Managerial aspiration: do gender and gender role identity make a difference in the Chinese context?

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to explore how gender and gender role identity separately and jointly affect managerial aspirations.

Design/methodology/approach – The study was cross-sectional in nature. Survey data were collected from Chinese Government sectors. Two-way analysis of variance was used to test the research hypotheses.

Findings – The results showed that gender role identity and combination of gender and gender role identity predict management aspirations while gender alone does not affect management aspirations. Androgynous individuals self-reported higher scores of managerial aspirations. Female managers who perceive themselves as androgynous and masculine tend to possess higher management aspirations. However, when they perceive themselves to exhibit feminine traits, they are more likely to hold lower management aspirations. Moreover, male managers with androgynous and feminine traits are inclined to have higher management aspirations.

Research limitations/implications – Due to cross-sectional survey data, research results may be biased by common method variance. In addition, because of a convenient sample, the research results may lack generalizability. Moreover, with participants from different organizations, the percentage of men and women in the organization and participants' role conflicts between work and family life would impact the gender role identity of individuals. Future research should control for the gender composition of the workplace and participants' role conflicts between work and family life.

Practical implications – The findings can help narrow the gender gap of managerial aspirations through focusing on gender role identity in selecting managers and designing the leadership training program, ultimately resulting in diminishing disparity in top leadership positions between men and women.

Originality/value – This study examines how gender and gender role identity separately and jointly affects managerial aspirations in the Chinese context.

Introduction

Despite the number of women in managerial roles that have been increasing during recent years, generally, women still remain underrepresented in higher-level management positions in major institutions from business to politics in all countries (World Economic Forum, 2015). Women comprise half of the world's population; however, it is reported that only 5.8% of CEO positions are held by women at S&P 500 companies (Catalyst, 2020), and there is no sign to show this situation has notably changed in recent decades.

A variety of theoretical perspectives contribute the dearth of women at top positions, including sex-stereotypical prejudice and discrimination (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Heilman, 2001), an imbalanced division of family responsibilities (Aguiar and Hurst, 2007; Metz and Tharenou, 2001) and deficiency of valuable human and social capital (Fitzsimmons and Callan, 2016; Eagly, 2007; Michailidis *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, managerial aspiration, defined as an individual motivation to pursue a position of increased power and a major influence in management (Tharenou, 2001), has been cited as an additional factor by some researchers to explain under-representation of women at the top (Powell and Butterfield, 2003, 2013). Managerial aspiration was considered a major predictor of career attainment (Schoon and Polek, 2011) and hierarchical advancement (Tharenou, 2001). Women have less interest and lower management aspirations to seek managerial positions than their counterparts (Eagly *et al.*, 1994; Hoobler *et al.*, 2014). Some studies dived deep and identified reasons from an organizational development perspective to explain why women have lower management aspirations (Fritz and van Knippenberg, 2020). For example, study suggested that bias from managers in allocating challenging work, training and development and career encouragement has led to women's lower managerial aspirations. Fritz and van Knippenberg (2020), on the other hand, attributed their lower aspirations to deficiency of organizational support and work control.

Nevertheless, research findings on whether women have lower managerial aspirations than men are still mixed. While the majority of research indicated differences in managerial aspirations between genders, there is also evidence showing that no difference exists in terms of managerial aspirations (Gbadamosi *et al.*, 2015; Morrison *et al.*, 1987; Qiu and Dooley, 2018; Singer, 1991). Some researchers even went further and argued that mixed research results were derived because the majority of those studies did not distinguish between gender and psychological gender, which is gender role identity (O'Reilly and O'Neill, 2004).

Gender can be a group of women and men based on social categories. Gender role identity refers to personal beliefs about the extent to which individuals psychologically possess traits and characteristics that are associated with gender stereotypes for men and women (Bem, 1974; Lips, 2017). However, even though researchers made such a distinction between gender and gender role identity and separately examined their role played in impacting management aspirations, they tended to ignore the fact that when men and women hold the same gender role identity, they may have different attitudes toward career aspirations (Choi, 2013) and gender equality (Lemaster *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, past research on gender, gender role identity and management aspirations was mainly based on the Western context and relatively few studies were conducted in Asian countries (Karami *et al.*,

2011), especially in China. As a social construct, gender role identity was shaped by cultural heritage, norm and belief in the socialization of men and women. Deeply influenced by traditional Confucian culture, some Chinese women still hold the belief that men play a role as breadwinners while women are caregivers. Thus, some women choose to give priority to support of their husbands' career development and promotion, and their role is to take care of their families (Cooke, 2005; Tsang *et al.*, 2011). However, Chinese women have played an important role in socio-economic development during the past three decades (Bishop *et al.*, 2005; Cooke, 2005), leading to the change of women's social status in society. In conjunction with rapid market development and reform in the dynamic Chinese context, this drastic change in social status has been prompting a transition from the traditional value of male domination to gender equality. Consequently, it might be valuable to investigate how in China, gender and gender role identity affect managerial aspirations both jointly and in isolation where such studies are rarely conducted.

This study contributes to the literature. First, most previous studies on gender and managerial aspiration either did not make a distinction between gender and gender role identity or only separately examined the effect of gender and gender role identity on managerial aspirations. However, men and women with the same gender role identity may have different attitudes toward career aspiration (Choi, 2013) and gender equality (Lemaster, 2015). Responding to Dobbins and Platz's (1986) call, this study conducted a more in-depth examination of gender difference and differentiated gender from the perspective of gender role identity. Furthermore, this study followed Fritz and van Knippenberg's (2020) suggestion that more studies are needed to explore the contingent relationship between gender and managerial aspirations. This study examined the separate effect of gender and gender role identity and interaction effects of these two variables on managerial aspirations. In this way, this study helps to take targeted measures to lessen the gap between men and women in top leadership positions. In addition, second, the extant literature on gender and managerial aspiration mainly focused on a western setting while there is little research conducted in the Chinese context. Thus, this study provided an understanding of the gender role identity of men and women managers and how gender and gender role identity impact career aspirations in China.

Theory and hypothesis
Gender and aspiration
Social role theory mainly focuses on societal stereotypes about gender (Eagly and Wood, 2012). Stereotypes or gender beliefs form by people's expectations of behavioral characteristics and social roles about men and women (Eagly, 1987; Eagly and Wood, 2012). Many of these expectations become norms of behavioral tendencies to be considered desirable for each sex and eventually form stereotypes of the typical social roles of men and women. In society, it is generally believed that men are breadwinners and hold higher status roles such as leadership positions, whereas women are homemakers and occupy lower status roles (Eagly and Karau, 2002).

In addition, women are stereotyped to be unfit for leadership roles, leading to prejudice and discrimination against women seeking or being promoted to leadership positions (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Heilman *et al.*, 1989; Johnson *et al.*, 2008; Rudman *et al.*, 2012; Schein, 1973). These gender stereotypes and biases not only disvalue women's performance and competence, and disregard female employees in providing key resources and support but also reduce their own self-perceived competence and self-efficacy (Heilman, 2012; Rudman and Phelan, 2010). Meta-analysis research has indicated that women possess lower managerial aspirations than men (Eagly *et al.*, 1994). The literature on this topic has

provided evidence that stereotype-based gender bias discouraged women's aspiration from assuming leadership positions. For example, found women were stereotypically perceived by supervisors as having lower career motivation and, thus were given fewer opportunities for development such as training, encouragement and task arrangement. Fritz and van Knippenberg's (2020) study showed women received less support and experienced lower job control from male supervisors than men, resulting in lower management aspirations.

In China, the traditional socio-cultural values deeply embedded in society emphasizes the sexual division of labor at home and in the workplace and still exert extensive influence on expectations and norms about women and men holding social role. As previously stated, men take on the role of breadwinner and occupy high-status positions, whereas women take care of children and elders and support their husbands' career development (Cooke, 2005, 2014; Korabik, 1994). These cultural stereotypes and biases will influence women's self-perception and others' attitudes toward women pursuing managerial positions. These ideas would possibly impede women to aspire higher management positions (Cooke, 2014). Therefore, we proposed:

H1. Gender impacts managerial aspirations and Chinese women have lower managerial aspirations than their counterparts.

Gender role identity and aspiration
As an individual's psychological gender, gender role identity is defined as personal beliefs about the extent to which an individual psychologically possess either traits or characteristics that are related to gender stereotypes (Bem, 1974; Kite *et al.*, 2008). Gender role identity is a result of interaction between an individual's self-cognition associated with masculine and feminine traits and social context (Lips, 2017; Dean and Tate, 2017). Some scholars believed that masculinity and femininity of gender role identity were not only used for classification of individual traits but they also played an important role in gender-related interests and preferences (Lippa, 1998, 2010). In addition, researchers argued that it is gender role identity rather than gender that determines career attainment, including career advancement and career aspiration (O'Reilly and O'Neill, 2004, Powell and Butterfield, 2003, 2013).

As Bem (1974) and Liben and Bigler (2017) suggested, masculinity and femininity are not opposite ends of a single bipolar continuum, but rather two independent dimensions. Based on individuals' scores on masculine and feminine dimensions, there are four categories, namely, masculinity (high scores on masculinity and low scores on femininity), femininity (high scores on femininity and low scores on masculinity), androgynous (with high scores both masculinity and femininity) and undifferentiated (low scores on both masculinity and femininity). Role congruity theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002) indicated that leader prototypes (stereotypes) are congruent with men and masculine traits, but women and feminine characteristics are stereotyped to be unfit for leadership roles. Then masculine traits of gender role identity were well-documented to be associated with leadership roles (Koenig *et al.*, 2011; Schein, 1973; Schein, 1975) and promotion in leadership positions (Tharenou, 2001). Thus, as social cognitive theory proposed (Bandura, 1999), individuals with masculine traits may believe they can achieve leadership positions and have a more positive attitude toward their goal, so they will have higher managerial aspirations. Additionally, the research identified that gender role identity, especially masculinity, can positively predict individuals' aspirations to higher management positions (Powell and Butterfield, 1981, 2003; 2013), whereas feminine characteristics have opposite effects (Powell and Butterfield, 1981). Thus, we proposed:

H2. In China, individuals with high masculinity characteristics tend to have higher management aspirations, while those with high femininity have lower aspirations.

Gender, gender role identity and managerial aspiration

Fritz and van Knippenberg (2020) reasoned that mixed findings of gender's affect on managerial aspirations are indicative of the relationship between these two variables being influenced by contingency factors. Dobbins and Platz (1986) critiqued gender differences as an aggregate or mean difference. O'Reilly and O'Neill (2004) concluded that it was the joint effect of gender and gender role identity that influenced career-related outcomes, such as career aspirations, career attainment and others, instead of respective roles of gender and gender role identity in isolation. Therefore, we hypothesized that the relationship between gender and managerial aspirations would vary depending on the gender role identity of individuals.

According to the role consistency theory, leader stereotype is congruent with men and masculine traits, whereas women and feminine characteristics are stereotyped to be unfit for leadership roles. Therefore, women and individuals with feminine characteristics will face gender stereotypes and bias, when they pursuit management positions. However, gender role identity, as a result of interaction between an individual's cognition and social environment (Dean and Tate, 2017), can be self-regulated by individuals in reacting to a particular context. To reduce stereotypical prejudice and bias in management positions, some female managers may regulate their gender identity. In the processes of gender identity regulation, women managers are more likely to face dual demands of leadership stereotypes and gender stereotypes. When female managers show high masculine characteristics, being congruent with characteristics for stereotyped leadership roles, gender stereotypes may have an impact on them for low feminine characteristics. A substantial body of literature has provided evidence that men would benefit from having high masculine features while women would suffer from the same characteristics (Eagly *et al.*, 2007; Heilman *et al.*, 2004; Rudman and Glick, 2001). Highly masculine women may face criticism for their lack of femininity traits, known as negative "backlash effect," because they exhibit traits incongruous with what is expected of them. Consequently, it is worth exploring which category of gender role identity of men managers and women managers will form under pressures of different social environments and how their gender and gender role identity jointly affect their management aspirations in China. This way, we can obtain a better understanding of the nuanced effect that men and women with the same gender role identity exert on managerial aspirations. Therefore, we proposed the following hypothesis:

H3. Gender interacts with gender role identity to impact individual managerial aspirations.

Methodology

Participants and procedure

Using convenience sampling methods, we collected data from participants attending a leadership training program organized by three Chinese universities in Beijing in 2018. Participants came from all parts of China. Most participants in this study were lower and middle-level managers from different government sectors. The quota of participants was set in advance based on the population of each province. Therefore, it can be assumed that they

were representative of the whole population of Chinese managers in the government sector. Questionnaires were distributed with assistance from supervisors of the training program. Included with each questionnaire was a cover letter that informed participants of the purpose of this study, assuring them the data would be confidential and they could withdraw from the survey at will anytime.

A total of 280 trainees completed the survey. We obtained a valid sample of 268 participants, of which 51.5% of respondents were male. The average age was 39.4 years, and 64.5% of respondents had bachelor's or above degrees. In terms of hierarchical level, 72% of respondents held lower management positions (among women, managers in lower and middle positions account for 93.4%, whereas among men, the percentage of managers is 94.3%). Information about the participants is provided in Table 1.

Measures
Gender. Gender was labeled women and men, according to the social group category. This variable was dummy coded as 1 for men and 0 for women.

Gender role identity. Revised sex role inventory (BSRI) by was used to measure gender role identity. BSRI, developed by, was widely used to assess gender stereotype perception and generate gender role identity. Revised BSRI by removing some items with low factor loadings when applied in the Chinese context, 26 items comprised the revised instrument. Among 26 items, 14 were masculine terms (e.g. competitive, arbitrary, forceful, risky, aggressive and ambitious), 12 were feminine terms (e.g. compassionate, affectionate, tender and understanding). Cronbach's α of the revised masculine scale and feminine scale were 0.87 and 0.79, respectively. Cronbach's α of these two scales was 0.83 and 0.77 in the current study. The respondents were asked to indicate on a five-point scale how well each of 26 traits describes himself or herself (1 being not at all, to 5 being frequently if not always). On the basis of the participants' scores, respondents are categorized into four groups, namely, masculine (high masculinity, low femininity), feminine (higher femininity, low masculinity),

Gender	Male			Female	
	Frequency	(%)		Frequency	(%)
Gender	138	51.5		127	47.4
Educational background					
Bachelor diploma and below	7	5.1		18	14.2
Bachelor' degree	81	58.7		63	49.6
Master and higher	48	34.8		45	35.4
Total(valid)	136	98.6		126	99.2
Missing	2	1.4		1	0.8
Age(year)					
30 and lower	2	1.4		18	14.2
30-40	74	53.6		55	43.3
40-50	55	39.9		40	31.5
50 and higher	7	5.1		12	9.4
Missing	138	100.0		2	1.6
Hierarchical level					
Low level	77	55.8		100	78.7
Middle level	35	25.4		15	11.8
High level	8	5.8		7	5.5
Missing	18	13		5	3.9

Table 1.
Information about
the participants

androgynous (high femininity and high masculinity) and undifferentiated (lower femininity, low masculinity).

Managerial aspiration. 13-item scale ($\alpha = 0.92$) was used to measure managerial aspirations. The scale mainly catches the extent to which individuals aspire to obtain a position with high power and significant influence in the organization. Thurnou's scale was translated and back-translated to ensure the consistency of English and Chinese meanings. In addition, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to test the factor loading structure of the managerial aspiration scale in the Chinese sample. The fit indexes are good ($\chi^2 = 207.28$, df = 21, $p < 0.05$; RMSEA = 0.05; CFI = 0.95; TLI = 0.93; SRMR = 0.05), indicating that this scale can be used in the Chinese context. Sample items included "my aspirations are very high in regard to professional recognition and achievement", "I would like to advance to a position where I can have an influence or a greater influence on policy decisions." Cronbach's alpha was 0.75 in this study.

Control variables: consistent with Fritz and van Knippenberg's (2020) study, we controlled for demographic variables, including age, educational background and hierarchical management level. Age was measured in years. Educational background was measured in obtained degree (1 – college degree or under, 2 – undergraduate degree, 3 – master's or doctoral degree). Conventional wisdom dictates that people with a high level of education are more likely to assume managerial positions (Tharenou, 2001). The hierarchical level was measured in holding managerial positions. Prior research indicated that people holding positions in organizations influence their managerial motivation (Eagly and Karau, 2002).

Analytical procedures
We used SPSS 23.0 to analyze the data. To control for any variance caused by age, educational background and hierarchy of management, we initially conducted 4×2 (gender role identity $\times$ gender) analyzes of covariance. Age, educational background and hierarchy of management were entered as covariates. Outcomes of the analysis showed that these variables did not reduce the impact of gender and gender roles on managerial aspirations. Therefore, we applied to 4×2 (gender role identity $\times$ gender) two-way analysis of variance (univariate analysis of variance) on a managerial aspiration to test the research hypotheses.

Research result
The general means, standard deviations and alpha coefficients of the study variables and correlations among them are presented in (Table 2).

Variable	Means	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Self-perceived managerial aspiration	3.48	0.57	(0.75)						
Age	39	8.90	0.18**						
Educaion background	3.23	0.69	0.13*	−0.20					
Hierarchical level	1.35	0.88	0.20	0.18	0.25**				
Gender			0.10	0.04	0.07	0.02			
Masculinity	3.95	0.50	0.30**	0.12	0.27**	0.16	0.13**	(0.83)	
Femininity	3.95	0.44	0.26**	0.10	−0.13**	−0.07	0.07	0.24**	(0.77)

Notes: Reliabilities of managerial aspirations, masculine and feminine (continuous measurement) are in parentheses; $n = 268$; *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$

Table 2.
Pearson correlations,
means and standard
deviations

Table 3 demonstrated the distribution of men and women on gender role identity. Among men, androgynous individuals accounted for the highest proportion (30.04%). Among women, undifferentiated and masculine individuals accounted for a higher proportion (29.14% and 27.56%, respectively). In addition, within gender role identity, while a vast majority of men show androgynous quality (66%), the numbers of women exhibiting feminine and masculine traits are almost equal (53.2% and 53.0%, respectively).

The main effect of gender and gender role identity on managerial aspirations is depicted in Table 4. It was indicated that the effect of gender on managerial aspiration was not significant, F(1, 260) = 2.04, p = 0.16. Thus, research *H1* was not supported. However, managerial aspirations varied significantly as a function of gender role identity, $F(3, 260) = 8.76, p = 0.000 < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.09$.

To further compare different effects on the relationship between gender role identity and management aspiration, we conducted pairwise *t*-test. The results revealed that androgynous (mean = 3.77) and masculine individuals (mean = 3.47) self-reported higher managerial aspirations than feminine (mean = 3.39, $p < 0.01$) and undifferentiated individuals (mean = 3.32, $p < 0.01$). Hence, research *H2* was supported. In addition, the interaction effect of gender role identity and gender on managerial aspirations was significant as shown in Table 3, $F(3, 260) = 4.53, p = 0.04 < 0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.09$. Subsequently, we conducted a test of simple effect and pairwise comparisons of the marginally significant interaction term.

Table 5 reveals how managerial aspirations varied as a function of the combination of gender and gender roles. Analysis of univariate tests by gender's simple main effect showed for both men and women, there was a significant difference in aspirations among the four groups of gender role identity ($F (3,252) = 4.21, p = 0.01, \eta^2 = 0.05; F (3,252) = 8.48, p < 0.01, \eta^2 = 0.09$).

Gender role identity	No. of men	% of men within gender	% of men within gender role identity	No. of women	% of women within gender	% of women within gender role identity	Managerial aspirations Mean	SD
Masculine	31	22.50	47	35	27.56	53.00	3.47	0.58
Feminine	29	21.00	47	33	25.98	53.20	3.39	0.54
Androgynous	42	30.04	66	22	17.32	34.40	3.77	0.54
Undifferentiated	36	26.10	49	37	29.14	50.70	3.32	0.53
Totals	138	100		127	100			0.57

Table 3.
Gender, gender role identity and managerial aspirations

Source	Type III sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.	Partial η^2
Corrected model	12.22[a]	7	1.75	6.04	0.00	0.14
Intercept	3,069.20	1	3,069.20	1,0627.69	0.00	0.98
Gender	0.59	1	0.59	2.04	0.16	0.01
Gender role identity	7.59	3	2.53	8.76	0.00	0.09
Gender * gender-role identity	3.92	3	1.31	4.53	0.00	0.05
Error	72.78	252	0.29			
Total	3,237.16	260				
Corrected total	84.99	259				

Note: [a]$R^2 = 0.144$ (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.12$)

Table 4.
Main effect of gender, gender role identity on leadership aspirations

The results of pairwise comparisons demonstrated that androgynous (mean = 3.83. SD = 0.54) and masculine women (mean = 3.54, SD = 0.6) have higher aspirations than feminine (mean = 3.14, SD = 0.56, $p < 0.01$) and undifferentiated women (mean = 3 0.26, SD = 0.54, $p = 0.02$). it was also shown that androgynous (mean = 3.74. SD = 0.55) and feminine men (mean = 3.65, SD = 0.57) have higher aspirations than masculine (mean = 3.38, SD = 0.54, $p = 0.03$) and undifferentiated men (mean = 3.38, SD = 0.53, $p = 0.02$).

The simple main effect of gender role identity indicated that only in the feminine group do men and women have different managerial aspirations, $F(1,252) = 12.9$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.05$. In this case, women have lower management aspirations than men (mean difference = 0.499). Therefore, *H3* was supported. Figure 1 offered a visual presentation of the means of managerial aspirations for the interaction of gender role identity and gender.

Discussion

Based on social role theory and role congruence theory, we investigated the influence of gender, gender role identity and their interaction on managerial aspiration in the Chinese contexts. First, there is no significant difference in managerial aspirations between men and

Gender	Sum of squares	df	F	Sig.	η^2
Female					
Contrast	7.344	7.34	8.48	0.00	0.09
Error	72.766	252			
Male					
Contrast	3.643	3.64	4.21	0.01	0.05
Error	72.776	252			

Table 5.
Univariate tests of gender and gender role identity on aspirations
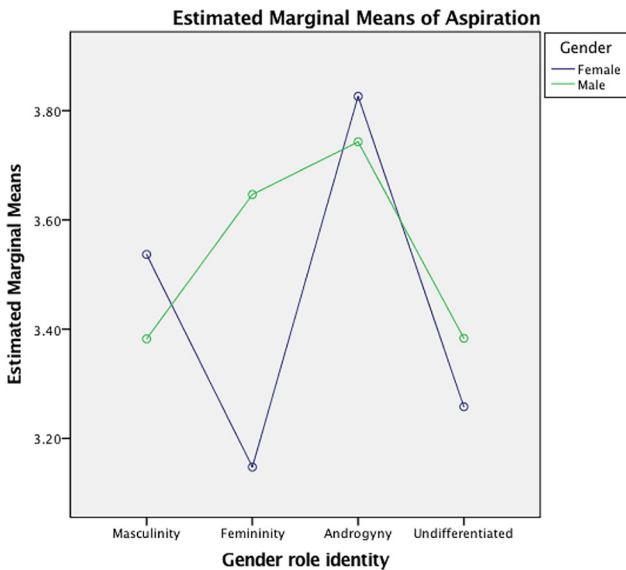
Figure 1.
Interaction of gender role identity and gender on managerial aspiration

women. Because roles and status of women in the workplace have changed considerably, proportions of men and women in lower and middle management positions have shifted to be more balanced over time in China (Tsang *et al.*, 2011). When exposed to more women in management roles, people's expectations of management roles are more women-oriented because of the role model effect (McGinn and Milkman,2013). Meanwhile, a meta-analysis study demonstrated that women are more likely to display transformation leadership behaviors (Eagly *et al.*, 2003), which constitutes an advantage for women managers in a dynamic and complex society context (Kark *et al.*, 2012). These shifts influence traditional gender role expectations and women's self- role expectations on management roles, thus attenuating the stereotypes that managers are associated with specific social gender groups.

Second, previous studies and meta-analyzes have consistently demonstrated that masculine traits are stereotypically fit with leadership position (Koenig *et al.*, 2011) and associated with higher managerial aspirations (Powell and Butterfield, 2003, 2013) and career attainment (O'Reilly and O'Neill, 2004) in the Western context. This study clearly showed that aside from masculine traits, those with androgynous traits also hold high leadership aspirations. With the current social transformation in China, the traditional uniformed, functionalist work paradigm has been shifted to a modernized business model, which is characterized as flexible, humanistic and caring. Consequently, traditional leadership behaviors, which are associated with masculine traits and connected to "command and control" or autocratic leadership style, maybe less conducive. In contrast, a new leadership style, characterized by a combination of both task-orientation and people consideration-orientation may be more appropriate for organizations because of their association with masculine and feminine traits (Wang *et al.*, 2012). For example, transformational leadership behaviors are considered to be both agentic (masculine) and communal (feminine) (Eagly, 2007; Kark *et al.*, 2012). In addition, research findings in the Chinese context suggest that managers with androgynous characteristics are expected to be effective managers, which was consistent with what has been found in Western cultures. Therefore, managers of androgynous traits with higher flexibility and adaptability in different workplaces may have positive management experiences in management positions, resulting in high management aspirations (Bem and Lenney, 1976; Dean and Tate, 2017). Thus, this study provides further evidence for the argument that androgyny is more flexible as a personality trait (Bem, 1974; Kark *et al.*, 2012).

Third, this study not only investigated the gender role identity of both women and men managers but also confirmed that gender and gender roles interact to influence management aspirations. It was shown that male managers have more androgynous and masculine characteristics, whereas female managers possess more masculine and undifferentiated characteristics. These may indicate that traditional values and gender beliefs are undergoing changes in tandem with social transformation in China. China's social census from 1990 to 2010 showed that gender roles became more equal because of the social transformation of the one-child policy, a downsized family size, improved education level, increased geographic and occupational mobility and advanced opportunities (Yang, 2017). Women, especially young women, are more independent, confident and forceful (Yang, 2017).

In addition, male managers with androgyny and femininity reported higher management aspiration, so did female managers with androgyny and masculinity. A social cognitive theory proposed that people exert more effort toward a goal if they believe they can achieve it (Bandura, 1999). Women with masculinity and androgyny, generally deemed to fit stereotyped managerial positions, may have higher aspirations because they have a greater expectation of achieving success. Likewise, men with androgynous characteristics, expected

to be effective managers, may have a positive cognition experience in managerial positions and thus possess high aspiration to pursue senior managerial positions. In contrast, men with high feminine traits were found to be better prepared to show individualized consideration and emotional intelligence than "masculine" male managers (Gartzia and Van Engen, 2012). Thus, men with androgynous characteristics may have high aspirations because of positive cognition in management positions.

To reiterate, it is gender role identity and combinations of gender and gender role identity, rather than gender, which influences managerial aspirations. Gender role identity is not only a simple trait but also a cognition process of self-adjusting in reacting to social context.

Theoretical and practical implications

Our research contributes to the literature on gender identity and career aspirations in several ways. First, most of the previous studies were based in the Western context and used part-time and full-time MBA undergraduates as research participants. As some researchers argued that studies sampling undergraduates cannot really imitate the profound effect that work exerts on individuals' lives (Goodman and Haisley, 2007). We recruited managers of government sectors as research participants. This research was one of the few studies conducted in China. Second, we used Bem's BSRI to display the distribution of gender role identity of Chinese managers, which expanded the research in the Chinese culture. Meanwhile, the different results of gender and gender role identity impacting managerial aspirations supported the viewpoint that self-labeling as a woman or man was distinct from the identity of gender stereotypes of femininity and masculinity (Dean and Tate, 2017). Third, this study provides a way to investigate managerial motivation from the perspective of managers' psychological gender. It offers empirical evidence that androgyny predicts both managerial effectiveness and managerial aspirations. The findings suggest that managerial aspirations go beyond gender differences in the workplace and make people less consider the ideal image of one in a managerial position, which may be more likely to favor women over men.

Practically, because gender has no impact on managerial aspirations, less emphasis should be placed on the gender of candidates when organizations recruit and promote managers. In addition, the dearth of women at top positions can be partly attributed to implicit and invisible prejudices and biases. To reduce such prejudices and biases, we suggest that Chinese Government sectors adopt appropriate human resources management policies, such as clearer promotion evaluation and performance appraisal policies, as well as training policies which help managers to reduce unconscious gender biases. Furthermore, in the leadership training programs, the government should consider how to help managers, especially women, to form androgynous identity so that they can make flexible changes in showing masculinity and femininity, facing different tasks in managerial positions.

Limitations and future research

Our study is not without limitations. First, as this study is cross-sectional in nature, common method variance might bias the relationship between gender role identity and managerial aspirations (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Future studies could use a longitudinal survey to collect data to examine the similar relationships between related variables. In addition, we used a convenient sampling technique and 268 participants in this study. Future researchers should be cautious about its generalizability because of the relatively small sample size. They are encouraged to adopt more rigorous sampling strategies and to recruit more samples to test the interaction effect. Second, although our study

controlled for age, educational backgrounds and managerial hierarchy that influence managerial aspirations, we did not control for the organizational gender composition and managers' role conflicts between work and family life. Differences might exist between sex-parity groups, female-minority groups and female-majority groups that affect gender identity and management aspirations (Dasgupta *et al.*, 2015). Women having many responsibilities in housework, for example, taking care of children, may affect their managerial aspirations (Cooke, 2005; Tsang *et al.*, 2011). Future research could ideally take into consideration gender composition and responsibilities in the family when researchers choose participants from organizations.

Third, more in-depth exploration is needed to detect whether the prototype of a manager is being shifted toward androgynous traits in both China and the international context and to ascertain whether stereotyped masculine characteristics of leadership affect gender identity of women managers in the workplace. Fourth, we noticed that male managers with high feminine traits and women managers with high masculine traits self-reported high aspiration scores. This study result should be further examined to see how gender role identity functions in specific contexts and whether these managers suffer a backlash effect, where men and women who violate gender stereotypes face socioeconomic penalties (Rudman and Glick, 2001). Finally, future researchers should examine how the contradictory, yet complementary aspects of masculinity and femininity may act protectively to buffer negative consequences of crossing gender boundaries in carrying out their leadership tasks.

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