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## **Family dynamics and relationships in female entrepreneurship: An exploratory study**

### **Abstract**

Recent studies on women entrepreneurship have focussed on various facets. The role of family dynamics and relationships has long been studied in the context of female entrepreneurship. In emerging economies family dynamics and relationships determine whether women can choose entrepreneurship as a career choice. Given the recent emergence of dominant economies and internal changes that has led to encouragement of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial initiatives, this paper explores whether family dynamics and relationships still play an important role in women's decision to become entrepreneurs. It aims to understand whether there has been a shift in family dynamics and decision making that supports female entrepreneurship. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to understand the role of relationships and family dynamics in their career choice. Using a qualitative approach and Chinese female entrepreneurs as a case study, this study interviewed fifteen entrepreneurs. The results note that though there are changes in family dynamics that encourage female entrepreneurship, women still find it difficult choose entrepreneurship as a career and there are unfair expectations that are placed on them. The expectations create undue stress which directly affects their ability to carry out their professional duties. The research suggests that in order to foster development of female entrepreneurship, government agencies and local government bodies should provide further access to family support services that can facilitate women empowerment and foster entrepreneurial thinking without feeling guilty about family commitments or unfair expectations.

**Key Words:** Family Dynamics, Women, Entrepreneurship, China, Decision Making and Relationships

## 1.0 Introduction

Women entrepreneurship as a global contributor to economic growth has been long recognised, especially in removing poverty, attaining gender equality, job creation, and hastening social progress (Goldman Sachs Report, 2019), and governments continue to encourage women to engage in entrepreneurship (Liñán, Jaén, and Martin 2020 ). Over the years there has been dramatic increase in women entrepreneurs (De Bruin, Brush and Welter 2006), as well as country-specific increases. Emerging markets/economies have not only witnessed economic changes over the decades, but also have vast opportunities for growth (Mensah, Asamoah & Jafari-Sadeghi 2021), however, there remains diverse constraints from the macro and micro-environment (Micelotta et al 2018), as well as family and co-ethnics especially when it comes to women entrepreneurs. Since the 1980s China's economic transition has led to private enterprise development and rise in entrepreneurship (He, Lu and Qian, 2019). Female entrepreneurship in China has seen a continual increase over the past 30 years with 48% of women establishing their own businesses and as of 2019, 7.9% of women are involved in early stage entrepreneurial activity (Texter, 2021). Overall, women in China are more likely than men to be self-employed, with 38.7% women compared 34.9% men and furthermore with women owning 30.9% of all business in China (NBSC, 2019). The robust and sustainable growth in female entrepreneurship has also been aided by government initiatives. China's strategy of Mass Entrepreneurship and innovation was a crucial strategy in sustaining economic growth and creation of job opportunities (Cooke and Xiao 2021). The strategy first put forward by Li Keqiang in 2014, launched in 2015 by the government, and later upgraded in 2018 places innovation at the top. The promotion of this strategy addressed university graduate unemployment issues and focussed amongst other areas on job creation (Cooke and Xiao 2021) and indeed, there has been an increase in female graduates who are opting to start up their own ventures (Hu et al, 2019). Women in China are motivated by work-life balance, with career being important especially with the younger generation (Zhu, Kara, Zhu 2019). For some career choice of entrepreneurship is attractive, on the flipside the market is saturated in terms of university graduates and studies have also found that women believe that having children or being married and without children negatively impacts their career (Xinhua 2019, Kim et al 2020) although, in 2019 China implemented the workplace protection for women law, deterring employers to ask about marriage and intentions of having children (Kim et al 2020).

Marriage for women is a significant part of their life, not just providing a 'nomic' function and sense of belonging (Berger and Kellner, 1964; Curran et al 2010), but a turning point for many women in that it places the woman in a position of not just of a wife but a caregiver within the family (Fine 2007), this element being even stronger in some cultures and societies (Jafari-Sadeghi, 2021). Furthermore, the level of commitments within the family can have both a direct and indirect impact on women's career or entrepreneurship (Singh et al 2022). Relationships within the Chinese culture and especially within family are crucial and traditionally a priority. Women often aim to maintain their dutiful roles (Chen and Li, 2007) whilst also sustaining their businesses, however, this is not always the case and frequently family dynamics will be a play-out that can help or hinder entrepreneurship progression (Tomlins et al, 2021). Despite much research and scholarly works completed, there are still limitations in terms of areas such as decision processes that may impact men and women differently when pursuing business (this can be decision not to pursue also) (Verheul 2005), the impact of gender and culture, especially in terms of gender stereotypes in businesses that are found by women (Yadav and Unni 2016). This paper aims to explore that despite facing and overcoming challenges to reach entrepreneurial goals women choose to conform to and remain within cultural boundaries prioritising relationships of familial commitment, traditional culture or societal pressure. The

aim of the paper is to explore family dynamics and relationships in the context of female entrepreneurship that still prevent females to choose entrepreneurship as a preferred career in China.

Therefore, the following research questions are framed to explore the relationship dynamics and how they influence and impact women entrepreneurs in China.

What are the key relationship dynamics that influences the success of female entrepreneurs?  
How does relationships dynamics influences the career choices of the female entrepreneurs?  
How does the cultural stereotypes affect the career choices of female entrepreneurs in China?

The research questions are explored by undertaking a qualitative study with fifteen Chinese female entrepreneurs based in the capital city of China. The rest of the paper is as follows, the second section details the literature pertaining to family dynamics and relationships while the third section details the method used to collect primary data. The fourth section discusses the results and implications of study and the last section highlights the limitations and further areas of study.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

Initial studies on female entrepreneurship were found within feminist theories (Hurley 1999), with the following decades witnessing an array of research from investigations into entrepreneurial intentions, motivations, setting up ventures, support systems, contributing to family businesses, facing and addressing barriers and challenges amongst others. More than often it was evident that the foundation of these studies rested on not just the role of gender but dynamics of relationships whether they are formal or informal being played out (Jafari-Sadeghi, 2021). Growing studies on gender differences (Reynolds et al, 2004) are multifaceted, and have wide deal of research on gender differences and their relationship to business creation (Noguera et al 2015), on constraints that stem from family, culture and society and the negative effect of this as a result of high demands on time and commitments of work-life balance (Hagqvist, and Bernhard-Oettel, 2018). Furthermore, traditional roles consigned to women hinder the idea of entrepreneurship and make it less desirable in comparison to their male counterparts Langowitz and Minniti (2007).

### **2.1 Stereotyping Gender**

Gender stereotypes have often been a common place in one form or another, despite country, race, religion amongst others, with women often being associated with communal qualities such as connectedness, kindness, timidity in comparison to their male counterparts who are often associated with agentic qualities, such as autonomy, independence and courage (Gupta et al 2009). Gender stereotyping has its roots in socialisation during childhood and is often facilitated by the external or internal environment such as school, mass media, parents, family members and peers (Miller and Budd 1999). The stereotype activation theory (SAT) highlights that behaviour is impacted by the way in which the stereotypical information is presented (Wheeler and Petty, 2001). Behaviour can be impacted by ‘stereotypicalism’ perceptions from the environmental interactions, whether these are from the familial environment or non-familial environment. In the context of entrepreneurship, women entrepreneurship appears to be more receptive to gender stereotypes, which often may stem from culture rather than male entrepreneurship (GEM 2015)(Sadraei et al., 2018). This is similar globally where their

positionality in society is framed within class, race and culture and contribute to shaping their roles in society (Anggadwita et al 2017). The social role theory of gender differences highlights that women and men face and conform to dissimilar expectations and therefore, this has an impact on their beliefs, attitudes as well as development of different skills (Chen and Francesco 2000).

## 2.2 Female Entrepreneurship and Gender in China

Gender is culturally constructed (Ahl 2006), and often reinforced by inequality in society (Baud 2010). It is a 'institutionalised system' which consists of social practices and aids in interpreting the masculine and feminine as dissimilar socially (Gupta and Turnban 2012). Family norms and traditional gender roles have seen a change since China's transition to a market economy, however, the perception of women being irrational dependable, and sensitive remain in conflict in workplace masculine leadership roles (Cooke and Xiao 2021). China's collective culture positions interpersonal relations as priority, and aligning with this women prioritise and place focus on their relationships within the family. The traditional perception which remains strong in China is that men are seen as family income generators and women as care providers of the family and this has an impact on their social behaviour (Cooke and Xiao 2014). Women in work habitually face and are expected to fulfil dual responsibilities (career development and family care) (Nasir et al, 2016; Cooke and Xiao 2021). Research has made evident challenges women face, with employers often being deterred from investing in women employees, the underlying factors being that they have child-bearing and child-rearing responsibilities, and this is seen as impacting career development for women (Cooke and Xiao, 2021).

In terms of entrepreneurship, female entrepreneurs are faced with many stereotypical barriers when setting up and operating their businesses in transitional economies. Gender stereotypes are culturally embedded and hinder female entrepreneurship, with some women continuing to accept stereotypical roles as this leads to social acceptance in their view (Liu and Zhao, 2019). Furthermore, women entrepreneurs also place barriers themselves and accept them, as again this allows them to socially 'fit in'. The acceptance of these gender roles is blamed for the glass ceiling and career progression, and it is necessary that women remove these barriers that enhance gender stereotypes (Liu and Zhao, 2019). Overall, women continue to face a range of generic barriers, gender differences, such as access to finance (Jafari-Sadeghi, et al 2021) whereby personal savings and friends are used for business finance input (China Association of Women Entrepreneurs (2016). Challenges relating to the lack of family support (Ramadani, Gërguri-Rashiti and Fayolle, 2015). Networking barriers stemming from traditional beliefs where honor of the one-self and family plays a key role in staying within the boundaries.

## 2.3 Women, Marriage and Family

Family has a historical and cultural importance in China therefore positionality of marriage becomes central. Family is also significant in regards to gender socialisation and identity making (Gaetano 2010) and for Chinese women kinship position and kinship group provides her identity, role and status (Barlow 1994). Later marriages had been encouraged by the state as it contributes to limiting family size, however, over the years there have been an increase in unmarried singles, giving concern as relationships and marriage issues impact other areas such as work, life and study and bring uncertainty to society (Cao 2007 in Arianne, 2010). As marriage is traditionally and culturally important and with the rise in unmarried women, in 2007 women were warned that they should marry by age 27 or become 'leftover women' (shengnü) in other words forever unmarriageable by the Chinese Women official organisation

(Chen 2012). In China the average age of first marriage has seen an increase (Gaetano, 2014). this is more evident in the larger cities, divorces have also increased since the liberalisation of the Marriage Law in 1980, and more and more women are engaged in education and career building.

#### 2.4 Familial Relationships and Entrepreneurship

The past century to present has seen concepts and definitions of the family in continual shift as a result of diversity in the forms family structures influenced and impacted by social change. The family is recognised as a social institution (Hansson 2006) as well as an ‘organisation that cares for the maintenance of family life’ (Cruz and Basco, 2018). An enhanced understanding is required of the family and scholarly calls to acknowledge families as ‘intimate relationship systems’ and the impact of this on actions and activities by family members (Jennings, Breitkreuz, and James 2014; Jaskiewicz et al. 2017; Cruz and Basco 2018). In the systematic view of the family, three perspectives put forward: structural, psychosocial, and transactional (Koerner and Fitzpatrick 2004), highlight the family composition, roles and tasks (of family members), emotions and family identity. In understanding this in the context of entrepreneurship provides a deeper insight into functional and emotional aspects (Stangej and Basco 2017). The family system theory offers focus on relationship within family and provides a rounded viewpoint of family relationships within the members (Von Schlippe, Schneewind, and Schneewind 2014). Entrepreneurs are often part of a family/family member ‘manoeuvring in concert or disharmony with an array of other family members’ (Heck Trent, 1999). Family relationships and their dynamics cannot be disregarded in women entrepreneurship as they play a key role and provide an understanding of how families are involved in various and specific activities including those related to entrepreneurship (Cruz and Basco 2018), the actions and influences of the family impact entrepreneurship (the entrepreneur) (Westhead, Wright, and Ucbasaran 2001).

In providing a theoretical underpinning to the study it is evident that family is prime to the relationship, where behaviours are not just learned but reinforced, and people (family) continuing to define the nature of the relationships (Ray 2016). This is complicated by gender stereotyping (female) and cultural construction especially in male dominating societies. Family dynamics and relationships have been core factors in the decision to choose entrepreneurship as a career choice. Theories examining the role of family dynamics have explored behavioural aspects from both familial and non-familial environments (Stereotype activation theory); relationship with family members (Family system theory); perceived differences between man and women (Gender theory); inequality and empowerment (Social theory of gender). While these theories have espoused themes that have an important role in family dynamics in the context of female entrepreneurship, there exists gaps in understanding why women still conform to choose familial commitment in contrast to entrepreneurship goals. In many developing countries, while women are empowered to choose entrepreneurship as a career choice, there still exists a reluctance from women to choose self-employment. In highlighting our research gap, we sought to understand against the background of rapid economic growth and changes in attitude in the Chinese society, whether there has been an influence on family dynamics. Therefore, the aim is to understand whether there has been a shift in family dynamics and decision-making that actually supports female entrepreneurship, including support mechanisms that either hinders or encourage female entrepreneurship in the county. Figure 1 highlights the theoretical variables associated with this study.

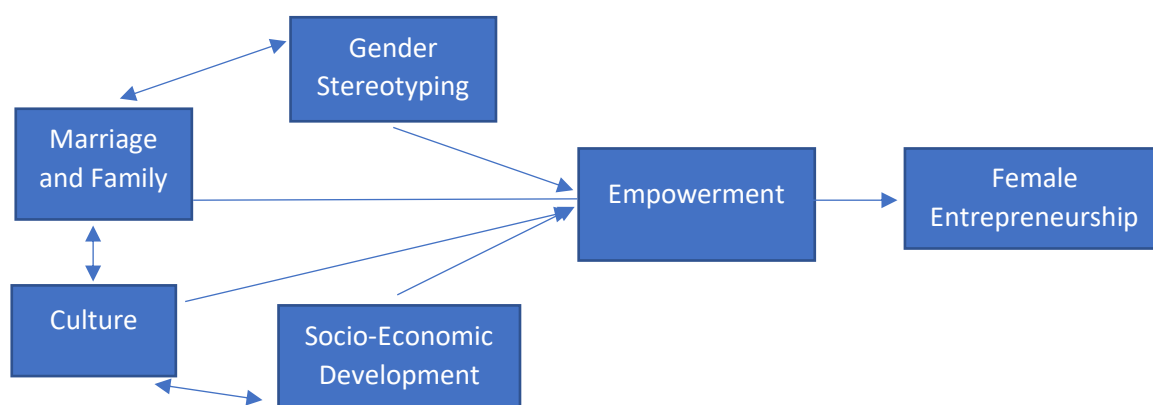


Figure 1: Family Dynamics and Entrepreneurship

### 3.0 Research Approach and Method

In order to answer the research aim, this paper adopts a qualitative approach. Qualitative element allows capturing of dynamics experienced by the participants, therefore providing a deeper insight not just into the facts, but feelings and opinions experienced. Furthermore, qualitative research allows open-ended questions to be extended especially concerning situations over time and connections to decision making. It aims to identify explanations of behaviour and are extremely useful for acquiring information regarding values, interests, behaviours and opinions especially in the context of cultural information (Smith and Smith 2018). The level of flexibility in this method allows the researcher to plough deeper in the complexity of the problem and gain more enriched data and therefore understanding of the topic (Seaman 2008).

The main mode of data collection was in-depth semi structured interviews that were carried out with 15 female entrepreneurs in the city of Beijing in China. Due to data saturation, the researcher did not go beyond 15 interviews. Initial questions were developed from literature review and further questions were questions were asked to understand the importance of family structure for them, from their emotional and sociological/societal perceptive. The researchers used personal network and snow balling method to establish contact with female entrepreneurs. A set of standards were used in the selection of female entrepreneurs for reliability and validity. The firm of the female entrepreneurs should be registered for the past 5 years. Each interview lasted an average of 40 minutes and the recordings were transcribed to derive data for analysis. Before the interviews, the developed interview schedule was blind tested and translated with native

Chinese speaking academic. The validity of the transcriptions was addressed through back translation by an experienced Chinese academic and a sample of the transcripts were sent to another academic to test its content validity. No issues were revealed and the transcribed data was thematically analysed to identify the key emerging themes in the personal journey of the female entrepreneurs. A total of 120 pages of transcribed data was available for analysis and data was analysed using NVivo software. Codes and aggregate themes were developed based on transcribed data and checked for validity by an independent academic. The key themes related to importance of family, relationship status, gender stereotypes and family orientation were identified (table 2). No new information was forthcoming after fifteen interviews and with time constraints, the researchers decided to stop conducting any further interviews. The respondents were anonymised and a brief profile of the respondents is given in table 1.

**Table 1: Profile of respondents**

Respondent No	Age and Background	Firm Characteristics	Interview Length
R1	26, educated up to degree level, Owner	Private firm- specializing in wedding planning	40 min
R2	28, law major, owns 50% share in the business	Private firm-café bar	50 min
R3	51, early childhood education	Private firm-Operates a Kinder Garden/Play school for small children	40 min
R4	24, university degree	Private firm- Art Studio	45 min
R5	27, school educated, proprietor	Private firm- Retail shop	40 min
R6	28, university educated	Private firm-Restaurant	40 min
R7	34, secondary school educated	Private firm- Plumbing	45 min
R8	30, technical education	Private firm- Electronics services	50 min
R9	36, university degree	Private firm- Runs a dance school	30 min
R10	22, secondary school educated	Private firm- Runs a gymnastics studio	35 min
R11	36, primary school educated	Private firm- Online shop	40 min
R12	21, university educated	Private firm- Jewellery designer	45 min
R13	55, secondary school educated	Private firm- Successful beautician	50 min
R14	35, university educated	Private firm- convenience shop	40 min



R15	43, university educated	Private firm- online seller	50 min
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#### **4.0 Data Analysis and Results**

Inspired by the systematic approach adopted by Maclean and colleagues (2019), our analysis of interview data have revealed three dominant themes around female entrepreneurship in China, which are explored in the following sections. First, is female entrepreneurs' marriage perception, including if unmarried, their relationship perception. This entails their attitudes towards a saying 'marriage is the second birth for women in China' as well as the importance they attach to their marriage or relationship compared to career. Second, is the widespread influence of family orientation, a notion permeating a large portion of interview transcripts yet indicating a conflicting stance on the influences of family on females' experience in their entrepreneurial endeavours. Third, is perspective on the gender stereotype and its effects on females' entrepreneurship journey, or career development in general. Table 2 provides illustrative quotations for each theme which are amplified in the following sections. We then briefly consider, reflectively, aspects of the data that point to the revelation of the transitioning feature of the Chinese society, calling for the need to revise the contemporary understanding of female entrepreneurship in a Chinese context.

**Table 2: Data, Categories and Aggregate Themes**

Illustrative first order quotations	Second order categories	Aggregate themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(I agree) ... it depends on how wealthy your husband family is and if he treats you well or not ... whether your husband will be helpful for your future career or for your own family (before marriage).</li> <li>I think it is correct to say that ... We normally get married in our 20s and live in the new home with husband. If the husband is not treating the wife well ... it will be very frustrating for the wife.</li> </ul>	Marriage as Second Birth	Marriage/ Relationship Perception
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I think single women are facing a lot of pressure ... I believe career is the foundation of marriage. I don't want to give up my career for marriage. The best scenario would be that my future husband will understand my career choice and support me.</li> </ul>	Marriage vs Career	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I am ... in a stable relationship. My boyfriend is working as a designer in another studio ... I see no conflict between marriage and career. My boyfriend and I both love designing, we are happy together. I think I will definitely work after getting married ...</li> </ul>	Relationship vs Career	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I feel a lot of pressure on me, like pregnancy and keeping the family harmonious. Starting a business is already hard enough but there are other difficulties.</li> <li>When I get married, I may think that getting a stable job is better. Then I wouldn't be running my own business.</li> <li>I do all the housework at home, before my kids went to university, I also took care of their lives and study etc., was very busy but worth it as long as they (the kids) were doing well.</li> </ul>	Family Pressure	Family Orientation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>When my kids went to University, I was at home and felt bad and lost my life purpose. My husband then suggested that I go and help with his business and he supports me. He can also give me advice when I have problems.</li> <li>My mom is very open-minded ... she can give me advice. I will also talk to my grandfather on my mother's side or my auntie, as he was a headmaster before, and she is a teacher. Both of them can give me guidance.</li> </ul>	Family Support	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The disadvantage is that we have more pressure in balancing life and work.</li> <li>It is very difficult for females to get a job in China. Influence by feudalism, females' status is still low in China. Female employees also have very high mobility due to marriage and pregnancy; this would affect their work.</li> </ul>	Female Drawbacks	Gender Stereotype
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Female entrepreneurs are good at communicating with clients and dealing with customer complaints.</li> <li>We are very good at details, we have patience, prudence, and clear minds. When we negotiate with male clients, it is less awkward.</li> </ul>	Female Strengths	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>As long as you are willing to do, you can always get a job. There are no limitations on female anymore.</li> <li>I think as long as the woman is willing to work hard, it is not difficult to get a job in China.</li> </ul>	Female Neutral	

#### 4.1 Marriage/Relationship Perception

Marriage is perceived as a significant point of life by interviewees. When asked the question: 'Do you think that marriage is a second birth for women in China?' All interviewees agreed. There is a general sense that marriage is not just a commitment involving two individuals, but one that connects two families with the assumption that the wife becomes a new member of the husband's family.

*I completely agree ... As we literally marry into another family, it is very important to have a good marriage. This could affect the rest of my life. (R12)*

Under this assumption, the quality and happiness of the wife's life after marriage are strongly influenced, if not completely determined, by her husband and/or his family - suggesting a collectivistic perception towards marriage as opposed to an individualistic one. This consequently affects the wife's career choice and experience including her entrepreneurial journey.

*I think it is true ... Because choosing your partner is like choosing your life after marriage. If you choose someone who doesn't support your job, you would end up ... destroy(ing) both your career and family. (R1)*

An additional finding is that, in general, interviewees tend to see marriage as a lifelong commitment - there was no mention of the possibility of getting a divorce if things do not work out for them. On the one side, this indicates a long-term orientation towards marriage by Chinese females. On the other side, it echoes with the disadvantageous social perception towards divorced women bound by traditional Chinese values which could put them in a more difficult situation in establishing a new family or achieving higher career status (Hung et al., 2004).

Despite the agreement on the significant influence marriage can impose on females, some interviewees' state that they would put career before marriage as it gives them more independence and sense of security.

*I think career comes before marriage. I can live without marriage ... once I have my own career and financial independence, I feel a sense of security ... As I have just started my business, I have no time to think about marriage ... it is very important for me to have financial and thought independence ..(R9).*

The growing awareness of and need for freedom and independence is emerging amongst female entrepreneurs in China. To a point that a female entrepreneur would even give up a long-term relationship because the other party in the relationship does not provide enough support for her career.

*I broke up ... in the first year of my business. We were together for seven years and were going to get married ... But since I started my business, we had more disagreements. He ... wants me to get a stable job ... so that I can have more time for family ...(R11)*

This presents a sharp contradiction in the perceptions of marriage or relationship amongst female entrepreneurs in a Chinese context. Interestingly, those who hold career dearer than

marriage tend to be younger in age than those who see marriage and family more important. This could suggest an emerging trend of increasing acknowledgement and emphasis on freedom and independence amongst younger generation females in a Chinese context. This being stated, great importance has been attached to family by all interviewees, particularly on its influence on their career choices and development. In fact, the second theme we identified (i.e. family orientation) has attracted the majority of quotes across all interview transcripts.

## 4.2 Family Orientation

Our interview data show that family is the key factor affecting female entrepreneurs in China. Which is not surprising given that marriage receives a great premium as mentioned in the previous section. However, sources of family influence and the actual impact tend to vary. In general, family brings various kinds of pressure for some female entrepreneurs. But others claim that they either benefit from or rely on the support from family members. Following comments on marriage in the previous section, one source of pressure for female entrepreneurs lies in the husband's family (i.e. the parents-in-law) as it is not uncommon in China for new couples to live with the husband's parents, reinforcing the saying that females 'marry into another family' stated previously.

*We live with my husband's parents as they can take care of our child and some housework ... But ... we have no private space, and we have different values ... there are conflicts between us. If I devote myself wholly to my business, I ... will be blamed ... But if I try to be a good daughter-in-law and good wife, then I won't have time for my business ... my husband was very supportive ... but after we had our daughter ... He now often tries to convince me to get a stable job and take good care of family .(R10)*

Under such kind of living arrangement, parents-in-law have easy access to interfere with the young couple's decision making and career choice. Elder generations in China prefer stable careers to risky ones such as entrepreneurship. Therefore, many females are pressurised to give up existing businesses or ideas to start new ones. From the above quote, another source of pressure is from the husband who would like the wife to spend more time on the family, especially after children were born. Getting pregnant and taking care of children is a big part of the filial piety tradition in China for females. With this kind of socially accepted expectations on their shoulders, females feel that they have to endure more stress if they would like to start their own businesses.

*My parents give me pressure as they see people around me are getting married. I think it would be difficult to balance a good career and family. (R12)*

For unmarried females, pressure would come from their own parents who would ask their daughters to get married first, hence, putting females in a stressful situation when they would like to devote themselves into starting and running their businesses. It is clear that due to the socially constructed expectations on females' roles in families, embarking on an entrepreneurial journey in China would put a significant level of pressure on females as they have to work much harder than males to find a balance between their family and career commitments.

Despite various forms of pressure from different family members, interviewees also acknowledge family as a main source of support in either starting their businesses or helping

them to get through difficult times when running their businesses. Amongst other family members, husband play a more obvious role in supporting female entrepreneurs.

*My husband started a business ... I worked at his company and got to know more about wedding planning. I then went on to start my own wedding planning company ... Then I started learning business event planning too. Kind of following his footprint. (R8)*

One way a husband could support a female entrepreneur is by leading her into the business world where she is exposed to the knowledge and opportunities available. In this scenario, female entrepreneurs have the chance to learn from their husbands and receive support in starting and developing businesses.

*My husband is very good. He respects me and loves family. He spends a lot of time at home ... He will do housework, take care of the child ... My husband is very supportive for my career. He can be very busy at work, but his time is easier to manage. If he has time, he will help me as well. (R13)*

Another form of support from a husband would be that he contributes more to family so that she can have more time to concentrate on her business. This is a relatively rare scenario as husbands tend to leave the domestic responsibilities to wives in general. And this also involves a more ‘careful communication with husband’ according to the interviewee as it is easy for the husband’s masculine self-esteem to get hurt by doing more feminine domestic work. Another main source of support for female entrepreneurs is their own parents who are either from a business background or running their own businesses.

*Both my parents are doing business. My dad is in the metals business and my mom is in the clothing business, my brother is in international trade and printing business. I am influenced by my parents when I start my business. (R6)*

Females from this kind of families tend to be very well supported in terms of business knowledge, inspiration, and an encouraging atmosphere. For our interviewee, it is almost her family tradition to set up her own business as all other family members are involved in this field. Our data clearly demonstrate the importance of the role of family in influencing female entrepreneurship in a Chinese context. Although there are traces of social perceptions and expectations influenced by traditional Chinese ideology where females are primarily and sometimes solely the care taker of domestic matters in a family, it is worth noting that there is an emerging social norm where females are not as quite limited in the domestic sphere in their lives and particularly career paths.

### **4.3 Gender Stereotype**

When asked to reflect on the advantages and disadvantages female entrepreneurs face in a Chinese context, the majority of comments fall into this stream where females think that they are in disadvantageous position because of their gender.

*We are more easily to be questioned. Traditional thoughts are holding us back. For example, female should be at home to take care of husband and child. (R15)*

Affected by the traditional expectations, it is more difficult for females to balance life and work which puts them in a more difficult position. This is closely related to the family pressure in the previous section which can be classified as internal disadvantage for females when we position family as the unit of society or a viewpoint of our analysis.

*It is more difficult for female to start businesses in China. We often need to deal with government leaders at higher levels who are often males ... People would assume that we have some special relations with male leaders so that our business is doing so well ... Male entrepreneurs would not have this kind of rumour. I can't think of any advantages.*

However, external disadvantages also exist. The above suggests that, compared to males, female entrepreneurs tend to be victims of rumours from society as China is a largely male dominated society where males sit in more powerful positions in government and beyond.

*Our drawbacks lie in physical strength, social skills, and social acknowledgement. For example, when there is a big project, female entrepreneurs are often questioned whether they are able to fulfil the tasks. (R2)*

This also leads to questions and doubts around the capabilities of female entrepreneurs when taking up important or demanding projects illustrated by the above quote. Additionally, in the workplace in general, females are also directly or indirectly disadvantaged.

*In China, it is more difficult for females to find jobs than males ... If a company hires an unmarried female, when she gets married and pregnant, according to law, she is entitled to have 1 month paid marriage holiday and 3 months paid pregnancy holiday, while a male is only entitled for a 1 month paid marriage holiday and 15 days pregnancy holiday. (R14)*

It is very interesting how a regulation that leans towards females is perceived by females as creating a disadvantage for them in the workplace. As the above quote suggests, from a company's perspective, hiring a male employee would mean less hassle and financial burden than hiring a female, particularly those who are looking to get married and give birth to children. This suggests that regulations need to be improved to consider more thoroughly about social equality and justice - a point worth further investigating in future research.

With all the drawbacks stated above, however, some interviewees do acknowledge that being female has brought them certain advantages over male entrepreneurs as females are perceived to be more genuine, patient, and more careful with details.

*It is easier for us to gain trust ... we are seen as more mild, genuine and careful ... good at dealing with details. People tend to think male entrepreneurs are more cunning.(R8)*

These traits have been deemed very helpful for female entrepreneurs in the communication sphere when they are negotiating with clients and dealing with customer complaints. Another stream of comments on females in China seems to be very neutral. As one interviewee puts it:

*I think male and female are equal. I can't think of any advantages a female would have in starting her own business. (R1)*

Although there are data indicating that females are having more equality and independence in a Chinese context, they constitute only a very small portion of our data. In either the drawback or strength streams, gender stereotype is a dominant theme where perceptions on females appear to be very much socially entrenched. However, we do see a descending impact of traditional Chinese ideology on females' roles in family or society at large. It is clear that some of our data do acknowledge that the Chinese society is moving towards the direction where females enjoy more freedom and independence in the workplace. However, being a female entrepreneur in China are not perceived as having much advantage against their male counterparts. Nevertheless, the very last quote above suggests that the awareness of gender equality is emerging and growing in China.

## **5.0 Discussion and Implications**

This study aimed to explore the family dynamics and relationships in the context of female entrepreneurship that still prevent females to choose entrepreneurship as a preferred career in China. A qualitative data collected from women entrepreneurs in china clearly suggest that though there is a considerable progress in the society in terms of freedom and opportunities for females, certain gender stereotypes and societal pressure on females still exist and the female entrepreneurs are still a disadvantaged gender in a male dominated society. The research investigated various factors related to the marriage, family and its support, gender stereotypes and its influence on female entrepreneurs in their decision making process. The findings of the research clearly indicates that certain societal expectations which deep rooted in traditional and cultural values of Chinese society , has a negative influence on female entrepreneurs' journey.

It is evident that the marriage/relationship perception plays a key role in the career decisions of female entrepreneurs. The data suggest, a strong negative influence of marriage/relationship perception in the career making decision of the female entrepreneurs. A key factor, which was explored in the study, is the family orientation of female entrepreneurs and the extent to which it influences their determination to pursue their entrepreneurial career. The societal expectations on the female gender to take care of traditional family responsibilities are unjustifiably weighed towards them and they are torn between their responsibility towards their family and their career goals. They also lack any support from the family to balance their role as a mother and as a career woman. They also face pressure from their families to abandon their career choice to be an entrepreneur, as it is still considered as risky. These unfair expectations that has been placed on female entrepreneurs create undue stress which directly affect their ability to carry out their professional duties efficiently. These observations are directly in line with existing constraints in female entrepreneurship (Jafari-Sadeghi et al, 2021; Cruz and Basco, 2018), however, there were exceptions, female entrepreneurs from younger generation were putting their career ambition and goals ahead of their marriage/personal relationship there by challenging the traditional and cultural stereotypes and norms (Stangej and Basco 2017). This shows that socio-economic development may play an important part in the change in attitudes as well as family dynamics in relation to empowerment and entrepreneurship.

Family support is a key factor for an entrepreneurial journey and it is evident from the research that the female entrepreneurs coming from a business family do get their family support in terms of acquiring business knowledge and encouragement. This is a positive influence, as they are supported in acquiring the key resources that are needed to start a business. Also there is a new trend emerging in China, which suggest the female entrepreneurs are being supported by

their spouses in shouldering domestic duties and they also do provide emotional support, which is a key factors in successfully managing the business. This is in line with earlier observations that, spouses can be a support system when it comes to empowering females to become entrepreneurs (Saxon and Gillin, 2003). However, the Chinese society is still highly patriarchal and support from their family in managing their domestic duties is still not a norm (Cooke and Xiao, 2021). This indicates, the female entrepreneurs still struggle to have work life balance and there is still a long way to cover in achieving a gender neutral society.

The question of gender stereotypes also provided some insights into the female strengths and female drawbacks in the entrepreneurial journey. This indicated some of the key perceptions held by society about female entrepreneur's capability to run a successful business (Oppedal Berge et al, 2020). They were considered inferior to their male counterparts in their ability to run the businesses. It is also to be noted that most of the senior officials who are in the position of power to provide governmental support to the female entrepreneurs are male and negative attitudes of some these leaders towards the capabilities of female entrepreneurs is not particularly helpful in accessing the resources for their business.

The study also noted that the female entrepreneurs had to face emotional and mental trauma, as, instead of attributing their success to their professional capabilities, it would be attributed to rumoured unfair advantage accorded to them for being a female, which is a pervasive and destructive phenomenon of character assassination. In literature, similar experiences were noted where, female entrepreneurs has to fight this misogynistic view of the society in their entrepreneurial journey and which can cause extreme stress and mental trauma (Jafari-Sadeghi et al, 2021). These kind of negative attitude towards female entrepreneurs would discourage them is actively pursuing their dream and there is a need for change in the attitude of the society, to encourage more females to choose entrepreneurship as a career.

In China, while the statistics show an increasing trend in female entrepreneurship, our study notes that there are still embedded issues related to family dynamics that doesn't allow women to choose entrepreneurship as a career. However, some of the key characteristics of female gender are acknowledged as strengths by the society and they do find themselves in an advantageous position in gaining the trust of the people. The female entrepreneurs are perceived to be genuine, patient and careful with details, which are positive capabilities in running a business. Through the research sheds light on family dynamics and their influence on female entrepreneurs and their entrepreneurial journey in China, it would be presumptuous to draw a conclusion on the conditions of female entrepreneurs in China and make generalised statements, as this study is based on limited variables and participants. However, it is an important building block in understanding the journey of female entrepreneurs in China and additional research with more participants and wide range of variables will help to widen the research scope for a better understanding of the influence of family dynamics on female entrepreneurs and their journey.

## **Conclusion**

It is very much evident that women entrepreneurship at a global level is an important topic of research (Jafari-Sadeghi, et al 2021). However, this visibility is often blurred at a social level, country-specific level and also at a gender level. Despite women 'smashing' the 'glass ceiling/s' within and outside organisations, and being key players in family businesses, as well as setting up and owning their ventures, they have not been without challenges. Barriers remain in existence and can stem from family, society, culture as well as the underlying constraints



from a gender perspective and these all have an impact in relationships within the family. This study in a Chinese context sheds light on the current state of dynamics of female entrepreneurship in the country. China as a country has made rapid stride in several areas and also enacted institutions that promote entrepreneurship, however family dynamics and cultural embeddedness still play a crucial role in decision of women to choose entrepreneurship as a career choice. This study is without its limitations, firstly the sample size examined is very small, and the study was exploratory leading to non-generalizability of the results. Secondly, the study focussed on female entrepreneurs in the capital regions, further studies comparing the differences in sub-sets of rural and urban population may help us to understand the family dynamics, embeddedness and the factors leading to them. Thirdly, the study was qualitative in nature, deductive and quantitative approaches can be used to confirm the factors related to family dynamics and embeddedness and address the roles of moderating and mediating variables in the selection of entrepreneurship as a career choice for women. In future, further variables including economic factors as well as demographic variables can be explored to better understand the role of dynamics in female entrepreneurship.

#### Limitations and Future Scope of the study

Although this research study has helped to understand the various factors related to family dynamics and cultural embeddedness and their influence on the dynamics of the female entrepreneurs, there is a need to further test these factors with a larger sample size by applying various other methods. The study is also limited to one geographical location and carrying out this research in various other countries with similar demographics and also a comparative study will help to confirm the family dynamics and cultural embeddedness on the journey of female entrepreneurs in a global context.

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