Abstract: Transgressing the power/powerless divide: Hong Kong Academic Women
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Despite the advancement women have made in terms of their participation rate as undergraduate students worldwide, research indicates that women as academics are underrepresented in senior and leadership roles globally. A range of theories and metaphors are put forward to both describe and explain this 'absence': the pipeline; the glass ceiling; negotiating the stone floor; inhabiting the trenches; and being stuck in a swamp.

Tacit, culturally embedded assumptions about the skills and competencies of women are seen to hinder women's progression within university hierarchies (Eriksson-Zetterquist and Styhre, 2008). Universities are essentially seen as gendered, rewarding the competencies and skills supposedly associated with men, thereby placing male academics as 'gatekeepers' to career progression and central to decision-making processes. In particular, academic leadership is constructed as male and is thereby associated with (masculine) agentic attributes, namely ambition, aggression, self-confidence and independence (Madera et al., 2009). However, female academics who exhibit those characteristics which are praised in the academy are seen as 'difficult' or 'unfeminine'. In this respect, women are 'damned if you do, damned if you don't', emphasizing the incompatible subjectivities of 'woman' and 'academic' (Krefting, 2003). Male academics are positioned as power*ful*, whilst women academics are positioned as power*less*.

This paper seeks to explore the narratives of senior academic women who have successful negotiated and transgressed the powerless/powerful divide. The context is the Hong Kong Academy.

Hong Kong provides a particularly interesting context in which to explore the position of women as academic leaders. With a 'foot in two cultures', Hong Kong culturally is considered to have more of an affinity with China than the West. With respect to the position of women, Asian culture, based on a Confucian heritage, espouses a specific concept of femininity; women's roles and conduct in public life are framed by cultural expectations that place a premium on women as dutiful wives, mothers and homemakers and on a woman's conduct in public as subdued, quiet and withdrawn (Luke, 2000). However, in terms of its socio-economic environment, as a leading international finance centre, Hong Kong's universities have great similarity with those in the West and many academics have been trained in the West. Moreover, the region has a strong higher education sector; six out the eight University Grants Committee funded institutions are ranked in the QS top 500 world universities.

Based on a number of in-depth interviews with women leaders in the Hong Kong Academy, the paper will reflect on how these women have transgressed the power/powerless divide, their experiences of crossing that boundary and how

they have constructed and made sense of their identities as lone academic female leaders. Particularly attention will also be paid to the cultural context within which these women are positioned; to what extent has Confucianism impacted on their journey to become power*ful* academics.

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