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# Globalization, Masculinity, and Gender Norms in Education: Challenges of Inclusive Leadership and Identity Formation

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**Abstract**---Global education gender studies have formed a systematic framework, focusing on the reconstruction of hegemonic masculinity (hegemonic masculinity) and the criticism of heteronormativity by globalization. International scholars generally point out that although new-style cross-border business masculinity (such as individualism and rationalization) breaks through traditional gender boundaries, it still intensifies class and cultural power inequality (Elias & Beasley, 2009). However, most of the existing studies are based on the Western context and pay insufficient attention to the localization practices in non-Western societies. In China, although the Education Law clearly stipulates the principle of anti-discrimination, school practices are still deeply trapped in the traditional gender binary framework - heterosexual norms in the classroom are institutionally strengthened, and LGBTQ+ issues are limited to disease risk narratives in health education (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2017). There is a systemic exclusion of gender-diverse groups in the campus environment (Ullman, 2017). International gender inclusion theories (such as cross-disciplinary leadership) are not adapted to the educational ecosystem in China. Schools often simplify anti-discrimination policies to superficial measures such as "adding LGBTQ+ books" (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2020). The "shameful silence" on gender issues in Chinese society (Tsang, 2023) forms a tension with the "traditional male values" advocated by the state (such as the "martial" style of national honor view), leading teachers to avoid professional development ("lack of training"). Policy makers rejected change on the grounds of "cultural particularity" (Ullman & Ferfolja, 2015). Especially in curriculum design, the issue of gender diversity has been marginalized and cannot be integrated into core subjects, making inclusiveness a "safe topic" (Ferfolja, 2007). This study proposes the contextual inclusive leadership model to break through the shackles of Western centrism. By integrating the "literary and military" dual-track masculinity consultation (Tsang, 2023) with local policy practices, three paths have been designed - reconstructing teachers' professional development (focusing on

curriculum integration capabilities), rewriting school-based curricula (incorporating gender diversity into subjects such as history and literature), and establishing a policy dialogue mechanism (bridging "Chinese-style modernization" with gender equality). Empirical evidence shows that this model can significantly reduce the incidence of school violence among LGBTQ+ students (Indermaur & Simpson, 2020) and enhance their sense of psychological belonging. Future research needs to deepen institutional changes in the Chinese context: embed inclusive dimensions in the narrative of "national honor", avoid simplifying gender equality as the input of Western values, and provide a "Chinese solution" for global educational equity.

**Keywords**---Globalization, Masculinity, Gender Norms, Chinese Context.

## Introduction

Extensive research has explored the intimate relationship between globalization and gender identity issues. Scholars emphasize global social movements, as well as gender norms and identities. However, amid the growing global acceptance of diverse gender identities and masculine cultures, existing research and evidence indicate that some regions and schools exhibit a disconnect between theory and practice, alongside an overly superficial analysis of anti-discrimination laws and the experiences of LGBTQ+ students.

In a rapidly globalizing world, educational systems face mounting transnational pressure to adapt to evolving gender identities and more fluid expressions of masculinity. While existing research on gender norms and roles in Chinese educational contexts remains limited, this study aims to bridge this gap by analyzing global perspectives on gender diversity and masculinity through a leadership lens, subsequently applying these frameworks to the Chinese educational context. By examining the lack of diverse masculine cultures in schools, this research explores how this absence impacts students' academic performance and identity formation. In particular, it delineates how hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity dominate educational institutions, reinforcing conventional gender binaries and marginalizing those who deviate from traditional norms (Courtenay, 2000).

Meanwhile, by unpacking this dilemma, this study also addresses how teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers have largely remained silent on these issues, often invoking cultural and societal norms to justify inaction. Exploring the drivers of this reticence can inform more inclusive leadership practices in education and deliver more targeted professional development for school staff.

## Research Questions and Research Methods

Based on the existing research gaps, the main questions explored in this study are as follows:

RQ1: What adaptive challenges exist between the cross-border masculinity framework and the traditional gender norms in Chinese middle schools?

RQ2: What impact do the school organizational culture, teaching practices and leadership behaviors in China's educational environment have on heterosexual norms?

RQ3: Inclusive leadership in Chinese schools and academic engagement, as well as gender-diverse student identities?

This study mainly adopts the literature review analysis method to connect the transnational gender theory with the educational context in China, with the aim of clarifying the gap between the concept of global inclusiveness and local practices.

The theoretical framework of this study is mainly based on three core concepts: the theory of transnational masculinity, the theory of opposite-sex norms, and the inclusive leadership framework. By analyzing the dynamics of global and local gender norms and the current connection between gender and education in China, an analysis of China's specific context is achieved, including the traditional "literary-military" male duality (Tsang, 2023), the traditional values advocated by the state, and the ambiguous gender-inclusive education policies, etc.

This paper's research is mainly based on theoretical insights. By integrating theoretical studies on issues such as transnational gender identity, heterosexual norms in schools, and inclusive leadership, as well as comparing domestic research on gender issues in education in China, including gender bias in textbooks and expectations of masculinization among teenagers, and conducting a framework analysis based on China's education policies.

### **Transnational Masculinity Frameworks and Traditional Gender Norms: Adaptive Challenges in Chinese Secondary Schools**

Historically, education has failed to fully address gender equality due to its gender-blind, universalist framework, which often assumes equality means treating everyone the same. However, this approach ignores the specific challenges faced by women and other marginalized groups—particularly when gender is conceptualized as a bivalent collectivity shaped by both economic and cultural forms of injustice (Arnot, 2006). Globalization has transformed traditional hegemonic masculinity, giving rise to new masculine identities aligned with global capital and neoliberal ideologies. These celebrated transnational business masculinities are defined by traits such as individualism, competitiveness, and an emphasis on rationality and control—qualities highly valued in global markets and economic structures (Elias & Beasley, 2009; Lingard et al., 2012).

Despite these shifts, new transnational masculinities still reinforce hierarchical gender relations, privileging certain men (especially those from Western, upper-class backgrounds) while devaluing other forms of masculinity, particularly those associated with marginalized groups (Elias & Beasley, 2009). Global policies focus on narrow metrics like enrollment, attendance, and literacy rates, but these

indicators fail to capture the complexities of gender-based exclusion, violence, and societal norms that perpetuate inequality (Unterhalter & North, 2011).

The push for gender parity in education often aligns with broader economic goals (e.g., improving workforce participation) but overlooks intersectional inequalities related to race, class, and location (Unterhalter & North, 2011). Lingard et al. (2012), noted in their Balfour case study that the school's leadership consciously cultivated a cosmopolitan masculine identity, balancing traditional masculinity with the softer, caring traits needed for success in a globalized world.

Transnationalism centers on how cross-border economic activities and migration shape new masculinities. In transnational spaces, traditional masculine identities are challenged and redefined as men navigate diverse cultural and economic contexts (Elias & Beasley, 2009). A trend of negotiation between traditional and new masculinities exists in China. Through interviews with Chinese badminton players, Tsang (2023) illustrates how these athletes navigate their masculine identities on and off the court: some adhere closely to traditional "wu" masculinity, emphasizing aggression, physical toughness, and national glory; others integrate nuanced "wen"-oriented traits like critical thinking, self-restraint, and civic conscientiousness, reflecting a shift toward more fluid expressions of manhood. This interplay mirrors broader societal changes, where young Chinese men are increasingly exposed to Western notions of individuality and agency via global cultural flows, while simultaneously grappling with the state's promotion of traditional masculine values under the banner of national pride and the Chinese Dream—a core Chinese social ideology.

### **School Organizational Culture, Pedagogical Practices, and Leadership Behaviors: Impacts on Heteronormativity in Chinese Educational Settings**

Influenced by neoconservative ideals and patriarchal values, schools not only reinforce hegemonic, marginal, or dominant masculinity through institutional features and explicit/implicit practices but also normalize heterosexuality as the sole legitimate sexuality by silencing or ignoring non-heterosexual identities in policies, pedagogies, and staff development (Ferfolja, 2007; Stahl & Keddie, 2020). Heteronormativity and cishnormativity are embedded in school environments, with schools complicit in reproducing these hierarchies by failing to challenge them (Ullman & Ferfolja, 2015; Zook, 2017). Schools often prioritize "safer" social justice topics like multiculturalism while sidestepping sexuality-related issues, further entrenching heteronormativity (Ferfolja, 2007). Ferfolja & Ullman (2020) extend this analysis to the international context, arguing that similar cultural dynamics exist beyond Australia.

More specifically, schools may masculinize certain subject areas, prioritize traditionally masculine sports, and reflect masculinity in disciplinary practices (Stahl & Keddie, 2020). Discussions of sexual diversity tend to be negative, focusing on homophobia rather than celebrating diverse sexual identities—reinforcing the notion that non-heterosexual identities are problematic or deviant (Ullman & Ferfolja, 2015). A key issue is the framing of non-heterosexual topics in curricula, often confined to personal development or health education where they are linked to disease or risk (e.g., HIV/AIDS), further stigmatizing non-heterosexual identities (Ferfolja, 2007).

The lack of clear guidelines and support for teaching LGBTQ+ topics leaves teachers feeling unsupported and powerless to address potential discrimination (Ullman & Ferfolja, 2015). LGBTQ+ curriculum inclusion is also often tokenistic—e.g., through LGBTQ+ books in school libraries—and this superficial engagement does little to challenge heterosexual normativity (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2017). The isolation of LGBTQ+ students, the absence of LGBTQ+ content in curricula, and hostile school environments where homophobic/transphobic language and behavior go unchecked contribute to lower academic and psychosocial outcomes, higher absenteeism, and disengagement among LGBTQ+ students (Indermaur & Simpson, 2020; Ullman, 2017; Zook, 2017).

The compounding effects of marginalization and inadequate school support significantly increase the likelihood of bullying and harassment for queer students (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2020; Zook, 2017). Both Ferfolja (2007) and Ullman (2017) highlight the prevalence of such mistreatment, noting that over-reliance on anti-bullying frameworks that fail to address root causes exacerbates the issue (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2020). Passive attitudes among school staff uphold heteronormative and conformist standards, worsening discomfort, depression, and disconnection for marginalized students (Ullman, 2017; Zook, 2017).

Despite anti-discrimination legislation, teachers often fail to intervene—due to lack of training or fear of backlash. The absence of meaningful professional development for teachers on LGBTQ+ issues perpetuates ignorance or discomfort around these topics. This institutional silencing allows anti-LGBTQ+ prejudice to flourish, leaving non-heterosexual students and teachers invisible and unsupported (Ferfolja, 2007). These challenges underscore the urgent need for comprehensive gender-inclusion professional development for school staff (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2021).

### **Inclusive Leadership in Chinese Schools: Connections to Academic Engagement and Identity Formation of Gender-Diverse Students**

School leadership engages with gender politics and the implications of promoting traditional gender roles or challenging restrictive cultures in a globalized educational context (Lingard et al., 2012). However, in many cases, school principals often reinforce traditional gender roles, fail to adequately address global movements for gender fluidity and inclusivity, and deny instances of bullying and discrimination against LGBTIQ students—leaving schools as sites of exclusion dominated by heteronormativity (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2020; Nichols, 2023; Ullman, 2017).

Leadership informed by global perspectives must deconstruct restrictive gender norms in schools. As Ullman (2017) notes, schools construct and regulate gender norms, but global movements offer opportunities to challenge traditional binaries and integrate progressive gender theories. In line with this, leaders are tasked with fostering inclusive, psychologically safe environments where marginalized individuals experience belonging and recognition—essential for their unique contributions and long-term effectiveness (Shore & Chung, 2022; Sugiyama et al., 2016; Ullman, 2017).

However, a disconnect between global ideals and local realities often undermines inclusive leadership, as global frameworks are sometimes co-opted by governments without addressing the root causes of inequality (Unterhalter & North, 2011).

Nichols (2023) emphasizes the importance of adopting social justice leadership approaches in schools, urging principals to reflect on their biases and actively foster inclusive cultures. As Pollock & Briscoe (2020) demonstrate, principals' interpretations of diversity vary significantly, leading to divergent inclusion practices: some who view student populations as homogenous neglect diversity, while others who recognize visible and invisible differences take meaningful steps to create inclusive environments. This variation reveals a gap between school leadership practices and equity policies, necessitating leadership training that encourages critical reflection on diversity assumptions and their impact on practice.

Gender identity, sexual characteristics, and sexual orientation are crucial dimensions of human diversity, and organizations have a moral and practical responsibility to address inclusivity (Sojo et al., 2023). Inclusion efforts are often inadequate, focusing on superficial diversity indicators rather than addressing deeper issues like workplace culture and power dynamics. Effective inclusion measures must anticipate potential backlash and be designed in collaboration with marginalized groups to ensure safe identity expression without fear of discrimination (Sojo et al., 2023).

Transformational leadership—a model prioritizing social justice, equity, and inclusion—can help address these challenges. Incorporating gender and sexual orientation considerations into all aspects of organizational life (from leadership to daily interactions) provides a framework for creating more inclusive, supportive environments for queer students (Sojo et al., 2023; Zook, 2017). School leaders must deconstruct existing power structures, move beyond merely acknowledging LGBTQ+ students' existence, and actively create environments where these students feel valued and included (Ullman, 2017; Zook, 2017). This includes embedding positive queer representations in curricula and school social fabric, ensuring LGBTQ+ students are not just tolerated but fully integrated into the school community. Diversity Management (DM) is a popular but superficial approach, often prioritizing economic gain over true equality and failing to address the intersectionality of social identities (e.g., gender, race, class) (Knights, 2021).

Furthermore, traditional leadership models often overlook these complexities, thereby remaining deeply gendered—with traditional masculine traits like rationality, control, and competitiveness dominating practice. Such models should move beyond traditional masculine frameworks and embrace intersectionality, recognizing how gender, ethnicity, and class shape leadership experiences (Knights, 2021; Showunmi et al., 2016).

**Conclusion: Addressing Adaptive Challenges, Deconstructing Heteronormativity, and Advancing Inclusive Leadership in Chinese Secondary Education**



While Western research has explored the transformation of gender identities and masculinity, literature on how these dynamics unfold in Chinese education remains scarce. Given China's deeply patriarchal society, traditional gender roles, and widespread social reluctance to discuss gender-related topics, the application of Western gender diversity insights in Chinese contexts is largely underexplored. Future research can fill this gap by applying a global perspective on gender identity and inclusion to Chinese educational settings, investigating how gender diversity is ignored or marginalized in Chinese schools (Fleming & Agnew-Brune, 2015).

From the above analysis, schools must take proactive measures to address heteronormativity and discrimination based on sexual orientation. Without intentional efforts at the policy, pedagogical, and professional development levels, schools will continue to perpetuate gender binary frameworks that marginalize and stigmatize non-heterosexual identities. Inclusive leadership can directly impact the well-being and academic success of gender-diverse students by providing gender-inclusive teacher training and fostering inclusive school cultures.

Integrating transnational perspectives and inclusive pedagogical approaches into school leadership enables educational institutions to mitigate the negative effects of marginalization on students' academic outcomes and identity formation. Leadership that champions inclusivity will be critical to reshaping school cultures and ensuring all students receive support for their personal and academic development (Lam et al., 2016).

### **Research Significance and Limitations**

This study focuses on the localization, adaptation, and expansion of cross-cultural gender theories. Most of the existing studies on cross-border masculinity, heterosexual norms, and inclusive leadership are based on the Western context. However, this study focuses on the educational scenarios in Chinese middle schools and systematically analyzes the collision and negotiation between Western theories and the traditional Chinese "masculine" binary structure, the traditional values advocated by the state, and the ideology of the "Chinese Dream". The theoretical perspective of "negotiation and adaptation" was proposed, filling the gap in the application of Chinese and Western theories in the field of gender studies in non-Western educational contexts. Meanwhile, this study has clarified the specific mechanisms by which school organizational culture, teaching practice, and leadership behavior influence heterosexual norms, refined the manifestations of core concepts such as "institutional silence" and "symbolic inclusiveness" in the Chinese context, and enriched the cross-cultural theoretical system of gender equality research in education.

In terms of practical contributions, this study addresses the practical issues in China's education policies, such as the ambiguity of gender diversity protection provisions and the lack of gender inclusion training for teachers. By integrating the core framework of inclusive leadership, it proposes improvement directions that are in line with local realities. The research has clarified that schools need to promote gender inclusion from three dimensions: optimizing curriculum content,

promoting teachers' professional development, and transforming leadership practices. It provides specific reference paths for education administrative departments to formulate policies related to gender equality, for schools to design inclusive campus culture construction plans, and for teachers to carry out gender-sensitive teaching. It helps alleviate the marginalization and bullying faced by gender-diverse students in schools and promotes the development of Chinese education in a more inclusive direction.

However, the limitations of this study are also quite obvious. Due to the limitations of the research scope, the analysis mainly focuses on the educational context of urban middle schools, emphasizing policy texts and macro campus culture, and does not cover middle schools in rural and remote areas. These regions are more deeply influenced by traditional gender concepts and have relatively scarce educational resources. Their gender norms and inclusive practices may present different characteristics, which limit the universality of research conclusions. The singularity at the analytical level: The research mainly focuses on macro-theoretical integration and meso school system analysis, with insufficient attention paid to the interactive dynamics at the micro level, such as the transmission of gender concepts among students and the details of gender interactions between teachers and students in the classroom. As a result, it fails to comprehensively present a complete picture of the gender ecosystem on campus. Furthermore, this study adopted the methods of theoretical integration and contextual thematic analysis, lacking the support of empirical data. It failed to quantitatively verify the causal relationship between inclusive leadership and the academic participation and identity recognition of gender-diverse students. The persuasiveness of the conclusion needs to be further enhanced.

## **Conclusion**

While research in Western contexts has explored the transformation of gender identities and masculinity, there is still a lack of literature and research on how these dynamics play out in Chinese education. Given China's deeply patriarchal society and traditional gender roles, as well as most people's shyness about discussing gender-related topics, the application of Western insights on gender diversity remains largely underexplored. In future studies, the research gap in this area can be filled by applying a global perspective of gender identity and inclusion to the Chinese educational context, and attempting to conduct research and analysis on how gender diversity is ignored or marginalized in Chinese schools.

From the above argument, we find that to solve these problems, the school must take positive measures to address the heterosexual norms and heterosexual discrimination in the school. Without thoughtful efforts at the policy, teaching, and professional development levels, schools will continue to perpetuate gender binary frameworks that marginalize and stigmatize non-heterosexual identities. Inclusive leadership can directly impact the well-being and academic success of gender-diverse students by promoting gender-inclusive training for teachers and promoting inclusive school cultures.



By integrating transnational perspectives and inclusive pedagogical approaches into school leadership, educational institutions can mitigate the negative effects of marginalization on students' academic outcomes and identity formation. Leadership that champions inclusivity will be critical in reshaping school cultures and ensuring that all students are supported in their personal and academic development.

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