Advancing international human resource management scholarship on paternalistic leadership and gender: the role of postcolonial feminism

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Abstract

This article aims to inspire international human resource management (IHRM) scholarship that incorporates postcolonial feminist theory, using the under-researched topic of paternalistic leadership and gender to illustrate the opportunities and challenges such an endeavour can present. Paternalistic leadership is utilised because it represents one of the most widely used indigenous frameworks for examining leadership in Chinese contexts. The principal theoretical contribution of this article centres on providing IHRM scholars with postcolonial feminist ideas, perspectives and sites of inquiry for cultivating future research on gender and paternalistic leadership. The salience of postcolonial feminism resides in its capacity to address the representation of non-western women in feminist theory as a universal, transhistorical category, to centralise cultural difference in theorising gender, to shatter binaries reproduced by colonialism and imperialism (e.g. 'West/East', 'Western/Third World Woman') and to generate indigenous, localised knowledge on non-western women. Three sites of inquiry are discussed: 1) Chinese feminisms and genders; 2) Chinese cultures and gender norms; 3) voice, agency and the subaltern woman. This article provides research propositions for IHRM scholars seeking to translate postcolonial feminist ideas into empirical research. The article concludes by outlining implications for practice and providing research questions to guide future IHRM scholarship.

Introduction

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In this article we aim to inspire international human resource management (IHRM) scholarship that incorporates postcolonial feminist theory, using the under-researched topic of paternalistic leadership and gender to illustrate the opportunities and challenges such an endeavour can present. Paternalistic leadership is utilised for illustrative purposes because it represents one of the most widely used indigenous frameworks for examining leadership in Chinese contexts (Wu & Xu, 2012). Furthermore, while IHRM scholars have started to investigate paternalistic leadership in non-western contexts (Chen & Kao, 2009; Zhu, Zhang & Shen, 2012), they have yet to explore fully the dynamics between paternalistic leadership and gender (Peus, Braun & Knipfer, 2015).

The paucity of IHRM research on gender and paternalistic leadership within Chinese cultural contexts represents a missed opportunity for investigating the interconnections between leadership, gender and culture (Cheng & Lin, 2012; Pellegrini, Scandura, & Jayaraman, 2010). We submit that IHRM scholars could galvanise postcolonial feminism's focus on cultural difference in understanding gender and gender inequality (Mohanty, 1991, 2003; Narayan, 2000; Spivak, 1988, 1999), to address this knowledge gap and, at the same time, examine related methodological concerns about how to represent Chinese women in paternalistic leadership research. Our rationale for mobilising postcolonial feminist ideas, perspectives and sites of inquiry is strengthened further by the criticism that research on gender and leadership is 'drawn almost exclusively on perspectives and realities taken from Anglo-American literature and practice', thereby marginalising indigenous knowledge on the subject (Oplatka, 2006, p. 607; see also Ayman & Korabik, 2010; Eagly & Chin, 2010). Significantly, some studies have produced knowledge on gender and paternalistic leadership within non-western cultures (Cheng & Lin, 2012; Pellegrini, et al., 2010). However, this literature is

nascent, giving Peus et al. grounds to state: 'the question to what extent paternalistic leadership generalises to female leaders is yet to be answered' (2015, p. 58).

Addressing these omissions and concerns, the principal theoretical contribution of this article centres on furnishing IHRM scholars with ideas, perspectives and sites of inquiry drawn from postcolonial feminism, in order to cultivate future research on gender and paternalistic leadership. Crucially, it is not our aim in this article to discredit other gender theories (e.g. role congruity theory, expectation states theory) which have usefully advanced knowledge on leadership and gender (Cheng & Lin, 2012; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Ridgeway, 2001). Rather, it is to enrich the theoretical repertoire of IHRM researchers through articulating the emphasis postcolonial feminism places on studying the dynamics of gender, race and cultural difference. In contrast to other, largely Anglo-American, theories of gender and leadership, postcolonial feminism is particularly adept at shattering binaries reproduced by the cultural legacy of colonialism and imperialism (e.g. 'West/East', 'Western Woman/Third World Woman'). As this article shows, postcolonial feminism broaches specific conceptual and methodological problems involved in the study and representation of non-western women, as well as flagging sites of inquiry that problematise how the west is often an unmarked standard against which cultural difference is conceptualised (Narayan, 1997; Rajan & Park, 2005; Spivak, 1988, 1999).

This article is structured as follows. We begin by reviewing some of the influential theories available to IHRM scholars for theorising Chinese female leadership, before describing three of postcolonial feminism's key tenets. Here, we bring postcolonial feminism and paternalistic leadership theory into dialogue with each other. Next, we outline three areas of concern and inquiry for IHRM scholars: 1) Chinese feminisms and genders; 2) Chinese cultures and gender norms; 3) voice, agency and the subaltern woman. In each section we provide research propositions. The article concludes by teasing out the main implications for practice and providing research questions that may guide future research.

Theorising Chinese female leadership

Anglo-American leadership studies scholars have been repeatedly admonished for 'infrequently address[ing] the diversity of leaders and followers in terms of culture, gender, race and ethnicity, or sexual orientation' (Eagly & Chin, 2010, p. 216; see also Parker, 1996). Specifically, there have been calls to examine gender and leadership in non-western contexts, especially within China (Law, 2013; Peus et al., 2015; Tsang, Chan, & Zhang, 2011; Wang & Shirmohammadi, 2016). Theoretically, there are different options for IHRM scholars to address this knowledge gap. There is not the space here to provide a comprehensive review of these theories, but, as Ayman and Korabik (2010) reason, two influential and extensively used theories are role congruity theory and expectation states theory. Regarding the former, some leadership theorists have examined the different social and gender roles that men and women are expected to perform and the gender stereotypes associated with them (Wang, Chaing, Tsai, Lin & Cheng, 2013). Accordingly, role congruity theory has been developed to explain gender prejudice toward female leaders based on the premise that there is perceived incongruity between a female gender role and a leadership role (Eagly & Karau, 2002). In other words, agentic (masculine) traits have traditionally defined leadership roles (Schein, Mueller, Lituchy & Liu, 1996), diminishing the potential for women to be endorsed as leaders given their association with feminine traits such as communality and sensitivity. This theoretical frame could be used by IHRM scholars to examine how Chinese female leaders are perceived less favourably than men as potential occupants of leadership roles, especially in Chinese contexts where the authoritarian dimension of paternalistic leadership is dominate (Granrose, 2005). Deploying role congruity theory, Wang et al. (2013) investigated how authoritarian and benevolent leadership styles interact with leader gender to influence subordinate performance

(e.g. task performance, citizenship behaviour and creativity). They found the negative relationship between authoritarian leadership and subordinate performance was stronger for female than for male leaders, and that the positive relationship between benevolent leadership and subordinate performance was stronger for male than for female leaders. Concluding, Wang et al. (2013) suggest men and women adopt behaviours that are perceived as a positive deviation from gender roles.

Other theorists have galvanised a social structural perspective to investigate the status differences between men and women (Ridgeway, 2001; Ridgeway & Bourg, 2004). Expectation states theory proposes that gender is an 'institutionalised system of social practices for constituting people as two significantly different categories, men and women, and organising relations of inequality on the basis of that difference' (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004, p. 510). As such, gender is a cultural mark that is visible, influencing individuals' perceptions, observations and evaluations of leaders. In this framework, IHRM scholars can identify gender status beliefs in Chinese leadership contexts, investigating how they can shape a network of constraining expectations that obstruct Chinese women from emerging as leaders, as well as hindering existing female leaders in their career progression.

Research continues to examine and problematise the cultural belief that women possess minimal leadership potential (Eagly & Heilman, 2016). Recent developments in leadership and gender theory reiterates the importance of gender stereotyping and prejudice but advances how these may be studied. One pertinent avenue of research concentrates on people's perceptions of women of different races and how these may produce incongruence between the stereotypes associated with the female gender category and the agentic expectations associated with leadership roles. In this vein, Rosette, Koval, Ma and Livingston (2016) draw on role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) and an intersectional framework (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1990). Intersectionality theory posits that social categories are interlinked simultaneously, a

conceptual device developed by its feminist originators (Crenshaw 1989; Collins, 1990) to highlight how women of colour can suffer gender and racial discrimination concurrently. Rosette et al. (2016) find that in the case of white, black and Asian American women, gender stereotyping varies across racial groups. Black women were found to be dominant but not competent; Asian American women were found to be competent but passive; white American women were found to be communal but not particularly dominant or competent. One conclusion drawn is that black women are least likely to suffer agentic penalties (negative repercussions from counter-stereotypical behaviour), whereas Asian American women are more likely. Study findings show how the pattern is reversed for agentic deficiencies (perceptions that women have minimal leadership potential).

Notably, Rosette et al. (2016) connects to prior scholarship that demonstrates how race and gender can doubly disadvantage female leaders of colour (Rosette & Livingstone, 2012; Rusch, 2004). This body of scholarship draws closer to postcolonial feminist theory for helping us to understand more fully how gender is not always the primary basis for stereotyping and prejudice. Still, postcolonial feminism and intersectionality theory diverge in significant ways, as we discuss below, that allow us to attribute to the former distinctiveness. Equally, there are critiques of gender and leadership research that create an opening for postcolonial feminist theories to contribute to extant leadership scholarship. For instance, Gambrell (2016, p. 294) berates how some leadership researchers have 'imposed theory developed' from American 'White dominant businesses and organizations…onto people of color or women' (see also Ayman & Korabik, 2010; Parker, 1996). Gambrell (2016) cites the work of Eagly and Karau (2002) and Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt and van Engen (2003) to illustrate this approach, before advocating the generation of indigenous knowledge on gender and cultural/racial differences in leadership. We are very sympathetic to such critiques but our intention is not to discard 'western' leadership theories, such as those outlined above. Rather, we wish to nurture

indigenous knowledge and theory on gender and leadership so it problematises and complicates the dominance of western scholarship in this area. We turn next to begin our explication of postcolonial feminist theory and how it can contribute to gender and paternalistic leadership scholarship.

Postcolonial feminism and leadership research

Three key tenets of postcolonial feminism may be delineated as follows. First, postcolonial feminism acknowledges that the current global, postcolonial world is a cultural construction shaped by historical processes of imperialism and colonisation (Mohanty, 2003; Narayan, 2000; Spivak, 1988, 1999). One central concern is questioning dominant ontologies and epistemologies of colonialism that have and continue to uphold forms of European imperialism (Young, 2001). In so doing, postcolonial feminism seeks to destabilise a legacy of locating the 'motor of world history exclusively in Europe' in favour of recognising formations of 'high civilisation outside of Europe' (Kerner, 2017, p. 854) and their contribution to global power relations. The gendered aspects of these debates are numerous and may include problematising a global notion of 'feminist sisterhood', interrogating cultural representations of non-western women within colonialism, exploring the role of non-western feminisms within western feminist theories and acknowledging the contributions of non-western women in the global campaign for gender equality.

Second, postcolonial feminism has more than most fostered dialogue *within* and *across* feminist circles globally about the treatment and representation of 'non-Western' women. Chandra Mohanty (1991, 2003), Uma Narayan (1997) and Gayatri Spivak (1988, 1999), among others, have pioneered feminist debate and theory that has problematised the role of western feminism in reproducing European imperialism. For example, Mohanty (1991) reads western

feminist thought as a 'political and discursive practice' (1991, p. 334) in how it is enmeshed within global relations of power that shape how feminist bodies of knowledge are constituted and what purposes they serve. Mohanty (1991) exposes how the homogenous category of 'third world women' has emerged within western feminism. This category is said to represent non-western women as uneducated, oppressed, passive and silent victims in contrast to liberated 'western women', who are situated as their binary opposite (see also, Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2006; Spurlin, 2010). Postcolonial feminist critiques have addressed the gaps in western feminist theories that fail to examine how non-western women are represented in colonial literature (e.g. novels) (Lionnet, 1995) and articulate non-western women's rights in terms of a 'global feminist sisterhood' (Mohanty, 2003). In this regard, western feminist discourse is accused of establishing hegemony in theorising the category of 'woman', which Mohanty (1991) argues is incapable of representing all women globally within positions of subordination. Accordingly, Mohanty (1991) and other postcolonial feminists (Spivak, 1988) have sought to shatter the west/east and western woman/third world woman binaries. One strategy has been to produce 'politically focused, local analyses' (Mohanty, 2003, p. 32) of women and gender inequality to yield insights into issues such as unequal access to education and work, low incomes, female genital mutilation and oppressive marital arrangements.

Third, postcolonial feminist theory concentrates on the cultural specificity of the dynamics interconnecting gender, race and ethnicity. In that respect and at first pass, postcolonial feminist theory might resemble intersectionality theory, as both focus on bringing race and cultural differences into dialogue with gender. However, intersectionality theory has been criticised for failing to historicise gender, race and cultural differences. Indeed, Kerner argues that postcolonial feminist theories 'are more globally and more historically oriented than most positions put forward within current intersectionality research' (2017, p. 855). Power relations between different groups of women are more foregrounded in postcolonial feminist

theory than in intersectionality theory (Ashcroft et al., 2006). The attention paid to examining cultural differences between women is highlighted as an important strategy for combatting gender essentialism (Mohanty, 2003). Additionally, epistemological and methodological questions of representing non-western women may be said to be addressed more fully by postcolonial feminists (Kerner, 2017), some of whom have introduced an anti-categorical approach that aims to disrupt our preconceptions and understanding of the category of 'woman' (Mohanty, 2003; Spivak. 1988).

At this junction, let us be clear. Western feminism is a multifaceted body of scholarship that is by no means wholly unsensitive to the concerns postcolonial feminism raises (Beasley, 2005). However, it is postcolonial feminism's characteristics and long pedigree in attending to the issues outlined above, in particular the emphasis it places on cultural difference in theorising gender, which underscores its value to IHRM scholars as another conceptual resource for researching gender and paternalistic leadership.

Postcolonial feminism and paternalistic leadership

The potential for scholarly dialogue between postcolonial feminism and paternalistic leadership is based, in part, on how the latter represents one of the most important indigenous leadership theories within Chinese business culture (Farh & Cheng, 2000). Paternalistic leadership theory is philosophically grounded in Confucianism and is described by Farh and Cheng (2000) as comprising three dimensions: authoritarianism; fatherly benevolence; and moral integrity. For each of these dimensions there is a corresponding attitude that subordinates are expected to display: when a leader exhibits morality, the subordinate should respond with respect; authoritarianism demands dependence and compliance from the subordinate; while the demonstration of benevolence from the leader requires the subordinate to respond with a sense

of indebtedness and an obligation to repay the benevolence shown to them. Pellegrini and Scandura (2008) point out that non-western cultures tend to view paternalistic leadership as effective and benevolent, while western interpretations have criticised its authoritarianism, in particular its power inequalities between leaders and followers. Somewhat similarly, Westwood (1997) critiques paternalistic leadership for its patriarchal overtones, arguing that Chinese paternalistic leadership is constituted by Confucian gender norms which posit men not women as 'natural' leaders.

Research on paternalistic leadership and gender in China is scarce (Peus et al., 2015). Indeed, two recent reviews on paternalistic leadership theory fail to mention gender, not even as a potential topic for analysis (Chen & Farh, 2010; Wu & Xu, 2012), despite scholars calling for research in this area (Cheng & Lin, 2012; Pellegrini, Scandura, & Jayaraman, 2010). Addressing this lacuna, Pellegrini et al. (2010) examine the cross-cultural generalizability of paternalistic leadership using the western theory of leader-member exchange in India, and speculate that 'it may…be interesting to study the moderating effect of leader's gender because in traditional, male-dominated societies, "authoritative" female leadership may not be well received especially by male subordinates' (p. 413). Similarly, Chen, Eberly, Chiang, Farh & Cheng (2014) aver that women may be 'more effective at demonstrating benevolent behaviors, while men may be more effective at demonstrating [the] authoritarian behaviors' associated with paternalistic leadership' (p. 814).

Here, the potential contribution of postcolonial feminism to advance paternalistic leadership research starts from the basis of emphasising the role of cultural difference in theorising gender. Specifically, IHRM researchers would abandon pre-determined notions of what it means to be a 'woman' and a 'man'; instead, letting the multiple meanings associated with these or other categories that relate to 'gender' emerge from localised, indigenous analyses of women's and men's lives in and outside work. Cultural traditions, changing gender norms

and socioeconomic and political factors are brought into focus, in order to understand how gender and paternalistic leadership interact. The influence of culture is foregrounded also in the methodological challenges associated with how Chinese women are represented in paternalistic leadership research, regardless of whether this research is produced by western or Chinese scholars. In the next section, we elaborate some of these ideas, perspectives and sites of inquiry to detail the contribution postcolonial feminism can make to gender and paternalistic leadership research.

Chinese feminisms and genders

As stated above, postcolonial feminism has been proficient in generating feminist dialogues and analyses about the lives and representations of non-western women (Mohanty, 1991, 2003; Spivak, 1988, 1999). One advantage of this for IRHM scholars is that indigenous feminisms, sometimes overlooked by feminists from the 'west' (Ashcroft et al., 2006), can be used as additional resources for cultivating knowledge and theory on gender and paternalistic leadership in Chinese contexts. As mentioned above, within a postcolonial feminist frame, this involves IHRM scholars shedding predetermined ideas that might essentialise cultural differences about what gender means and how it is lived in Chinese and western contexts.

A brief comparative reading of extant research on gender and culture helps us to reveal commonalities in how gender is understood in the west and China, thus undermining this unhelpful binary. While gender binaries (e.g. man/woman, masculine/feminine) are normatively privileged in many western societies, they are also ruptured by heterosexual men and women (e.g. men who reject the breadwinner role), and by transgender men and women who transition from one gender to another (Dean, 2014; Shapiro, 2015). Similar non-normative expressions and understandings of gender have been documented in parts of Asia. For instance,

the term 'fa'afafine' has been given to biological males who express feminine gender identities in Somoa (Schmidt, 2016). Engebretsen's (2013) study of lala (lesbian) women in urban China reveals changing articulations of sexual subjectivity, such as gendered tomboy-wife roles. Similarities also exist in theories of gender fostered in the west and China. Kam Louie describes Chinese yin-yang theory that organises masculinity and femininity as harmonious opposites, where 'both men and women embrace both yin [female] and yang [male] at any particular point in time' (2002, p. 10). Likewise, some early western gender theories may be said to resonate with facets of yin-yang theory. In Bem's (1974) measurement of psychological androgyny, masculinity and femininity co-exist in androgyny, considered useful to men and women so they can adapt to the behavioural requirements of different situations at and outside work. However, living gender complementarity is challenging in China and the west, as gender norms can intensify the pressure on men and women to display gender differences so they exhibit gender conformity (Barlow, 2004).

In light of the above, postcolonial feminism teaches us that indigenous feminisms are beneficial for IHRM scholars because many are centrally concerned with unearthing localised Chinese understandings of gender and gender in/equality. It is also the case that Chinese feminism, like western feminism, is a capacious body of theories that diverge in how they theorise gender and the types of equality outcomes they seek for women and men (Chen, 2011). For example, some Chinese feminists have read Chinese feminism as an import from the West (Yu, 2015), an observation noted also by Schaffer and Xianlin (2007, p. 18) who maintain the term is seldom used in China for its 'western connotations' of radicalism and extremis. However, the notion of 'Chinese feminism' persists and is often written about by Chinese feminists who chart its history and ponder its future as shifts occurs in China's political regimes, economy and gender norms (Chen, 2011; Leung, 2003; Liu, Huang & Ma, 2015).

For instance, the 1990s ushered in Chinese feminism as 'women's genderism/feminine-ism' which has been read as a 'soft', palatable expression of feminism that, as Yu remarks, 'would hardly be regarded as feminist according to the Anglophone standard' (2015, pp. 4-5). Nonetheless, the Anglophone standard is multifaceted and the 'soft' brand of Chinese feminism, which seeks the harmonious development of both sexes and is aligned with Chinese official political ideology (Schaffer & Xianlin, 2007), may chime in with chords of western liberal feminism which endorse liberty and equality based action that remove barriers to women's full participation in public life (Beasley, 2005). Other Chinese feminists have sought to problematise the 'frequently held belief that Chinese feminism is synonymous with Communist feminism' (Chen, 2011, pp. ix-x), the latter described as a conservative liberal based feminism (Liu et al., 2015). Sensitive to the diversity within western feminisms, Liu et al. (2015) reason that borrowing 'from the West' (p. 12) has helped Chinese feminists to lift the voices of previously silenced Chinese women such as those who identify as 'queer'.

Notably, the role of Chinese feminism in the construction of western feminism has yet to unfold fully. Until relatively recently, Chinese feminists have shown a distaste for western feminism, displaying reluctance to 'contribute to [transnational feminist] theory building' (Xu, 2009, p. 208). As Edwards (2010) maintains, feminist scholarship is typically confined to women's studies departments in universities where feminists speak as representatives of their nation, providing the 'Chinese perspective', and not from a position linked to transnational feminism. Despite Chinese feminism's muted influence on western feminism, its potential for contributing to a wider transnational feminist movement is voiced by those Chinese feminist scholars who advocate localised analyses of Chinese women's lives (Chen, 2011). It is hoped that western feminists will reflect on and adjust their deployments of the concepts of gender, and racial/cultural differences (Chen, 2011). Indeed, Barlow (2004, p. 12) holds that Chinese feminism can inspire scholars outside of Chinese and gender studies to apply 'more caution

about claiming what is and is not "universal"' when it comes to the categories of 'woman' and 'gender'. Here, we may add 'feminism' since some Chinese 'feminist' scholars have contested 'Chinese feminism' as an unwelcome western construct (Yu, 2015). Patently, much remains open about Chinese feminism's role in the ongoing development of western feminism, but it is clear to us that postcolonial feminism can keep this topic at the forefront for IHRM scholars who wish to engage sensitively with Chinese feminism. A research proposition reflecting this is stated as follows:

Proposition: Indigenous understandings and theories of gender within and across Chinese contexts are diverse, and are, in part, being (re)shaped by western feminist theory. Chinese feminisms hold potential for influencing the construction of western feminisms, such as cautioning against universalising the category of 'woman'. Specific strands of Chinese and western feminisms are likely to parallel each other just as other strands diverge on how gender and feminism are understood and experienced. Both can play an influential role in shattering the west/east binary.

Chinese cultures and gender norms

Postcolonial feminism's emphasis on culture is predisposed to include the dynamics of gender norms, ideas of leadership and Chinese culture in IHRM research on paternalistic leadership in China. Prior studies have focused on these intersecting elements (Ayman & Korabik, 2010; Law, 2013; Parker, 1996) but, as Law (2013) reasons, one outcome of the dominance of Anglo-American paradigms and frameworks for examining culture, gender and leadership in non-western societies is the insufficient recognition of the historically contingent quality of these categories. Indeed, postcolonial feminist Uma Narayan (2000) proposes one strategy to resist

cultural and gender essentialism: focus closely on the historical understanding of context as well as the social, economic and political processes that have shaped the relationship between gender and culture.

In that regard, as IHRM scholars, we should interrogate how gender norms have changed and are changing within Chinese cultures, and contextualise paternalistic leadership practices at this nexus. To illustrate, research shows how the influence of gender norms imbued with Confucian values have weaken in parts of China (Long, 2016), due, in part, to socioeconomic and political developments and reforms (Cheung & Halpern, 2010). Incremental economic and political reforms have boosted China's economy (Lin, Cai & Li, 2003), opening up opportunities for Chinese women to move out of the home and into the labour market. The percentage of economically active Chinese women in the labour market has been reported at 63.9% (ILO, 2014), with Liu, Wei and Xie (2014, p. 169) noting the presence of Chinese women as board directors, suggesting that 'boards with three or more female directors have a stronger impact on firm performance than boards with two or fewer female directors'. However, Wang and Shirmohammadi (2016, p. 38) report that '53% of Chinese professional women [have] never advanced beyond lower-level positions in the workplace'. While gender norms are changing in response to economic demands for female labour, Tsang, Chan & Zhang (2011) argue that gender inequality reforms are frequently subservient to other national social and political campaigns. Other scholars note that Chinese traditional beliefs continue to circulate the view that women are unprepared for leadership roles as they invest their time performing roles as wives, mothers and daughters (Westwood, 1997). While many Chinese women derive psychological fulfilment from fulfilling the duties associated with these familial roles (Cooke, 2003), women and men continue to be assigned distinctive social roles organised across the public-private divide, sustaining gender stereotypes that minimise women's leadership potential (Eagly and Heilman, 2016).

Although not framed by postcolonial feminism, Long's (2016) study findings provide empirical insights into how post-1980s women professionals in urban China are enabled and constrained by the dynamics of gender norms. Long's cohort of women (born in the 1980s) is regarded as a generation set to 'inherit Chinese traditions', but also expected to 'embrace a new mind-set' following China's market reforms and Opening Up policies. Long describes China as a country that is undergoing 'sociopolitical transformations with strong national strategic initiatives for economic development and global influence' (p. 425). This represents a particularly transitional and dynamic moment in China's socio-political history for exploring how gender influences how Chinese women identify as workers, mothers, wives and daughters. Interview data shows that some women normalised the idea of women undertaking a second shift of labour in the home, even if they held full time jobs. For these working women, conforming to traditional Chinese gender roles was important in constructing their identities as mothers, speaking highly of those working women who 'privilege family over work and discrediting and condemning women who do not have the same priority' (p. 435).

Other interviewees were strong dissenters of traditional Chinese notions of gender, with some arguing that 'women [should] not be confined by femininity' within the Chinese tradition (p. 435). This was apparent in how several participants had started their own businesses, although some felt they should not privilege their identities as business owners over their identities as wives and mothers, choosing to spend extended time with their families. Displaying entrepreneurial flair could heighten the risk of being branded *Nv Hanzi* (masculine-acting women) which one woman felt was 'an awful stereotype' (p. 435). The same concern was expressed by those women who wanted to achieve professional success but were concerned about being branded 'the strong woman', a colloquialism described by Long (2016) that 'encapsulates the myth that woman can be "too aggressive", "ambitious" or "successful" to have a healthy family life' (p. 435).

While the tension female leaders can experience about being too 'feminine' or too 'masculine' has been debated for some time in the gender and leadership literature (e.g. Koenig et al., 2011), it is Long's (2016) appreciation of the historical contingency of gender norms in China that converses with a postcolonial feminist approach. Future IHRM research on gender and paternalistic leadership that draws on postcolonial feminism could build on Long (2016) by exploring the argument that different types of Chinese women face different structural barriers embedded within Chinese culture. These structural barriers not only have the power to silence the voices of specific types of women (Narayan, 2000), but also shape their access to and participation in the labour market. For example, Chinese women in rural settings can experience more obstacles accessing work in urban regions (Zhang, De Brauw & Rozelle, 2004); likewise, Maurer-Fazio, J Hughes and Zhang (2007) found labour force participation rates for women varied across Chinese ethnic minority groups (e.g. Han, Hui, Korean, Uygur and Zhuang). A research proposition that reflects this is:

Proposition. Postcolonial feminism is oriented to examine the dynamics of gender norms, ideas of leadership and cultural boundaries. The historical contingency of gender and culture has work-related consequences for different types of Chinese women who wish to access and participate in the labour market. Chinese women aspiring to or employed in leadership roles may face formidable cultural barriers rooted in traditional gender norms that underpin conventional forms of paternalistic leadership.

Voice, agency and the subaltern woman

Another site of postcolonial feminist inquiry concerns the relationship between voice, agency and subalternity. In other words, IHRM researchers must consider how they intend to represent

the voices of female Chinese leaders, without robbing them of their agency. This is an important epistemological issue that poses methodological challenges, discussed next.

One conceptual resource within postcolonial feminism theory for thinking through the methodological issue of representation is Spivak's (1988) seminal paper 'Can the subaltern speak?' Referring to Gramsci's notion of the 'subaltern' (which he applied to those social groups subjugated under the hegemony of the ruling classes), Spivak theorises the conditions of possibility for generating knowledge about the 'female subaltern'. Spivak notes that some western feminists have sought to represent the subaltern woman but criticises these benevolent efforts as instances of 'speaking for the subaltern', rather than letting the subaltern woman speak for herself. Spivak claims that 'speaking for the subaltern' is an act of 'epistemic violence' because subaltern women in particular do not have the agency to speak for themselves. Indeed, in rounding off her essay, Spivak is emphatic: 'the subaltern cannot speak!' (1988, p. 312). Specifically, in coming to this conclusion, Spivak problematises the idea that the subaltern woman can make a free representation of herself in her own words, pointing out that such representations are the discursive constructions of Western scholars. In other words, the subaltern is represented and heard through the mediation of the non-subaltern.

Crucially, this does not mean the subaltern woman is forever condemned to be represented and known only by and through the words of others. Nor does it mean that the western scholar cannot ever know the subaltern in any way. Notably, Spivak (1999, p. 189) reappraised her infamous assertion ('the subaltern cannot speak!') as 'inadvisable', later advocating how scholars must acknowledge their complicity in 'muting' the subaltern subject (p. 190). This salient point, one that demands western scholars learn to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for) the subaltern woman, has methodological implications for both western and non-western scholars.

For IHRM researchers interested in paternalistic leadership and gender, Spivak's (1988, 1999) theory of subalternity forces an interrogation of the political positions, identities and the interests that lie behind their critical assumptions and goals. This may be read, in part, as a call for such scholars to cultivate an epistemic reflexivity that locates the production of knowledge in specific historical, cultural and institutional contexts. One methodological challenge for western IHRM scholars is how to avoid becoming retrievers of information about Chinese women as leaders that claim to represent them as figures from the 'Third World', 'on display in Western journals' (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012, p. 575). Accordingly, methodological strategies are needed to foster reflexivity. While reflexivity is a well-discussed notion within methodological scholarship, especially in regard to studying indigenous people (Nicholls, 2009), it takes on a particular hue within a postcolonial feminist framework because it focuses sharply on issues of place, voice and representation (Racine, 2003).

Elaborating this, Ozkazanc-Pan (2012) argues that researchers cannot assume the research field and indigenous study participants exist as a reality external to the researcher. Instead, scholars must examine how the research field and the study participant (potentially the subaltern subject) are discursively constituted as such. This focal point should be a vital part of the research process. Following this approach, western IHRM researchers might interrogate how they discursively construct categories such as 'Chinese', 'woman', 'gender' and 'paternalistic leadership' throughout the research process, as such categories can become repositories for western ideas and meanings that influence how these categories are represented and theorised. For IHRM scholars in China, the same approach might be applied, examining how non-Chinese study participants are constructed as such and how their voices are represented in research outputs. Additionally, scholars in China may focus on how western representations of China in IHRM scholarship reproduce colonial discourses that speak for,

rather than speak to, Chinese research participants. One proposition may be stated as the following:

Proposition. If IHRM researchers do not reflect on voice, agency and representation, they heighten the risk of constituting Chinese female study participants in ways that reproduce western leadership knowledge at the expense of indigenous knowledge. Similarly, if Chinese IHRM researchers do not reflect on how 'non-Chinese' study participants are represented, they risk effacing the diversity of these people's lives and their agency in constructing multiple gender relations and meanings. Chinese scholars must consider also how they can lift the voices of different Chinese women in diverse Chinese cultural settings.

Implications for IHRM knowledge and practice

In the preceding sections, we have sought to open an interrogative space within IHRM to incorporate postcolonial feminist theory. The theoretical contribution of this article concerns how we have added and outlined the merits of postcolonial feminism to the menu of theoretical options available to IHRM researchers interested in researching paternalistic leadership and gender within Chinese cultures. As debated above, the particular contributions of postcolonial feminism relates to three of its key tenets: 1) acknowledging that the current global, postcolonial world is a cultural construction shaped by historical processes of imperialism and colonisation; 2) its interrogation of the representation of 'non-western' women within feminist scholarship; 3) the emphasis placed on the cultural specificity of the dynamics between gender, race and ethnicity. Illustrating postcolonial feminism's capacity in those regards, we have discussed three areas of inquiry and concern: 1) Chinese feminisms and genders; 2) Chinese cultures and gender norms; 3) Voice, agency and the subaltern woman. Elaborating further the

value of a postcolonial feminist theory for IHRM researchers interested in gender and paternalistic leadership, we outline some implications for practice and suggestions for future research.

Chinese feminisms and genders. One strategy for practice is that IHRM scholars engage with strands of Chinese feminism to explore the dynamics between paternalistic leadership and gender, rather than relying solely on western feminist theory. Responding to the wider call from Chinese feminists for localised analyses of Chinese women's lives (Chen, 2011), we suggest Chinese feminism represents an untapped and valuable conceptual resource for generating indigenous knowledge on gender and paternalistic leadership. Mobilising Chinese feminism may also reveal parallels with gender theory in other parts of the world that erode the western/non-western feminism binary. Research questions that can shape future research practice along these lines include:

How can different streams of Chinese feminism help to advance a feminist postcolonial critique of non-Chinese theories of gender? Might some Chinese feminist theories leave gender binaries intact?

How can ideas within different strands of Chinese feminism deliver equality outcomes for Chinese women who aspire to and who presently occupy leadership roles?

Where the authoritarian dimension of paternalistic leadership is more accepted in Chinese cultural settings, how does that shape perceptions of gender and female leaders who behave that way?

Where subordinates experience care and paternal authority from a female leader, are they more or less willing to demonstrate the conformity expected of them in a paternalistic leadership context?

Chinese cultures and gender norms. One implication for practice concerns the need for IHRM scholars to refrain from mobilising gender as a transhistorical, transcultural category which means the same in all cultural contexts. Since cultural difference is one of the pivots in theorising and historicising gender for postcolonial feminists (Mohanty, 1991, 2003; Spivak, 1988), its capacity for historicising the relationship between culture and gender norms is invaluable. Acknowledging this is to recognise that neither Chinese culture nor Chinese women are unified categories (Barlow, 2004). It is crucial for IHRM scholars to ask 'what women' and in 'what Chinese cultural contexts' when examining gender and paternalistic leadership. The following research questions are pertinent to that end:

Which Chinese women face cultural barriers that block or make it difficult for them to perform leadership roles in contexts where authoritarian forms of paternalistic leadership are privileged? Do Chinese women face more challenging cultural barriers in leadership roles than western women?

If Chinese female leaders act more benevolent in order to survive in organisations that are dominated by men numerically and/or symbolically, do they cement traditional gender roles ascribed to them?

How do Chinese male leaders fare compared to non-Chinese female leaders in different cultural settings?

Do Chinese women want to alter the gendered values and traditions that infuse paternalistic leadership? If there is a need and/or want for change, does this create opportunities for alternative modes of leadership?

Voice, agency and the subaltern woman. We hope to galvanise Chinese scholars to contribute further to the gender and paternalistic leadership literature by researching the voices of Chinese women in leadership roles. That such voices have yet to be heard fully is woeful. Collaborative and participatory research methodologies and methods, such as ethnographies and action research (Nicholls, 2009), could be useful to that end. From another angle, questions should be raised about the practices needed to enable Chinese women to be agentic for their own purposes and to make their voices heard. Here, there are no easy solutions. One strategy is that Chinese women might look to feminism for support. However, State permission is required to establish 'feminist' organisations, and feminist activism is tolerated within limited parameters imposed by the State (Edwards, 2010). Still, in academic circles, a postcolonial feminist perspective encourages and directs us to search the undergrowth of everyday Chinese life to find signs of where, when and how Chinese women can resist the pull of traditional gender norms and the pressure exerted by families to show gender conformity (e.g. Engebretsen, 2013). Chinese scholars have a particularly important role to play in lifting the voices of Chinese women so restrictive gender norms can be subject to critique and revision. Research questions sensitive to these issues include:

Why are the voices of Chinese women mostly absent in paternalistic leadership research? Addressing this silence, how can IHRM scholars design programmes of research that speak to rather than speak for Chinese women?

What reflexive strategies can IHRM scholars deploy to reflect on their ethnic background and the stereotypes that may impinge on the understanding and representation of cultural differences?

How are identity categories (e.g. 'woman', 'Chinese', 'leader') constituted throughout the research process? How can we refrain from essentializing Chinese women in paternalistic leadership research?

How can Chinese women represent themselves in paternalistic leadership and gender research?

Conclusion

In this article, we have sought to establish postcolonial feminism as a valuable resource for IHRM scholars who wish to address the knowledge gap concerning gender and paternalistic leadership. Postcolonial feminism offers particular ideas, perspectives and lines of inquiry that are both helpful and challenging for IHRM researchers, not least because they demand that we interrogate preconceived ideas about gender, leadership and cultural difference. To that end, we hope this article excites debate and provides some practical guidance about how postcolonial feminism can be mobilised in paternalistic leadership research. In closing, we do not see the value of postcolonial feminism being limited to this topic alone. Rather, it may be pressed into service by IHRM scholars around the globe who are interested in studying gender, race and cultural difference.

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