier for women to achieve senior positions. Female sport administrators, as a whole, do not have strong academic backgrounds. Statistics from the State Sport Commission indicate that only half of the female managers at and above the division head level have university degrees. [21]

In the broadest sense, education is not only restricted to formal school education but also includes a comprehensive socialization process, such as family influence. Unfortunately, according to Chinese tradition, women are not supposed to be actively engaged in public affairs. Instead, illiteracy was considered a virtue for

females in ancient China. This obsolete gender conception still has a strong influence in Chinese society today. Girls are not trained to be assertive or tough. Women are not as strongly encouraged to pursue higher education as men. For a young woman, finding a good husband is more important than doing a graduate degree. Such an environment by no means prepares women to consider ambitious careers. A recent survey of college students' employment preferences suggests that female students are most interested in jobs that attract excellent young men and are, therefore, convenient to find their future husbands. [22] A male department director argued that the so-called common weaknesses of females are largely attributed to family or rather social influence:

I also notice gender differences in perspectives between female and male university faculty members, who have compatible school education. So I don't think knowledge learning is a decisive factor. Chinese women grow up in such a society that prescribes them a certain social role defined by thousands of years of tradition on sexuality.

Pitifully, the educational roles of sport, such as character-building, are far from fully recognized in the debate involving higher education. Many graduates from physical education institutes have sport experience or, at least, are loyal sport fans. Their deep connection with sport shapes their unique management style as illustrated by comments of a female manager: 'They [female managers] are energetic, open and straightforward. Their frankness and extroversion make them appear very different from those sensible and prudent female officials in other industries. They just go to the point directly and don't play euphemism with you.' Unfortunately, academic performance and knowledge acquisition are still perceived as essential qualifications in Chinese organizations. In such a context, female managers are often overqualified in terms of their educational backgrounds compared with their male peers, but they still need to demonstrate special skills to compete with men, as shown in the following discussion.

English Ability

In the past decade, a new quality has received growing attention in screening potential sport leaders, namely, their ability in a foreign language, especially English. With China's growing influence in global politics and the world economy, language is a barrier to the country's active participation in international affairs. Therefore the country needs individuals who are able to communicate with the West. China's entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001 boosted its demand for individuals fluent in a major foreign language. The International Olympic Committee's decision to name Beijing as the host city for the 2008 Olympic Games undoubtedly reinforced this trend. All of a sudden, an overwhelming fad to learn English swept the city of Beijing, and hundreds of thousands of English-training programmes mushroomed overnight. [23]

The 2008 Olympic Games have created an impending challenge for Chinese sport administrators. The preparation work entails a tremendous amount of communication and coordination with various international Olympic constituents and stakeholders. In order to test the competition venues and facilities, China is expected to host an increasing number of international competitions in Beijing over the next few years. A top priority for the State Sport Commission is to develop competent sport administrators fluent in English and familiar with the practices of international sport organizations. Against this backdrop, and beginning in 2002, the commission organized internal English-language training sessions for its staff. Young managers were selected to attend full-time professional English training at home and abroad. Also in tune with the preparation work, the commission is making a greater effort to promote China's representation on the decision-making bodies of international sport federations. Foreign-language ability has thus become a key quality in nominating candidates to run for positions in international federations. [24] In the Chinese Soccer Association, for example, all four full-time vice-presidents can speak a second language fluently. The organization has set a goal that 70 per cent of its staff will be able to communicate in a second language in the near future. [25] By the same token, when the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games (BOCOG) took on seconded sport administrators from the State Sport Commission, candidates were exempt from a professional knowledge test mandatory for applicants from the general public; however, without exemption everybody had to write the English examination. [26]

This new emphasis on English opens up an unprecedented opportunity for female managers to compete for senior-level positions in NSOs. Conventionally, women have been considered more apt at learning foreign languages than men, and university students specializing in foreign languages are predominantly female. On many occasions, women have demonstrated a strong ability in English. For instance, Ms Xue Li, the first and the only female vice-president of the Chinese Soccer Association, delivered a report in English to the Asian Soccer Federation at a conference in Beijing in 2003. Her English and presentation surprised the media and received high praise from her international colleagues. [27]

A female interviewee's story serves as another example. An English major in her undergraduate programme with a master's degree in sport, she was promoted to deputy division head and further named as deputy secretary-general of an Asian sport federation within a few years. She attributed her precious career opportunities to her education background in English. Another female entry-level manager, also an English major at university, mentioned that her involvement in an international project was due primarily to her ability in English, the working language of the project.

However, the emphasis on English ability has also sparked controversy between the need for language skills versus knowledge of sport as key qualities for sport administrators. Not surprisingly, the criticism, or rather jealousy, comes from men

who feel disadvantaged by this change in priorities. For example, a male division head made such comments during his interview:

I think professional knowledge and experience in specific sports should be put as priorities in promotions. We should send managers with sport knowledge abroad to improve their English rather than promoting people fluent in English to senior management positions. English majors have a common shortcoming: the rigorous training of learning by retention prohibits their ability to think creatively and critically.

Nevertheless, the shift in emphasis to English ability does not give women alone a competitive edge. Women do not gain the upper hand when competing with male English majors. The assumption that translators are predominantly female does not hold true in Chinese NSOs. At the 2004 summer Olympic Games, there were 26 translators travelling with the Chinese delegation to Athens and only nine were women. [28]

Under certain circumstances, men are found to be the beneficiaries of the English policy. According to a young female manager, the Sport Commission once organized an English test to select two candidates to attend an international training programme abroad. Both of the top two scorers were female. However, there was a requirement regarding the nomination: a male and a female. This consideration was presumably intended to assure women's opportunity to enter the programme. But in this case, a young fellow with the highest score in the male group was given the chance simply because he was a man.

Support Networks

Many will agree that, in China, there is no shortage of talented women, but talent is useless without the means to realize its potential. A support network helps a person to integrate into the mainstream organizational culture and provides a route to promotion. Not surprisingly, women often find it harder to be promoted in organizations without adequate information and appropriate mentoring.

In Chinese society, people identify with each other easily when they share something in common. The notion of sameness (*tong*) plays an important role in bonding Chinese together in their public lives. [29] An individual can be identified with different groups as a result of sharing the same social characteristics or the same experience with others. For instance, *tongxue* means classmates or alumni and includes people graduating from the same school, and *tongxiang* (fellow countrymen) refers to people coming from the same place. Eventually, everyone is connected to a sophisticated network which offers favours and protection. In organizations, commonalities such as coming from the same county or graduating from the same university help a newcomer to become easily accepted and find a foundation to expand his or her personal network. Consequently, speculations often follow important employment and promotion decisions as people look for evidence of any similarities between the beneficiary and the gatekeeper.

Given the historical recruitment of graduates from physical education institutes (PEIs), and their subsequent promotion to upper management in NSOs, people without sports experience, and especially without educational backgrounds in PEIs, often feel alienated: 'You just feel lacking something and are not in the mainstream.' In general, alumni from different PEIs create their homogeneous alliance. Graduates from the same PEI maintain a closer network and tend to favour their own members when a competitive employment or promotion opportunity appears. A young female manager from such a PEI mentioned that when her husband finished his graduate study, his internship and job were both arranged with the help of their alumni at various sport organizations.

Undoubtedly, as a result of knowing insiders at the top and receiving mentoring from senior staff, one will be better informed of promotion opportunities and climb faster in an organization. Networking brings acquaintances, increases visibility and develops intimacy with co-workers. However, networking also involves frequent attendance at many casual social functions, which are rarely open to women. Female officials often feel that important negotiations take place and decisions are made when the men go out for beer or bowling after work. These social functions seem to be more frequent at sport management centres. A male department director in the commission admitted that, as a leader of sport management centres, it is important to be a champion in drinking. It seems to have become part of the business. Sometimes an athlete's transfer to the national team is decided during a dinner. Problems are often kept until dinnertime since alcohol is an excellent moderator for hard negotiations between men. Unless accomplished drinkers, women find difficulty in fitting into these occasions comfortably. For instance, a female division vice-head reported that she often chose to avoid these dinner and entertainment occasions because 'I don't like these social functions, and would rather stay home and enjoy the tranquility with my family. But, that is not what people think an official in my position is supposed to do.'

Moreover, these social occasions, often characterized by after-work dinners, drinking and men cracking sexist jokes, contradict the traditional gender role of Chinese women. Sociable women are not applauded in Chinese society. Being a popular sociable woman is not an admirable reputation, and instead she may be blamed for socializing too much with men. An attractive young female manager, for example, complained that she had been criticized for playing too much tennis with her department director.

Differential Retirement Age

In China, men and women retire at different ages. For management staff, males retire at 60 while females do so at 55. This differential retirement age was introduced in the early 1950s as an affirmative action to protect women's interests due to their heavy burden of childbearing and care. Since the implementation in 1979 of the one-child policy, Chinese couples have fewer children and women's

burdens from household chores and childcare have been significantly reduced. Along with more accessible higher education and employment opportunities in the reform period since the 1980s, women have achieved unprecedented success in senior administrative roles. Under such circumstances, the discrepancy in retirement ages is now being questioned. It is argued that talent is wasted if many well-educated women officials are forced to retire when they are still able to make contributions. In contemporary China, this obsolete policy has perpetuated discrimination against women in the public domain despite the fact that many proposals have been put forward in the past decade calling for equal statutory retirement ages for men and women. [30]

The early mandatory retirement age for women has also undermined female university students' employment prospects. Young women become hesitant to pursue postgraduate degrees even when the option is open to them. The reason is simple. When they finish their graduate or postgraduate degrees, which are supposed to enhance their competitiveness on the job market, they have to face another hurdle – their age. When a woman completes her postgraduate education in her mid or late 20s, according to Chinese tradition, she has reached a peak time to get married and have children. It does not matter whether the woman herself has such a plan or not, organizations do not want to take the risk of recruiting a woman who presumably will take maternity leave and redirect her primary attention from work to family within the foreseeable future. The Education Ministry has reported that the number of female engineers has decreased in recent years. The tendency for fewer female students to choose engineering as their major is arguably attributable to women's earlier retirement age. [31]

The negative impact of differential retirement ages is also reflected in promotion decisions and has caused problems in retaining competent and experienced female officials in NSOs. In recent years, the central government has regulated the mandatory retirement of senior leaders to promote young managers to senior positions. It is now rare to see a vice-minister over 60 but common to see a man in his early 50s or even 40s assuming office as a vice-minister. In the meantime, it has gradually become an unspoken rule that a man in his mid-50s is not likely to be considered for promotion to any senior posts. If the speculation is applied to women, female managers will have little chance for upward movement given the five-year retirement age discrepancy. Consequently, women's career paths are shortened and their development prospects are significantly impaired. Zhang Caizhen, the female vice-minister, realized this problem many years ago and had made a great effort to improve women's status in sport organizations. When she served on a Working Commission on the Development of Youth and Women, established by the State Council in the 1980s, the delegates put forward a proposal that the retirement age should be extended to 60 for female administrative staff at and above the division head level and for female academics at and above the associate professor level. The proposal was adopted by the State Council and was soon issued as a binding government document. Unfortunately, this policy has not

been fully implemented by government agencies, including various ministries such as the State Sport Commission. For instance, a female division head said that although she was allowed to continue working until 60, at the age of 55 she was not permitted to work for another term of office in the position. She left the organization one year later.

Conclusion

The embedded prejudice towards women's capability and commitment is widespread in Chinese society and has severely hindered women's development in the public sphere. More often than not, females and males in management are stereotypically regarded as two homogeneous groups. Women are presumed to be inferior to men, whereas it is taken for granted that men are born leaders and that women just do not have what it takes. The stereotype of women's inferior image is rampant and reinforces women's relative powerlessness in organizations. For instance, women are stereotypically depicted as focusing too much on trivialities and lacking a broad strategic vision. Such characteristics are not regarded as beneficial to decision-making and, as a result, become 'legitimate' excuses to block women from top executive posts. Consequently, female sport managers are disproportionately underrepresented, particularly in senior management positions, and are significantly disadvantaged in accessing promotion opportunities in Chinese NSOs.

A direct consequence of entrenched gender bias is that women are often assigned to less powerful deputy positions. Even female officials at the top of the state hierarchy are no exception. Many female leaders' political careers are characterized by promotions from deputy positions at a lower level to a higher level. Some have no experience of being number one throughout their entire political life. [32] The situation in national sport organizations also indicates a similar trend. Among the nine female managers interviewed in this study, five are in deputy administrative positions, all playing an assisting role to the top male directors in their organizations. Statistics from the State Sport Commission provide tangible evidence of women's position in the power structure of the national sport bureaucracy. The higher the administrative ranks, the fewer and the older the female administrators. As of 2002, females accounted for 20 per cent (117) of all middle-level cadres (585). But there were only three female department directors and 19 female vice department directors, with an average age of 53 and 52 respectively. Not a single woman in this group was under the age of 35; a quarter fell between 36 to 45 years old; and more than a half were between 46 and 55. [33]

Other distinctive features of women's representation in the organizational power structure are that they are usually assigned to be in charge of less important business functions. Evidence shows that most influential female state leaders in the central government are appointed to undertake work primarily related to culture, education, health, science and women's work. [34] According to a 2001 national survey, there were 317 female vice-mayors in China, more than half in charge of culture, education

and health. Only 15 per cent were responsible for economic issues. This is not to say that other areas are not important, but apparently less so given the government's continual emphasis on economic growth. [35]

Women's powerless position is conspicuous in national sport organizations. As Kanter [36] has argued, holding a variety of positions across functions paves the way to senior management, and three specific types of activity enhance an individual's opportunities to power and success: extraordinary activities, visibility and relevance. The benefits of moving through different offices are obvious: obtaining a clearer picture of how the entire organization functions, increasing one's visibility and building up networks. All these add favourable weight and win credibility for a future promotion. Unfortunately, women are often isolated in peripheral and non-core business functions, such as accounting, foreign affairs and secretariats, and consequently have a slim chance for transfer and promotion. Female managers are usually assigned to be in charge of amateur sport or youth sport, whereas men are generally placed in posts of responsibility such as competition and training, both of which are of more strategic importance to organizations. In sport management centres, a position in core business functions, even at the entry-level, is more desirable than positions in non-core business sections because core business functions provide a promising career path and better growth opportunities. On the contrary, non-core business divisions provide a shorter development route and one reaches a career dead-end more quickly. The possibility of transferring from a peripheral to a priority business function is very low. Nevertheless, managers at and above the division-head level have better opportunities of moving to other functions. Such transfers sometimes symbolize an interest from the top executive, and frequent movements often signal prospective promotions. Therefore a promotion to a division head is a significant event for young and promising managers in NSOs. A division head is entitled to supervise the overall daily operations within an office and therefore it is an important stepping-stone to more prestigious positions, such as department directors, which have power to influence the final decision-making at organizational levels. However, it should be noted that promotions to division heads are much more valued by women than by men because division heads in general represent the glass ceiling for many women managers. On the contrary, for males, only promotions to department vice-directors or department directors mean something in their ladder climbing.

This gendered job assignment pattern is reflected in the experience of female interviewees too. The former female vice-minister, Ms Zhang Caizhen, had played a critical role in promoting sport policy and sport social science studies in China and was awarded an Olympic Order for her contributions to Chinese sport. However, she had never been in charge of competitive sport, which was the foremost priority of the national Olympic programme. Ms He Huixian, a former female department director and assistant to the minister, had headed the department of publicity, not competitive or mass sport. A female department vice-director reported that she

administered the men's national team rather than the women's team, which was a strong Olympic contender and received enormous public attention in China. Therefore the management of the women's national team became the responsibility of the male director. The only female division head interviewed in this study headed the general affairs office in a multi-sport management centre. The main responsibility of this office was to provide secretarial and logistical support to five Olympic sports and had little to do with the competition and training programmes.

In general, females seldom make it to positions of department directors, not to mention ministers, and they usually end up in the less powerful deputy positions and non-core business divisions. This means that women are excluded from the central decision-making roles in organizations and have limited influence on organizational practices. In other words, influential gatekeepers in the national sport bureaucracy remain predominantly male, and men keep control of decision-making in these organizations. Such phenomena are mainly due to the fact that men comprise most selection and promotion committees, and have the final say on who is hired and promoted.

Interestingly, in sports management centres female managers in small and less hierarchical organizations tend to obtain comparatively better development opportunities. Furthermore, in sports that have only recently encouraged women's participation, females stand a better chance of breaking into the central decision-making bodies due to the emerging attention on women's events. By contrast, in traditional sports with a long history of female involvement, women's representation in their management structures has lost momentum and is not seen as a priority. In these sports, former female elite athletes may be fast-tracked to senior management positions due to their outstanding athletic accomplishments. Nevertheless, they rarely achieve further impressive promotions in their ladder climbing. This is why it is common to see one or two token female officials in the leadership of traditional sports, but their influence within the organization is limited.

This study also revealed that specific qualities have worked to enhance women's promotion opportunities. Having a graduate degree is a selling-point for employment and has increased one's marketability. English majors became favourite prospective candidates for senior executives after China was selected to host the 2008 Olympic Games. However, as the previous discussion has shown, women do not necessarily benefit from possessing these qualities. For instance, female English majors, who have obtained unprecedented opportunities as a result of China's preparation for the 2008 Olympics, are criticized for lacking professional knowledge of sport, especially by men with no second language. Female managers with post-secondary degrees perform their duties under extraordinary pressure because they are placed under a spotlight by male colleagues. Nevertheless, the disturbing voices and biased judgment cannot overshadow the plain fact that these value-added merits, in effect, have offset discrimination caused by gender differences and have provided women with advantages and more development space over male competitors in their ladder climbing. For example, many successful female sport administrators in the

national sport hierarchy are found to have one or more of these attributes. Not surprisingly, a number of female interviewees possess at least one value-added merit, such as a master's degree or a major in English.

In summary, the qualifications for promotion embedded with gender prejudice in Chinese NSOs do not create an even platform for women to assert their capabilities. However, some recent trends indicate female managers are prospering with their better education, strong English abilities, and high self-esteem and some have overtaken their male co-workers in key management positions.

Nonetheless, more affirmative action needs to be taken to improve women's organizational well-being in NSOs. A series of concrete actions are needed at the operational level to ensure women's equality in organizations. Efforts should be made to increase female representation in the selection committees for hiring and promotion. When more women sit on the committees and are entitled to speak for women, biased judgements on female candidates will be greatly reduced. Furthermore, female managers at all administrative levels should be given greater access to training programmes and offered more opportunities to move across different areas, including core business sections. This will build up women's knowledge and skills in various areas and provide females with a stage to demonstrate and develop their capability and potential. Last but not least, a career advancement and support programme should be set up within the sport administration system to address issues relevant to female managers in sport organizations. Such women's advocacy initiatives will play an essential role in providing necessary resources to female managers for their prosperity in organizations.

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Notes

- [1] Fan, 'Women's Sport in the People's Republic of China'; Dong, *Women, Sport and Society*; Brownell, 'Challenged America'.
- [2] For example, Fan, 'Women's Sport in the People's Republic of China'; Dong, 'A Reflection on Factors Determining the Recent Success'; Brownell, 'Strong Women and Impotent Men'.
- [3] Hearn and Parkin, *Sex at Work*.
- [4] For example, Snizek and Neil, 'Job Characteristics, Gender Stereotypes and Perceived Gender Discrimination'; Rubin, 'Gender, Equality and the Culture of Organizational Assessment'.
- [5] Martin, 'Hidden Gendered Assumptions'; Meyerson and Fletcher, 'A Modest Manifesto'.
- [6] McKay, *Managing Gender*, 13–14.
- [7] Hall *et al.*, *The Gender Structure of National Sport Organizations*, 1.
- [8] Hall *et al.*, 'Organizational Elites Recreating Themselves'.

- [9] Ibid., 28.
- [10] Whitson and Macintosh, 'Gender and Power'.
- [11] McKay, *Managing Gender*.
- [12] Hovden, 'Short Communications: Gender and Leadership Selection Processes'.
- [13] Hovden, 'The Gender Order as a Policy Issue'.
- [14] Shaw and Slack, "'It's Been Like That for Donkey's Years'".
- [15] Kanter, *Men and Women of the Corporation* (1977).
- [16] For example, the State Sport Commission of China (www.sport.gov.cn), the Chinese Olympic Committee (www.olympic.cn), the All-China Sports Federation (www.sport.org.cn), All-China Women's Federation (www.women.org.cn), the International Olympic Committee (www.olympic.org), the Canadian Olympic Committee (www.olympic.ca), and the Beijing Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games (www.bocog.org).
- [17] Meyerson and Fletcher, 'A Modest Manifesto'.
- [18] Hall *et al.*, 'Organizational Elites Recreating Themselves'.
- [19] Kanter, *Men and Women of the Corporation* (1977), 188.
- [20] Kanter, *Men and Women of the Corporation* (1993).
- [21] Guojia tiyu zongjv, *Guanyu peiyang xuanba nvganbu qingkuang de huibao*.
- [22] 'Survey: Men Want Career; Women Want Men', *People's Daily*, 11 Nov. 2004, available online at http://english.people.com.cn/200411/24/print20041124_165000.html, accessed 27 Nov. 2004.
- [23] To prepare for the 2008 Olympics, hundreds of thousands of Beijing residents are learning English, from government officials to police and taxi drivers, from elementary school students to retired senior citizens. Estimates show that Beijing has as many as over a thousand languages training centres (companies) competing to hold various language training courses. See 'Olympic Bid, WTO Entry, APEC Boost Beijing 'English Economy'', *People's Daily*, 5 Nov. 2001, available online at http://english.people.com.cn/200111/05/eng20011105_83923.html, accessed 18 Feb. 2005.
- [24] Renshi Si [Personnel Department of the State Sport General Administration], *Guanyu jiaqiang guoji tiyu zuzhi rencai peiyang gongzuo de yijian* ('Proposals for promoting the development of representatives in international sport federations'), 2002, available online at <http://www.sport.org.cn/ziliaochaxun/zonghe/2004-03-24/118830.html>, accessed 7 Dec. 2004.
- [25] Qian Long Wang, 'Xue Li rang fanyi cheng baishe, Yan Shiduo ganshou xiagang weixie' ('Xue Li discarded the translator, Yan Shiduo facing laid-off threat'), available online at <http://sport.qianlong.com/4713/2003/11/03/117@1687904.htm>, accessed 2 Feb. 2004.
- [26] Interviews with two BOCOG staff in Beijing in 2003.
- [27] Qian Long Wang, 'Xue Li rang fanyi cheng baishe'.
- [28] '2004 yadian aoyunhui zhongguo tiyu daibiaotuan 633 ren wan quan mingda' ('A complete name list of Chinese sport delegation to the 2004 Athens Olympic Games'), Sohu Sport, available online at <http://2004.sports.sohu.com/20040720/n221090957.shtml>, accessed 1 Sep. 2004.
- [29] Yang, *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets*.
- [30] 'Shi qishi haishi zhaogu? Funv keyi yu nanren tongling tuixiw ma?' ('Discrimination or preferential treatment? Can women retire at the same age as men?'), Xinhua News Agency, 29 Jan. 2003, available online at <http://www.china.org.cn/chinese/zhuanti/269982>, accessed 2 Oct. 2004.
- [31] 'Number of Chinese Woman Engineers Decreases', *People's Daily*, 25 Aug. 2003, available online at http://english.people.com.cn/200308/25/print20030825_122998.html, accessed 2 Oct. 2004.
- [32] 'Pandian zhongguo nvxing gaoguan congzheng zhilu: daduoshu fenguan wenjiao weisheng' ('The political careers of Chinese senior female leaders: most responsible for culture, education and health'), *Nanfang Zhoumo* (South China Weekend), 27 Jan. 2005, available online at <http://news.sohu.com/20050127/n224130165.shtml>, accessed 29 Jan. 2005.

- [33] Guojia tiyu zongjv, *Guanyu peiyang xuanba nvganbu qingkuang de huibao*.
- [34] For instance, the vice-chairperson of the National People's Congress Standing Committee, Ms He Luli, was responsible for public health when serving as vice-mayor of the Beijing Municipal Government. Ms Chen Zhili was the former education minister before being appointed as a state councillor. Ms Gu Xiulian and Ms Hao Jianxiu, both ministerial leaders, serve as president and vice president of the All-China Women's Federation respectively.
- [35] 'China Has 500 Female Mayors', *China Daily*, 22 Aug. 2003, available online at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/en/doc/2003-08/22/content_257275.htm, accessed 26 Aug. 2003.
- [36] Kanter, *Men and Women of the Corporation* (1977).

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