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Asian Women in Management

Asia, the most rapidly growing, highly competitive region of the world, currently includes more than half the world's population and produces more than one-fifth of its GNP (*World Bank Atlas*, 1992). The percent growth in GDP among countries in the region is among the highest in the world, with 1993 estimates ranging from 10-12 percent for the People's Republic of China, to over 8 percent for Malaysia, over 7 percent for Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, over 6 percent for Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan, South Korea, and Taiwan, over 5 percent for Hong Kong, India, and Sri Lanka, with only New Zealand (3.5 percent), Australia (2.5 percent), Japan (1.2 percent), and the Philippines (1.1 percent) lagging somewhat behind ("Paying for Excess," 1993, p. 45).

Asia is far from economically or culturally homogeneous. It includes four major industrial structures: Japan, a postindustrial economy; Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan newly industrialized, service economies; Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philip-

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pires, and Thailand, low-wage-rate, developing economies; and the People's Republic of China with its state-dominated socialist economy (Lasserre, 1991); and numerous religious traditions, including Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, and Islam.

Yet over the last decade, Asia has emerged as a "strategic region," a region in which major global firms must compete (Lasserre, 1991, p. 240; also Kindel, 1991). As the flow of foreign investment into Asia out-ranked that of all other regions of the world, new world-class Asian firms, primarily from Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, began competing against their European and North American counterparts (Lasserre, 1991; "Investment in Asia," 1993). Within the dynamism of the region, the scarcity of managerial talent to meet the demands of growth is palpable (de Bettignies, 1991), providing a rich background on which to trace the progress being made by Asia's women managers.

Asia's women managers

While women's labor force participation rates in the Asian economies are ranked among the world's highest, women's presence in the managerial ranks is less impressive, and their near absence from executive positions renders them almost invisible. Yet, similar to Asia's rapidly improving economic performance levels, many predict that the number of Asian women managers and executives will rise markedly over the coming decade. Why?

To date, one of the most common explanations for Asian women's underrepresentation and underutilization in management has been the influence of Asia's various cultural and religious traditions. All Asian cultures are collective and familial (Hofstede and Bond, 1988), with each expecting women to assume primary responsibility for the home and children. Confucianism, which dominates the People's Republic of China and overseas Chinese communities as well as strongly influencing Japanese culture, has traditionally socialized women to be shy, unassertive, and obedient to men. One classic Confucian adage states that "it is a virtue if a woman has no ability" (Xi, 1985). When a woman becomes a leader in the People's Republic of China, some Chinese repeat the folk saying that it is like "a donkey taking the place of a horse, which can only lead to trouble" (Croll, 1977). Based on similar traditions, the Japanese have viewed women neither as authority figures nor as business decision makers (Adler, 1987). In Thailand,

by contrast, Buddhism does not mandate different roles for women and men. However, Buddhism's emphasis on the importance of spiritual life historically led many Thai men away from "economic-type" activities, leaving such business pursuits to women (Siengthai and Leelakulthanit, 1993-94, 1994).

Traditional cultural and religious explanations may no longer be the most important for predicting women's representation in management in the coming decade, but rather the impact of Asia's rapidly growing economies and the profound influence of underlying social structure changes in each country. Such societal factors as increasing educational levels, the region's dynamic entrepreneurialism, and the continued influence of family-owned business enterprises may, in fact, be more determinant.

Women's increasing educational levels

According to Philip Yeo, chairman of Singapore's Economic Development Board, "In the next ten years there will be no shortage of cheap labor in Asia But there will be a serious shortage of educated, skilled people" ("Asia's Hot New Growth Triangle," 1992, p. 137). The education level of Asian women has improved dramatically and, in some countries, now exceeds that of many Asian men, thus positioning women well for the professional and managerial jobs of the 1990s. In Singapore, for example, women workers are generally better educated than their male counterparts, with approximately 60 percent of employed women, compared with 48 percent of their male counterparts, holding at least secondary qualifications (Chan and Lee, 1994, based on the *Report on the Labour Force Survey of Singapore*, 1991). In Taiwan, with its long tradition of emphasizing education, 60 percent of the students graduating in business and the social sciences in 1988 were women (Cheng and Liao, 1993-94, 1994). Already by 1983 in the People's Republic of China there were nine times as many women in college as at the time of the communist takeover in 1949 (Korabik, 1993-94, 1994). Although women currently comprise only 26 percent of all college students, the People's Republic of China reports higher proportions of women in university teaching, scientific research, medicine, and management than does the United States (Korabik, 1993-94, 1994). Whereas more men than women in Hong Kong receive university

degrees, 75 percent of those graduating in international business from one university are now women (de Leon and Ho, 1994).

In Indonesia, with more women managers working in the public than the private sector, 60 percent of women public sector managers, versus just 51 percent of their male counterparts, have received higher education (Wright and Crockett Tellei, 1993–94, 1994). In Japan, a country with a 99 percent literacy rate, the level of education continues to be lower for women than for men, however, college training for women increasingly appears to be the norm (Steinhoff and Tanaka, 1993, 1994). Malaysia similarly has a lower education level among women than among men, but the number of college-educated women is rising rapidly, including among those enrolled in managerial and technical studies (Mansor, 1994). Whereas only 29 percent of Malaysian university students in 1970 were women, by 1990 the number had increased to 44 percent (Mansor, 1994). In Thailand, the general literacy rate among women is still 75 percent compared with 90 percent among men (Siengthai and Leelakulthanit, 1993–94, 1994). However, like the emerging pattern in other countries, Thai women managers are more highly educated than their male peers, with 78 percent of women managers and only 61 percent of their male peers having higher education (Siengthai and Leelakulthanit, 1993–94, 1994).

Foreign-language fluency, a key skill needed to increase global competitiveness in the region, is frequently higher among educated Asian women than men, many of whom have worked for exporters or foreign-owned firms over the past few decades. In Taiwan, for example, although men head most of the small exporting businesses on which the economy has been built, women secretaries who are fluent in foreign languages have traditionally communicated with foreign importers. Many of Taiwan's women managers today began their careers working in such firms (Cheng and Liao, 1993–94, 1994).

Women managers and Asia's dynamic entrepreneurialism

Like the influence of women's rising educational levels, the dynamic entrepreneurialism of the region can be expected to continue to provide women with managerial opportunities—opportunities that often remain denied to women in other sectors. Whereas women managers have remained fairly to extremely scarce in major corporations, women entrepreneurs in increasing numbers are founding and managing small

and medium-sized businesses throughout Asia. In Singapore, for example, 38 percent of women managers own their own firms (Chan and Lee, 1994). In Japan, "there are women in managerial positions just about everywhere . . . except in large corporations. Generally the smaller the firm, the greater the presence of women in management" (Steinhoff and Tanaka, 1993, 1994). The probability is five times greater in a small Japanese firm than in a major Japanese corporation of a Japanese woman becoming an entry-level manager, ten times greater of becoming a middle-level manager, and 30 times greater of becoming a division head (Steinhoff and Tanaka, 1993, 1994; based on Ministry of Labor, Women's Bureau, 1990). Owing to North American and European companies' focus on large multinational corporations rather than small, often family-owned firms, these Japanese women executives and business leaders often remain invisible or ignored by both management scholars and the business press.

In reviewing the situation for Asia's women managers, the Malaysian province of Kelantan presents a unique case. In Kelantan, the woman is generally the dominant person in the household and often the breadwinner of the family (Mansor, 1994). Women also dominate business activity in Kelantan, with many women engaged in lucrative small businesses (Mansor, 1994). Notwithstanding this unique pattern, women's dominant position in Kelantan's entrepreneurial small business sector "is not reflected in the big corporations and government organizations based in Kelantan, where women paradoxically do not hold managerial positions" (Mansor, 1994, p. 103). Rather than offering women unique opportunities, Kelantan's denial of access to managerial positions in major organizations replicates the pattern in other Asian countries.

Women executives in family-owned businesses

Along with the impact of rising education levels and entrepreneurial activity on Asia's women managers, the continued presence of many family-owned firms bodes well for the small, although growing, number of women executives. The influence of family businesses is particularly important because it offers women access to senior executive positions, although unfortunately often only to a limited number of select women from socioeconomically privileged families. Whereas increasing education levels offer a broader range of women access to

entry-level managerial positions, education alone does not open the doors to senior management in Asia or in any other part of the world (Antal and Izraeli, 1993). However, most of Asia still maintains fairly stable social class distinctions, with large numbers of poor and a very limited number of well-to-do families. Families from the uppermost socioeconomic classes educate both their daughters and their sons, often sending them to foreign universities for initial or advanced degrees. Thus, not only do these families educate their children, but they also provide early exposure to the world beyond their home country's borders. Such families' strong expectation is that their children, including an increasing number of daughters, will return to work in family businesses. Although the exact number remains to be assessed, informal observation suggests that the proportion of women executives (as opposed to lower- and middle-level managers) in such countries as Thailand and the Philippines may already be among the highest, if not the absolute highest, in the world.

Beyond the regionwide influence of improved education, entrepreneurial activity, and family-owned businesses, conditions specific to each country are also facilitating women's entrance into the managerial and executive ranks. For example, Hong Kong's substantial emigration in the years leading up to its 1997 return to China, has, to date, included 20–25 percent managers, leaving Hong Kong with an acute scarcity of local managerial talent (de Leon and Ho, 1994). Organizations need both women and men managers to fill the gap caused by this emigration braindrain. Singapore's extremely rapid economic growth has created critical labor shortages which observers expect to increase in the coming decade. As a result, among other initiatives, the Singapore government has launched a major campaign to attract those women not already working back into the work force (Chan and Lee, 1994).

Asian women managers and transnational firms

Foreign multinational corporations have played a significant role in the economic development of Asia, especially in the countries of Southeast Asia. Some foreign corporations have contributed to the economic development of the countries in which they operate, both directly through their investment in facilities and personnel and more indirectly through their influence on national systems of education, vocational training, technological capability, and overall human resource develop-

ment (Bartholomew, 1992; United Nations, 1992). The newly industrialized economies (NIEs) of Southeast Asia have been particularly effective at capturing the benefits of enhanced technological, economic, organizational, and managerial capability from transnational firms and channeling them into enhanced capability at the national level (Ozawa, 1992). For example, Malaysia negotiated with electronics transnationals from the United States to produce in Malaysia on the condition that they provide education for Malaysians who were not employed by the transnationals, but who would then have the competencies to work for local Malaysian firms (Nadler and Nadler, 1989).

Whereas foreign multinationals of the past have also had an influence on Asia's women, that influence has not always been positive, especially for women aspiring to managerial careers. Until recently, foreign multinationals have primarily provided low-level employment for women workers, often paying them a minimum wage for repetitive manual labor. For example, for the past several decades, women in Malaysia and Taiwan have comprised more than 80 percent of the labor force in such export industries as textiles and electronics assembly (Cheng and Liao, 1993–94, 1994; Mansor, 1994).

While multinational corporations historically hired many women as low-level workers, they rarely selected women for managerial or executive positions. Today, however, intensified global competition is forcing firms to adopt new business strategies, and, consequently, to develop new human resource strategies (see Adler and Ghadar, 1990; Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1989). These emerging transnational strategies are already beginning to have a profound impact on the managerial opportunities of Asian women and can be predicted to have an even greater impact in the future. Women, to an increasing extent, will be recruited, selected, and promoted into managerial and executive positions in the 1990s.

To manage these changing dynamics, business leaders need to ask two questions. First, why should leading transnational firms consider hiring Asian women as managers and executives? And second, why would top Asian women choose to work for a particular transnational firm as a manager or professional? We will address both questions.

From the perspective of companies: Competitive advantage

Transnational firms' primary reason for hiring and promoting women managers and executives is to create competitive advantage. Organiza-

tions increase their chances of recruiting the best people by targeting top women and men, rather than continuing the traditional pattern of limiting recruitment to men. Since the vast majority of firms target only male managers and executives, firms can gain competitive advantage by differentiating themselves from the majority and actively recruiting women. In a highly competitive global business environment, the cost of prejudice is extraordinarily high. In Asia's highly competitive, fully employed economies, the cost of prejudice is becoming just too high to limit selection to men.

Moreover, in Asia in the 1990s, if a firm does not recruit and select women managers, a competitor will. For example, one leading U.S. transnational that is in the process of rapidly tripling its investment in Asia decided to take what it considered to be an innovative approach by explicitly targeting Asian women managers and executives. In 1993, while on a recruiting trip in Southeast Asia, the Americans were surprised to discover that a group of Japanese bankers had already convened a seminar in Singapore designed to increase their understanding of the relationship between women managers and power in the region. Needless to say, the Japanese had neither randomly nor casually selected this topic. The Americans concluded that if they, and other Western firms, did not actively attract and hire senior Asian women, the Japanese firms might beat them out in what, until that day, had seemed like an extremely unlikely domain.

By targeting women managers, transnationals can also overcome some of the competitive disadvantages of not being a local firm. In Japan, for example, local Japanese multinationals hire almost exclusively male managers, both because they have the relationship networks to recruit them and because Japanese men usually accept such offers, especially from major Japanese corporations. By contrast, when recruiting in this extremely competitive market for male talent, foreign firms have trouble similarly attracting top male candidates, especially those graduating from the leading universities (Adler, 1993; Lansing and Ready, 1988; Steinhoff and Tanaka, 1993, 1994). As a result, some foreign firms—initially led by the Americans—have turned to hiring and promoting Japanese women into managerial and professional positions (Steinhoff and Tanaka, 1993, 1994). Given the increasing supply of educated Japanese women and the extremely low demand for them among Japanese firms, this strategy has provided foreign transnationals with relatively easy access to a pool of highly

talented potential managers. Like the pattern in Japan, although not identical to it, transnational corporations in Taiwan have led local firms in recruiting and hiring local Taiwanese women as managers (Cheng and Liao, 1993–94, 1994).

Transnationals are aided in initiating policies to recruit local women managers by the fact that they are “foreign,” that is, that they are not local firms. In contrast to the corporate culture of local firms, the corporate culture of transnational firms is not as tightly bound by the customs of the local culture, nor need it be. Foreign transnationals therefore have greater flexibility in defining selection and promotion criteria that best fit the firm’s competitive needs rather than having to strictly adhere to those that most closely mimic the historic cultural patterns of the local country. Simply said, transnational firms can and do hire local women managers even in countries where it is still extremely rare for the local firms to do so (Adler, 1993).

Beyond the economic arguments based on the ample supply of potential women managers and firms’ lack of demand for them, along with the arguments based on foreign firms’ restricted access to the highly competitive local male-labor markets, transnational firms also choose to hire Asian women as senior managers because it works. Asians respect both women and men in executive positions, especially in most Southeast Asian countries. Not only do Asians take senior women executives and professionals seriously and treat them with the respect necessary for success, they treat foreign expatriate women managers in a similarly professional way (Adler, 1987, 1993). As one woman manager working in Hong Kong summarized, “It doesn’t make any difference if you are blue, green, purple, or a frog. If you have the best product at the best price, the Chinese will buy” (Adler, 1987). The problem for women, especially in Southeast Asia, has been finding a way to get major corporations to hire them as managers and to promote them into executive positions, not for them to succeed once hired. Moreover, based on historic patterns, it appears that women managers, once hired, may stay longer with a firm than do their male counterparts, thus providing the hiring firms with a greater return on their investment in training and developing the women managers. The opportunity today for both transnational and local firms is to realize these labor market imperfections and to capitalize on them.

In a number of North American transnationals, the CEO has made a public commitment to equal employment opportunity practices, includ-

ing committing to recruiting and promoting women both into management and up into the executive ranks. While equity is certainly a valid and commendable reason for such firms to recruit and hire Asian women, there are far more compelling business reasons—as discussed above—for increasing the number of women managers and executives.

***From the perspective of Asian women:
Challenge, opportunity, and a sincere environment*¹**

Based on interviews with thirty Asian women executives from Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, women managers are looking for positions that offer them challenge, opportunity for career growth, and a sincere organizational environment. First, the women executives want the initial position that they are hired into to be professionally challenging. They want both an appropriate level of managerial responsibility and “stretch,” the opportunity to learn from what they are doing. Second, the Asian women executives emphasized that they want to work for a company that will offer them ongoing opportunities to learn and, therefore, possibilities for career growth. Most Asian women executives see transnationals as having an advantage over many local firms because they frequently provide better learning opportunities, especially for people joining at the junior managerial and professional levels. However, they see local firms as often providing women with better opportunities for career advancement, especially as they become more senior in the organization. As one very senior Malaysian woman executive, who herself had worked for both a world-renowned transnational and a prominent local firm, summarized, “When my daughter graduated from university, I advised her to take her first position with a large foreign firm so she could learn as much as possible for five to six years. After that, I told her to join a local firm where she would have an opportunity for real responsibility and promotion to the top.”

Third, the Asian women executives described their preferred organization as providing a “sincere environment,” that is, an organizational culture that includes women managers both in words and in action on a day-to-day basis. Since, according to the women executives, women managers more often make a longer-term commitment to an organization than do many of their male colleagues, it is particularly important to them that firms offer an appropriate organizational climate, with rich opportunities for continuous learning and career growth. In choosing a

company to work for, these women consider challenge, opportunity, and a sincere environment considerably more important than either the salary level or job description accompanying the initial position. It is not, however, that the initial salary should not be commensurate with that offered to a man, or that the job description of the initial position need not be an appropriate fit with the woman's skills and experience. Rather, the important difference is that women consider factors beyond salary and job description particularly important in selecting a firm.

When asked, the women executives explained that while they were highly committed to their career, they continually sought ways to balance their private and professional lives. However, seeking help from an employer to reduce the time demands of managing a household and caring for children is not as critical or as important in Asia as it is, for example, in North America. In Asia, unlike in North America, almost all senior women managers have the assistance of live-in household help and an extended family, as well as having grown-up children. For most Asian women executives, provisions for maternity leave and child care were not considered particularly important, since the majority of these women had already raised their family and no longer had young children living at home. As one Malaysian executive responded to my query about household, family, and child care arrangements, "I would not be at this senior a level unless I had a supportive husband, live-in household help, and grown-up children. Now I relax after a stressful day at work by going to my daughter's home and playing with my grandchildren."

Since it is the woman in Asia who remains primarily responsible for the home, children, and social well-being of the family, many lower- and middle-level managers appreciate receiving help from employers with their family demands. The women executives recommended that, whenever possible, companies offer such benefits as flextime, telecommuting, and a company car and driver for personal use. They described the latter as particularly valuable because it offers dual-career couples the services of a dependable person—the company-employed driver—to take care of such time-consuming tasks as shopping, running errands, picking children up from school, and many other activities that have traditionally been done by nonworking wives. The women executives emphasized, however, that most Asian managers have access to many more social support systems than do the majority of their North American counterparts. As one Chinese woman partner

in a major international accounting firm, explained, "It was no problem when I had the twins, I just got two nannies." While such paid support personnel are beyond the reach of most women workers, they are available to many of the women managers and to almost all of the women executives.

When asked about the best way for a local or foreign firm to attract senior women managers, the women executives emphasized the importance of relationship networks. Asian women, as well as Asian men, often accept a position because the owners or managers of the company are known to them, either directly or through a mutually respected acquaintance. Objective announcements advertising job characteristics in journals and newspapers serve a relatively less important function and are considerably less effective in Asia than, for example, in North America. One Chinese woman human resource director in Singapore cautioned against relying on executive search firms unless the client firm directs them to search for and identify a list of potential candidates that includes women. She explained: "Executive search firms have much more experience, and therefore much better contacts [networks], for identifying male candidates than for finding appropriately qualified women." Moreover, since so many of their previous foreign and local clients have appeared to prefer men, the Asian-based executive search firms continue today, both explicitly and implicitly, to screen out potential women candidates.

Competitive frontiers

The business environment in Asia is clearly changing, and with it the opportunities for both local and transnational firms to consider hiring and promoting women managers and executives. This issue of *International Studies of Management and Organization* describes the role of women in management in four Asian countries. Lorna Wright and Virginia Crockett Tellei present the situation for women in management in Indonesia, a country with one of the world's largest and fastest-growing populations, a dominant Moslem culture together with strong, localized, Hindu traditions, and an economy that is only now beginning to perform at the level of some of its more rapidly growing neighbors. Karen Korabik describes the situation for women in management in the People's Republic of China, a country with the largest population in the world, an extraordinarily rapidly growing economy,

and both a changing command economy and a political system still controlled by the communists. Cheng Wei-yuan and Liao Lung-li present the situation for women managers in Taiwan, a country based on Confucian traditions that has experienced continued rapid economic growth, significant movement toward full democracy, and a unique status as an only-sometimes-officially-recognized country due to its particular relationship with the People's Republic of China. Sununta Siengthai and Orose Leelakulthanit describe the case for women managers in Thailand, one of the world's few Buddhist countries, which only recently began to experience the rapid economic growth of many of its Asian neighbors. While four articles cannot possibly present all of the rich traditions of Asia, these particular four give an engaging introduction to the complexity of the issues and the emerging possibilities for Asian women in management.

Note

1. Research reported in this section is based on interviews the author conducted with 30 women executives and management scholars in Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore in 1993.

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