

Book Review: Jane Horan, *How Asian Women Lead: Lessons for Global Corporations*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, £21.99 hbk, (ISBN: 9781137378712), 192pp<sup>1</sup>

Maria Adamson<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The Final version of the review is published in *Work, Employment and Society*. Please use original citation: Maria Adamson. Book Review: Jane Horan, *How Asian Women Lead: Lessons for Global Corporations*, *Work, Employment & Society*, first online published May 26, 2015 doi:10.1177/0950017015579598

<sup>2</sup> Dr Maria Adamson is a Lecturer in Organisational Behaviour and Human Resource Management at the Department of Leadership Work and Organisation at Middlesex University. [M.Adamson@mdx.ac.uk](mailto:M.Adamson@mdx.ac.uk)

This book sets out to contribute to the growing discussion of female leadership as well as to question the traditional 'Western'-centred conceptions of leadership. It does so by exploring the specificities and complexities of Asian women's experiences of managing and leading and exposing the diversity of global leadership practices.

Having introduced the study's methodology of cross-cultural storytelling, Chapters 2 to 5 tell the stories of the four female participants – a Japanese businesswoman pursuing a career in the non-profit sector, a Bangladeshi-born Canadian academic, a Singaporean multinational executive and a Taiwanese freelance business consultant. The stories are based on in-depth interviews and regular communication with each participant over a period of time. Each chapter paints a vivid picture of women's leadership experiences, showing how multiple 'turning points' and factors – from travelling and playing sports, to family issues and religious beliefs – have shaped participants' leadership philosophy and style. Chapter 6 attempts to bring these four stories together: it is written in the unusual format of a corporate fable, in which the four participants discuss the work-related

dilemma of a fictional female character. The author uses quotations from the actual interviews, and the imaginative format of the chapter aims to draw the reader in on an emotional level into discussions of office politics, gender, ethics and power.

The following three chapters explore issues arising from the data. Drawing on both literature and the author's personal experience of being a 'Western' researcher in an Asian context, Chapter 7 reflects on the difficulty of overcoming cultural and gender biases in constructing and assessing leadership practices, and argues for reflexive scrutiny of organisational processes to challenge these. Chapter 8 offers a discussion of transformational leadership, exploring how the participants demonstrate elements associated with it, such as morality, authenticity, integrity, ethical values and inclusivity. This chapter also indicates that differences in cultural values, meanings and social practices play a significant role in the development of leadership styles and philosophies, implying a certain critique of Western-centric conceptions of leadership. Chapter 9 further pursues the idea of the importance of cultural context in questioning the traditional constructions of leadership, focusing on the role of cultural identity and language in cross-cultural meaning-making. Chapter 10 concludes by suggesting ways for organisations to challenge gendered leadership stereotypes by re-evaluating 'mental blueprints' of leadership and 'building reflexivity into the organizational mindset' (p.135).

In applying an innovative methodology to investigate a hitherto underexplored context, the book offers a number of fascinating insights into the leadership experiences of women from several parts of Asia, highlighting the importance of the intersection of cultural context and gender norms for understanding leadership. However, despite illustrating truly captivating stories of Asian women, Horan does not seem to go far enough in substantially questioning the theoretical assumptions of 'Western' models of leadership, which means that the book falls a little short of its promise to offer 'a new perspective' on leadership (p.2). Participants' stories touch on a multitude of issues that undoubtedly question the 'Western'-centred construction of leadership practices and the author repeatedly highlights the significance of the specificities of Asian contexts, such as values of collectivity, religious and family practices, and social structures. And yet, the data are interpreted through the transformational leadership framework which, although admittedly more critical, is still a product of the 'Western' theoretical imaginary. There is also surprisingly little critique of the framework in light of the data. I believe that the in-

depth nature of the research methodology and the author's intimate knowledge of the context could potentially allow for a more grounded theory conceptualisation of the meanings of leadership in the Asian context. The interrogation of such contextual differences could have made for a very critical discussion of the transformational leadership framework and other Western leadership conceptions. Finally, while the book's title suggests a focus on female leadership, gender is not viewed as a theoretical core of its analysis. The book could have benefited from a more systematic use of the gender theories of leadership and a more critical interrogation of the relationship between cultural and structural factors and the formation of Asian women's leadership styles and practices.

Nonetheless, debates on the construction of the gendered nature of leadership are vital, and any attempt to probe 'Western' frameworks by investigating a different cultural context is illuminating and most certainly welcome. The fascinating stories of Horan's participants, and her own reflections on researching the Asian context raise awareness of the complexity of factors shaping women's leadership experiences, implying, perhaps, that there is no single way of doing transformational or any other kind of leadership. The book may therefore serve as an inspiration for further exploration of the entanglements of gender, culture and leadership.