**Exploring female entrepreneurship in China as a means of empowerment and emancipation**

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**Abstract**

The focus of this study is work/family conflict (WFC) amongst Chinese female entrepreneurs. An increasing number of Chinese mothers started their business hoping to be financially independent from their husbands yet flexible enough for domestic and child-care responsibilities. However, they found themselves instead struggling with WFC and their own identities as Chinese mothers. Drawing upon 34 in-depth interviews with Chinese female entrepreneurs with child/ren under 18 years old, this article sets out to understand what has motivated them to be entrepreneurs and how WFC was experienced and potentially managed by the interviewees and with what consequences. The analysis draws heavily on identity theory, which sees identity evolution as an ongoing process through experiencing and adaptation, especially focusing on how WFC is caused, experienced and negotiated between entrepreneurial and motherhood identities. In conclusion it is argued that a new feminist identity is forming and developing through managing WFC.

**Keywords**

work-family conflict (WFC); female entrepreneurial identity; Chinese culture; emancipation; feminist

**Introduction**

Chinese female entrepreneurship is a well-studied topic. Research has focused particularly on motivation (Hung, et al., 2011), internationalisation (Alon, 2011) and leadership style (Li, et al., 2013). However, little is known about work-family conflict (WFC) among Chinese female entrepreneurs. WFC refers to the times when family role and work role are discordant (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). WFC is often more severe if one has childcare responsibilities (DeMartino and Barbato, 2003). Dual responsibility at both home and workplace is different for Chinese female entrepreneurs in comparison to their western counterparts due to the societal and familial expectations of women in Chinese culture.

This article begins with an overview of female entrepreneurship, WFC and identity, with a specific focus on how identity theory, instead of role theory, can be adapted for the work/family research literature. Following an outline of the research methodology, what is participants’ motivation to start a business and how WFC is caused, experienced, and managed are emphasised and described in detail along with its consequences. It is argued that WFC has resulted from multiple identity discordances (i.e., between entrepreneurial identity and motherhood identity) and resulted in an emerging feminist identity. The article concludes that female emancipation is progressed through four stages from their entrepreneurial motivation, gaining confidence through managing multiple identities to their reflexivity on their marital relationship and societal norms.

**Female Entrepreneurship in China**

The number of Chinese female entrepreneurs is taking a world-leading position. According to Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM, 2018), in China 41% of entrepreneurs are female entrepreneurs while 59% were male. This gender ratio is considerably higher relative to peer statistics including 38.5% female and 61.5% male entrepreneurs in the United States, 36.5% female and 63.5% male entrepreneurs in Asia, and 24.5% female and 75.5% male entrepreneurs in the UK. Out of 89 self-made female billionaires in 2018 globally, there were 51 Chinese women, making up 57% of the worldwide total (Lee, 2019). One explanation of these patterns is that being a female entrepreneur in China is socially respected (Elam et al., 2019).

However, Chinese female entrepreneurs may experience a high degree of work/family conflict (WFC). Chinese women often hold a sense of responsibility and obligation towards family members which seems to be more austere than in the West, which is often attributed to the inﬂuence of Confucianism (Park and Chesla, 2007). Confucianism expects a woman to be "a good wife and a loving mother" (贤妻良母), whose role is to take care of the children and the household (Fu et al., 2008). As I discuss below, women’s entrepreneurial ambition is constrained by their domestic responsibilities and consequently contributes to their WFC.

**WFC Among Female Entrepreneurs**

The concept of work/family conflict (WFC) refers to the times when family role and work role are discordant (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Greenhaus and Beutell, 2003). Conflict arises as competition for one’s limited time and commitment comes from both the work and family domains (Adisa, 2016) and will eventually lead to the incompatibility of the two domains (Voydanoff, 2004). This is because conflict is associated with a wide range of negative psychological problems including stress, dissatisfaction with both work and family roles, resentment towards people involved in the two domains, burnout and a feeling of guilt (Ferguson et al., 2016; Haines et al., 2013). Women tend to experience more WFC than men (Akehurst et al., 2012). Having children and the number of children can affect business activities (DeMartino and Barbato, 2003) because child-care and other family obligations require time and energy (Kevane and Wydick, 2001). When entrepreneurs avoid involving a family in business, their business is more likely to be successful (Carter and Rosa, 1998).

Despite such intensive literature on western female entrepreneurs, this topic is seldomly researched in Chinese culture. Women’s identities in this context are traditionally gendered by their parents and society, as wives and daughters. One way this can be illustrated is to consider the Chinese verbs for marriage, which is highly gendered. The term 嫁 (women getting married), consists of 女 (women) and 家(home); the term 娶 (men getting married), consists of 取 (obtain) and 女 (women). Just as the terms suggest, in Chinese culture, there is no equality in marriage. A woman getting married is to belong to a new home while the man obtains/possesses the woman. For elderly parents within Chinese culture, a girl married off is like water poured outside (嫁出去的女儿泼出去的水). This phrase implies that once the daughter is married to another family, she will never be able to go back (to her maiden family). If a woman does not perform these two identities by a certain age they will be judged, and they will be a source of concern for the people around them. Even though women are now seen more often in the workplace, "men go out and women stay indoors” (男主外女主内) is still widely acknowledged. However, with the familial and societal expectations for a Chinese woman to be “a good wife and a loving mother” (贤妻良母), the entrepreneurial process is likely to differ from Western examples. I argue that while building their own businesses and managing WFC, they have gradually developed their personal identity.

**Identity theory and WFC**

Existing work/family literature in the past decades is largely examined through role theory, including role conflict (Greenhouse and Beutell, 1985), role salience (Noor, 2004), role strain (Warren and Johnson, 1995), role values (Carlson and Kacmar, 2000), gender roles (Gutek, Searle and Klepa, 1991) and social roles (Frone, 2003). Role theory explains roles “by presuming that persons are members of social positions and hold expectations for their own behaviours and those of other persons” (Biddle, 1986: 67). Identity theory suggests that identity is a process of construction over a lifetime (Chasserio et al., 2014). Compared to role theory, identity theory offers a much richer and more complex perspective; “the former sees role as a prop in the staging of identity performances, while the latter views it more as a context-determined, evaluative tool that specifies required identities” (Simpson and Carroll, 2008:31). Identity theory suggests that identity changes over time (Kreiner et al., 2006), forming into a dynamic process of self-reflection (Gioia et al., 2013). During the process of identity development, individuals continuously examine how their own identity fits into existing social identities and roles (Hall and du Gay, 1996; Patten, 2016). An individual may have multiple identities with each being salient to distinctive behavioural expectations or occupations. An over-arching identity will encapsulate these multiple identities and alter with their salience throughout time (Shepherd and Haynie, 2009).

There are times when the group-level identity conflicts with the individual-level entrepreneur identity resulting in “two conflicting discourses” (Ahl, 2004: 61). As the author explains the discourse on womanhood “is in conflict with the discourse on entrepreneurship" and "being a woman and an entrepreneur at the same time means that one has to position oneself simultaneously concerning two conflicting discourses" (ibid).

This conflicting discourse can be shown through an individual’s WFC, for example, the motherhood guilt for not accompanying children because of some devotion to business. How the WFC is experienced, dealt with, or neglected is one representation of one's identity evolution. When a woman’s entrepreneurial identity clashes with her motherhood identity, identity conflict theory suggest that standard/observed behaviours will give way to internal behaviours (Hogg, Terry and White, 1995). That is, on some occasions, people tend to accept and conform to social expectations while on some others they may distance from existing social norms and redefine new social norms (Díaz-García and Welter, 2011). My research examining WFC among Chinese female entrepreneurs through identity theory will bring novel foci of identity evolution and Chinese culture into the current work/family research literature.

**Research Methods**

This research recruited 34 Chinese female entrepreneurs (with at least one child under 18 years old) via personal contacts and snowballing between February and March, 2020. A common definition of an entrepreneur is someone “who is self-employed and who starts, organizes, manages, and assumes responsibility for a business” (Segal, et al. 2005:42). However, research suggests that entrepreneurship discourse brings some female entrepreneurs a sense of being fake as they find it difficult to "connect their internal sense of self with this masculine social identity" (Lewis, 2013: 254). Studies have shown that some female entrepreneurs refuse to define themselves as "entrepreneur" because it is not "who I really am" (Lewis, 2013:252) or "it has a dishonest feel" (Warren, 2014:28). Rather, some would like to be referred to as "a founder" or "a creator" (Lewis, 2004:61). Although preferring to be addressed otherwise, this does not mean that they do not behave as entrepreneurs. Though the interviewees did not identify themselves as entrepreneurs, I suggest they fit this definition. When recruiting participants, this study adopted a set of criteria for purposeful sampling: 自己做生意且孩子未成年的母亲 (a mother with child/ren under 18 years old and has her own business) and discarded the Western-originated term 企业家 (entrepreneur). This research employed semi-structured voice call interviews through 微信 (WeChat, a Chinese social media app), due to the restraints of the Covid-19 pandemic at that time, with an average duration of 90 minutes. The length varied from one hour to three hours. All the interviews were conducted by the author and based on confidentiality and informed consent.

My own stance and experiences facilitated an interactive meaning-making approach to the interviews. Both the interviewer and interviewee are necessarily and unavoidably active in an interview in which both parties communicatively take part in meaning-making work rather than simply asking and replying (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). More than this, I have brought together an 'indigenous, transformative, liberation and feminist' point of view (Barnes, 2018: 379). To be exact, being a Chinese woman myself with many female entrepreneur family members and relatives, I am an ‘insider’ investigator (Chenail, 2011:257) compared to a western researcher or a male researcher. With this background, I find it relatively easy to build rapport and find common ground which allows 'an ethical relational space of engagement' (Ermine, 2007). Instead of giving neutral responses in the conversation, I had an intrinsic feminist perspective and I often showed my empathetic reactions to their experiences. My participants were willing to share their stories with abundant detail. For example, when they are talking about how they were unfairly treated at their original workplace, I could relate to that as I had a similar experience. Sharing similar experiences offers ethics of care and increases mutual understanding which encourages participants to give more detailed data. My Chinese identity also helped me to obtain better data. I am fully aware of cultural traits, for example, 面子 (face), referring to a person’s prestige, dignity, honour, respect and status (Ren, Howe and Zhang, 2018) which discourages the participants to talk about their “real self”.

As mentioned earlier, this research was conducted via WeChat. Without having to meet them in person, the participants were more willing to accept an interview as they are busy people with dual responsibilities. Compared to having a video call, they said they preferred voice calls as they did not have to worry about their own image. They said that they were more at ease without looking at themselves on the screen. M31 recalled that she felt very comfortable talking to me because I “do not judge”. It is partly because of my empathetic approach and partly because she was hiding behind her phone.

Their willingness to share did, however, surprise me. When I was conducting the interviews, I was quite focused on the conversation and looking back now I felt that there were many hard-to-touch topics and a lot of tears shed over the phone. Examples of such topics were: mother’s cancer (M13), son’s kidney failure (M23), underaged daughter running away with a man (M24), a cheating husband (M26), suicidal thoughts (M30), adoption trauma (M28), divorce experience (M21) and other shared complaints of “rubbish husbands” (M4) and in-law relationships (M2). Although they have signed a consent which informed them that they can stop the interview at any point, none of my participants chose to stop because of their emotions. On the contrary, many have told me that this interview provided “a very good chance to reflect on my whole life” (M30) because “no one has ever shown such great interest and time listening to my life stories” (M26).

I am fortunate to have two Western supervisors who give me both academic suggestions and personal feedback/feelings, as working mothers, when commenting on my findings. This is necessary as being completely indigenous would stimulate “insider’s bias”. Chenail (2011:257) reported that insider researchers would have fewer curiosities because they only discover "what they think they do not know" instead of "opening up their inquiries to encompass also what they do not know they do not know". My supervisors would share their academic insights and personal motherhood experience on cross-cultural similarities and differences which in return has increased my cultural relativism. I understand the uniqueness of Chinese familial and entrepreneurial practices better after the compare and contrast process.

Through this method design, the research is to address the following questions:

1. What combination of factors encouraged Chinese mothers to start their own businesses?
2. What is their experience of WFC and how did they manage it?
3. What are the consequences of having and dealing with the WFC?

Accordingly, the empirical section commences with the why and how they have started their own business. It follows with the analysis of their increased WFC and how they managed it. Next, the aggravated marital relationship as one consequence of severe WFC is explained. How Chinese culture has influenced the participants' way of thinking and behaviours are looked at. The empirical analysis finishes with Mrs.Wang’s short case of her WFC and the implications. How identities evolved and the consequences emerged chronologically will be illustrated in the narrative case.

**Motivation: Starting A Business**

It was the year 2016, but I have always thought it was 2015. I could not remember things clearly and each day was the same to me. Being a stay-at-home mom is not for me. I was in this drowsiness every single day. (M1)

M1 was a housewife for 1.5 years for her delivery and breastfeeding. She recalled her days in this period as “drowsiness”. Being a mother was not enough for her and she was eager to achieve something outside of her family domain. By having her own business and her own friends, she said she could do more meaningful things that are not always about child-caring or domestic life. Her desire to establish a business shows that she did not wish to accept the life that her family had outlined for her.

Being a housewife, you may live happily for one year or two, then you will realise, your life is a disaster. You don't have respect in the family. Whenever you 找老公要钱 (ask husband for money), you don’t even dare to say the words out loud. (M25)

This was a common belief among the participants. The significance of financial independence was frequently brought up by them. In the traditional Chinese patriarchal system, only men were allowed to take a public sector position or to do business. Most women were housewives. By becoming financially independent, the participants had made the first and the most essential step of not depending on a man. Both M11 and M25 had pulling factors within themselves that compelled them to start a business. They wanted their own social circles and their own income so they “don’t have to ask husband for money”.

M3 has had a desperate experience that pushed becoming an entrepreneur as a necessity:

I started my own business when I had my second daughter and I wanted her to live a better life. My first daughter had aplastic anemia [a disease which meant that she cannot produce her own red blood cells]. This has destroyed our originally happy family. The hospital is a place that “sucks people’s blood”. A day’s medication would cost more than 10,000 Chinese Yuan. You have to reserve the medication one day before. If you don't pay for the medication a day prior, then the next day, when all the other kids (in the same ward) are having medication, your child won’t have any. We spent all the money we had and we borrowed all we could, from friends and relatives. The disease was not curable. She passed away eventually. I don't want to put myself and my family in the same situation again. Then I thought, I was still young, I must do something.

This unforgettable experience became the turning point of M3’s career life. She had a strong mothering urge as she wished to give her daughter a better life. In contrast to the often-middle-class orientated western research in work/family literature (Bianchi and Milkie, 2010), M3 provided an example of the work/family pattern of those who are less privileged. Money was a considerable issue. Her entrepreneurial activities were built upon her strong motherhood. Instead of expecting her husband to make a financial contribution, she took the responsibility of being the major breadwinner for her family. She has become very independent financially and psychologically. However, her strong mother identity still compelled her to financially, logistically and emotionally be “always there” for her daughter. This has caused huge WFC and is a shared problem among the participants.

**Experience: Increased WFC**

Dual responsibility has increased WFC which was generally managed by careful planning and time management. Through her typical day we can see how M18 managed work based on the needs from home:

I get up earlier than my family, to prepare breakfast. Three of us have breakfast together at the dining table. Then I go to my morning classes and they go to school or work. My morning classes finish before lunchtime which allows me to come back home and cook lunch. I don't have classes during the afternoon, so I use this time for grocery shopping, laundry and preparing dinner. My husband and son come back around 5 pm and dinner is served right away. I eat light and then go to my night classes. By the time I come back again, it is around 9.30 pm. I then do the dishes and prepare to sleep. (M18)

M18 is a wife and a mother for an 11-year-old boy. She is also a small-business owner of a yoga classroom. She has arranged her work to accommodate her family responsibilities so she can meet her entrepreneurial and domestic requirements. Her life is intertwined with her business and her house chores and she recalled "having no time to catch breath". When WFC could not be solved by time management, prioritising would be the next choice in line. Time can be taken from home:

When I have an urgent business order at hand, I would ask my parents to take care of my daughter. (M6)

It can also be taken from work:

Once my child made his clothes dirty at school lunch, I went to deliver him clean clothes. (M8)

Prioritising can be small matters mentioned above, it can also be huge matters that influence their business significantly. M8 has moved house along with her business from Shanghai to her hometown because of her 16-year-old son's 高考 (university entrance exam). This is after deliberate consideration. Her son was not born in Shanghai so he cannot take the Shanghai exam, which is an easier exam. It was feasible for her son to receive an education in Shanghai and go back to his hometown just for the exam. However, education in Shanghai is less intensive and more innovative. Local education is strict and suits the local exam better. She decided, if her son is to take the local exam, he must be educated in a local environment. Moving and restarting her business in her hometown was not easy, she lost a lot of business connections and opportunities in Shanghai but she said she was willing to take new challenges.

Entrepreneurship did not just bring the participants financial independence. Through managing their business and resolving their WFC, the participant grew into capable and confident entrepreneurial selves. Time management was the basic skill like the yoga teacher (M18) required to plan her classes between domestic requirements. When managing their own time became inadequate, they started to learn to manage people, like M6 managed her parents for childcaring. Huge challenges like restarting a business (M8) were taken while managing WFC. Aligned with increased WFC, marital dynamics started to change.

**Consequence: Aggravated Marital Relationship**

Everything has changed after marriage. I have become very busy. I cook. I do the dishes. I do the laundry. I take care of our child. On top of that, I have my own business! We get pregnant. We are in labour. We need to raise a child. We need to be good mothers and perfect wivies (贤妻良母). We need to be nannies. Now what, we need to be breadwinners! (M32)

M32 runs a convenience store in her neighbourhood. She recalled her good times before getting married and how busy she gradually became afterward. Brewer (2007) mentioned that people in marriage tend to share a sense of “we-ness” like a group identification. I do not see the “we-ness” between M32 and her husband since she has done it all by herself. However, when she was talking about her woman/mother role she said: "We get pregnant. We are in labour. We need to raise the child. We need to be good mothers and perfect wives. We need to be nannies. Now what, we need to be breadwinners!" She was using "we" to imply herself and, significantly, other women. As her business grew, she became busier and had a higher financial contribution to her family, yet her home responsibilities remained the same. She felt that she is still fully responsible for all the house chores and all the child-care activities.

I just don’t understand how could he [the husband] be so lazy at home (M4)

A major theme of this research is the implication of having a "rubbish husband"(M4). The participants had a great deal to complain about their husbands. They complained through the interviews, they complained amongst each other in their networks, and they have complained to the husbands themselves. There was a wide range of topics that they have complained about, such as procrastinating:

I used to complain a lot, but my business is growing so big, and I don't even have time or energy to complain. I just want to get things done and spend more time with my son. During the spring festival, we were planning to go skiing [in the mountains]. It is not far, only 2 hours' driving distance. He said we need to think about it and he never mentioned it again. (M1)

and bad habits:

He gambles on card games. I don't. He told me that my life is boring. He said just because I don’t have a hobby doesn’t mean that he can’t have a hobby. I could understand if he had a hobby like running, cycling, singing, or doing some sports, but not gambling. I don't know how other people live their lives, but mine is really depressing. I feel depressed. I have lived enough days in poverty and if I have some money, I would have saved it or invested it properly. Not losing it on gambling. (M28)

When taking the dual role, as mentioned earlier, time management was the basic skill which they were forced to learn. Their husbands however were not trained accordingly. The discrepancy enlarges as the participants’ businesses grow. Financial management similarly was acquired while they developed their entrepreneurial selves. M1 was the “drowsy” stay-at-home mother who could not remember which year it was (mentioned earlier). In our conversation, she did not explicitly recall how she has transformed from “knowing the correct year” to “getting everything done with efficiency” (M1). Abilities naturally and gradually acquired made them distanced from their husbands. Life with their husband became unbearable as they became “depressed” (M28) because of the differences.

**Reasoning: Cultural Influences**

It seems that by pulling (e.g., wanting to be independent) and pushing factors (e.g., being in poverty), women in this study wished to be an entrepreneur. In the process of this identity adaptation, they have encountered WFC and managed this one way or another. Yes, they wanted their own income and their own friend circle and now they have them. But is the current life what they wanted? They are tired, depressed, running across work/family borders with a “rubbish husband” whom they wondered why they married in the first place.

If a woman has a strong character, having a really successful business or career, she will feel very worthwhile. She would have a sense of achievement. She is contributing to society. But when she goes back home, her family, relatives and neighbours won't think so. No matter how successful she is, turning her back from her family and children would make her a failure. This is how we Chinese think. (M16)

M16 explained how she was compelled by Chinese culture to be a perfect homemaker. However, in practice, running between borders with an unsupportive spouse is energy draining. Too much expectation, from family and society, is on women. What is more, women in this study are trapped in this dilemma that they wish to have a harmonious family, but their husbands are not helping; they wish to get rid of the husbands, but they cannot ignore the social stigmatisation of being a widow or single parent. Choices remained heavily constrained.

M9 for example has a husband who has been gambling for several years. he would live in the casino for days. She recalled:

There are extreme times that I find him in the casino and ask for a divorce. When he knew that I am serious about it, he would always beg me don't divorce him because he can quit gambling for me. He will behave well for a while. (M9)

She tried to communicate and threatened to get a divorce, but her husband could not be persuaded. Her husband never changed, and they remained married. With a husband spending all the time in the casino, her domestic responsibility gradually became a heavy burden.

It needs huge courage and assertion to successfully divorce a husband. Many, like M9, stayed in the marriage. Some think that getting a divorce cannot improve their situation:

Getting a divorce won’t improve my situation. I could just walk away. What will happen to my business and my child? (M30)

Most of the participants who refuse to get a divorce because of their child/ren:

I have thought many times of leaving him. But I couldn't. I don't live for myself; I live for my daughter. When she grows up, it will be difficult for her to find a boyfriend if she is from a single-parent family. People would judge her. (M3)

With all these fears and worries, the majority of the participants decided to stay in the not-so-satisfying marriage. No matter how financially and psychologically independent, they still cannot escape the traditional family structure. Despite they are in different sectors with different scales of business, their perception of the family unit is highly congruent, insisting the child should have a father in a dual-parent family. Their weakness and fear of shaking the family structure in return become silenced support of the patriarchal system. M9 did not divorce her gambling husband and consequently, her husband took it as an indulgence of further gambling.

The above analysis explains how entrepreneurial identity was adopted, the experience of WFC, how it was managed and the reasoning of such WFC. Women in this study were developing agency through their entrepreneurship. While adapting new entrepreneurial identity, WFC increased and through managing these WFC, they have developed autonomy and their voices. However, they are still constrained by the traditional familial structure and social norm, resulting their fear of getting a divorce. This empirical section ends with Mrs. Wang's narrative analysis below. This case approach illustrates and explains holistically how identities were evolving, and new identities were being adopted chronologically while managing WFC, along with the consequences of such transition.

**Mrs. Wang’s Case**

He is my second marriage. I walked out from my first marriage real quick and married him when I was 27. We have a daughter. She is 8 years old. My first marriage was a disaster. Then I met him, I felt so secure with him. Plus, at that time, he was, how should I put it, very caring. He knew about everything. He knew how to decorate our new home and arrange furniture. He cooked really well. I didn’t know how to cook. I only learned how to cook after I became a mother.

Mrs. Wang (a pseudonym) is M32 who runs a convenience store in her vicinity. She was a stay-at-home mom until her daughter turned three and started commuting to kindergarten. She was bored at home and her husband suggested she open a convenience store on her own because shopping for essentials requires a long journey from their community. She is ten years younger than her husband. She recalled that in their life before marriage he was a “caring” person who was knowledgeable and good at cooking. Motherhood and entrepreneurship had, however, changed the situation. While managing dual responsibilities, she became very stressed:

I get up really early to cook. We eat. Pack lunch. Then I walk her to school and right after that, I have to go to the convenience store. I will be busy in the store. Until the time to pick her up again. We come back together. I cook dinner. She will be doing homework while I do house chores. I do the laundry, the dishes, the floor and occasionally the furniture. Then shower and sleep. I’m too tired that as soon as I touch the bed, I will fall asleep. “Sleep while you can, tomorrow is another tough day” I think to myself before I turn in.

Running a convenience store is not as easy as it seems. She complained that there is a lot of work. She needed to do the layout, check storage and procure more products. Monthly electricity bills, water bills, and occasional maintenance when things went wrong, are all managed by her alone. Then I asked if her husband is helping her in any way. She answered:

He is very lazy at home, like a statue. I'm very pissed off sometimes. But no matter how angry I am, how do I make my arguments? It's always a single-way communication. He never replies. When I'm done with my points, he will continue doing what he was doing, as if nothing happened. I feel like I'm punching at a pile of loose cotton. I rarely see Chinese dads taking care of children like western dads I've seen on TV. Those dads, in China, are rare. Very rare!

She enjoys her mother identity, despite all the hard work. She said her daughter is very sweet and clever. However, thinking her daughter may become a mother like her, worries her.

One day I came back, "dad washed the dishes for you today" my daughter said happily. For ME? I suddenly realised, how come these are MY dishes? I told her we all had our own meal on our own plates. Those are not just my own dishes. From that day on, I kept telling my daughter “Although your mom is doing this, it should be a family responsibility shared amongst family members”. I told her that “Not everything should be done by a mom. It should be equal between man and woman.” I also told her when she becomes a mom, she doesn’t have to do all of this.

Mrs. Wang’s story is a typical example of how WFC has increased and how it has influenced her logistically and psychologically. She thought of her husband as caring and capable before their marriage and found him resemble "a statue" after. Her experience of this marital change can be understood as a social expectation of Chinese wives and mothers. Chinese women’s ascribed social identity compels them to take familial responsibilities, example being Mrs. Wang “only learnt how to cook *after* being a mother”. The 贤妻良母 (good wife and loving mother’ ) ideology expected her to cook and to take care of house chores while her husband being “a statue”. She tried to argue but deeply rooted cultural influences can hardly be shaken and thus she felt like “punching at a pile of loose cotton”.

I suggest that Mrs. Wang was experiencing awakening feminism through the way she perceived her WFC. Feminists include not only individuals or groups who define themselves as feminist but also those "treating 'reducing gender inequality' as equivalent to a feminist; and treating ‘promoting the interests of women’ as equivalent to feminist” (Walby, 2013:4). Through complaining to her husband of equal responsibility for house chores, Mrs. Wang is voicing out gender inequality among Chinese women in the patriarchal system.

Through media like TV shows, she has perceived how feminism is practiced in Western countries. She concludes that Western fathers take care of children much more frequently than her understanding of Chinese fathers do. What actually happens or is practised is not of great importance. Rather, how individuals make sense of these experiences shapes one's identity (Bird, 2007; McAdams, 1996). Regardless of what is the common child-care practice in the Western countries, her sense-making of the Western fatherhood ideology has reinforced her feminist identity. She perceived that it is rare for Chinese fathers to take childcare responsibilities and she wished this situation could be changed.

She fears this patriarchal unfairness will be imposed on her daughter, who may also become a mother. Her motherhood identity and feminist identity have interplayed paradoxically in front of her daughter. With the mother urge of looking after her daughter, she has taken the majority of the house chores although her feminist identity believes that this should be shared between the husband and wife. Her mother identity in return has reinforced her feminist identity because she does not wish her daughter to live a difficult life like her. This reinforced feminist identity is shown through her lobbying and advocating feminist beliefs to her daughter.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

This research originally set out to discover how WFC has formed and been managed among Chinese female entrepreneurs. From conversations with such women, I argue that WFC has resulted from their identity evolution and resulted in their new identity development. We will divide this discussion into two parts, the first part focuses on how personal identity caused WFC and how it was experienced and dealt with. The second part looks at the formation of Chinese feminist identity with four sequential stages.

Social identity, in China, expects women to behave aligned with 相夫教子 (a women’s duty is to assist husband and to bring up children) and 不孝有三无后为大(the most unfilial thing is to not have children). Women are not expected to have a great financial contribution to the family in this context. This cultural expectation explains why Mrs. Wang picked up cooking responsibility and why her originally "caring" husband transformed into "a statue" after marriage. Their personal/entrepreneurial identity of being independent, making a financial contribution and developing their own friend circle is discordant with the imposed social identity. If social identity requires both Chinese men and women to take familial responsibilities, women in this study would have had less WFC and complained less about their “rubbish husbands”.

The way WFC is dealt with relies on coherence between multiple personal identities (i.e. motherhood identity and entrepreneurial identity). Many scholars find that when there is an identity conflict, individuals may abandon standard/observed behaviours for internal behaviours (Hogg, Terry and White, 1995) or distance from existing social norms and redefine new social norms (Díaz-García and Welter, 2011). The internal behaviour, or redefined new social norms, started from negotiating between identities to reach identity coherence. M8 has given up her business connection in Shanghai and moved her entire business to her hometown to better her son's high school experience. Identity coherence (between motherhood identity and entrepreneurial identity) is shown through their sensemaking of being a good entrepreneur is being a good mother. All the participants reckoned that financial support for their children is of great importance. An example can be that M3's first daughter's death is a life turning point that motivated her to develop a business. It is also a shared belief that their entrepreneurial identity can be an example for the children to pursue their own goals. With WFC being experienced, negotiated and/or solved, women are financially independent and gained confidence through managing and negotiating. I believe that it has facilitated their awakening feminism and in the following part of the discussion, I will focus on how feminist identity is formed and developed through four stages, from establishing their business, developing entrepreneurial identity, rethinking marital relationship to reconsidering the social norms.

The first stage of feminist identity is germinated through their entrepreneurial desire. Many have recalled that they do not wish to 找老公要钱 (ask money from husband) while 男主外女主内 (men go out and women stay indoors) has been practised through many generations before them. Some other participants felt social needs like M1 who wanted to do more meaningful things rather than always be concerned about child-caring or domestic life. Their entrepreneurial identity is generated along with the awakening feminist identity.

The next stage is through the development of their entrepreneurial identity from where they find confidence and security. It is reported that to develop an entrepreneurial identity, individuals normally start from observing other entrepreneurs including family members, peers and those who are well-established (Swail, Down and Kautonen, 2013) as role models (Newbery et al., 2018). They may then experience or try out the behaviours observed. During the process of identity development, individuals continuously examine how their entrepreneurial identity fits into their existing identities and roles (Hall and du Gay, 1996; Patten, 2016). Common entrepreneurial traits often include a high need for achievement (McClelland, 1961), internal locus of control, risk-taking propensity (Gupta and Fernandez, 2009) optimism, autonomy, dominance and aggression (Anderson et al., 2009, Collins and Moore, 1964). M1, a “drowsy” mother who could not remember which year it was, has transformed into a confident and efficient businesswoman who then complained about her husbands' procrastination. Developing as an entrepreneur is an ongoing learning and mimicking process instead of being a static role. Through this process, they have gained confidence in dealing with difficulties and negotiating between competing demands. Work/family enrichment theory suggests that a positive attitude or skill acquired from one role can be transferred to another role in a different domain (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006). Same with multiple identities, the confidence and the finance participants obtained from business has in return stimulated freethinking and reflexivity.

The third stage is developed through their reflexivity on their marital relationship. The “rubbish husband” complaint is based on severe WFC. While participants were negotiating between identities and contributing financially, they mainly criticised their husbands' reluctance to share domestic responsibilities. This stage has pushed them to rethink the inequality in marriage. They have a dramatic change of attitude towards their husband. There is no sense of "we-ness" (Brewer, 2007) in marriage but participants often used "we" when talking about women’s situation in general.

In the final stage of the feminist identity development in the current research, women started to rethink and challenge the social norms. For example, M16 lamented that “No matter how successful she [a Chinese woman] is, turning her back from her family and children would make her a failure. This is how we Chinese think.” The participants want to develop business with a husband who can share domestic responsibilities, but the social norms discouraged them from it. This social/personal identity conflict represents the struggle and impediments of female emancipation in China.

This article has two contributions regarding WFC literature and Chinese feminist identity evolution. First, this research provides a possibility of explaining WFC through identity theory, the formation of WFC is due to discordance between social and personal identity. WFC is dynamic and ever-changing; identity theory is an appropriate tool not only to understand WFC but also to demonstrate how people make sense of it through time. Moreover, this study sheds light on how feminist identity is forming and what obstacles there are in a Chinese context.

In terms of limitations, this research did not set out to study the feminist movement in China, only fragments reflected from the way interviewees experienced and managed WFC. The four stages of feminist identity evolution are therefore WFC concerned. Further research could be more feminist-focused to provide a comprehensive Chinese feminist identity development.

In conclusion, has being a female entrepreneur led the participants to emancipation? The answer is complex and paradoxical. The feminist movement is often seen by scholars as a form of women's emancipation (Evans 2013) particularly in terms of freethinking (Schwartz, 2017). Becoming an entrepreneur is an emancipatory process through the traits of seeking autonomy, authoring, and making declarations (Rindova, et al., 2009). Similar traits can be found among Chinese female entrepreneurs while they were developing their businesses. These women have started to question and challenge the traditional societal and familial expectations upon them. They are not satisfied to take up only domestic roles. Through their entrepreneurial ambitions, they want to be recognised as independent and successful women. In this process of challenging societal norms, there is an awakening feminism amongst them. However, their WFC suggests that taking an entrepreneurial role has aggravated gender inequality rather than reducing it. They take huge and sole responsibilities in both home and work domains. Their house chores are not likely to be shared by their spouses just because they became entrepreneurs. Therefore, they have often complained that they have too much burden in both domains. They are still physically trapped by their domestic responsibilities. Comparing solely being a housewife, taking an entrepreneurial role at the same time has been energy-draining and increased psychological stress. However, culture is not shaped in a short period and to challenge it may require several generations' effort. Mrs. Wang could not solve the gender inequality at the moment, but she has already begun to lobby her daughter into a feminist.

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