School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry

Women Starting Up in the Digital Creative Industries in China

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**This thesis is presented for the Degree of
Master of Philosophy
of
Curtin University**

October 2022

Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

Human Ethics (for projects involving human participants/tissue, etc). The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) – updated March 2014. The proposed research study received human research ethics approval from the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (EC00262), Approval Number #HRE2019-0087.

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Abstract

The emerging digital creative industries (*shuzi chuangyi chanye*) and the state's promotion of "Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation" (*dazhong chuangye, wanzhong chuangxin*) have facilitated changes in the landscape of China's creative economy and creative work. This thesis examines the role and lived experience of women entrepreneurs who set up their own business (i.e., start-ups) in China's digital creative industries. By drawing on in-depth interviews with 31 participants in the industries, as well as data collected from 19 observations, mainly in the city of Shenzhen, this study concludes that the promises of creativity, meritocracy and flexibility brought by the emerging digital creative industries and the state's encouragement of "Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation", make it a lure for women to realise their potential by becoming entrepreneurs in the industries. However, it is the structural discrimination and patriarchal relations that have been concealed. Women digital creative entrepreneurs are faced with political, economic, and cultural uncertainty, or what is understood as precarity. The precarity, as this study finds, is a combined outcome of different driving forces, including the institutional regulations, gendered nature of entrepreneurship in the industries, and the patriarchal social norms. Despite this, women entrepreneurs adopt various strategies including demonstrating nationalism and articulating feminine qualities to carve out more space for their entrepreneurship. This study contributes to the under-explored field of gender and creative work in the context of China, as well as the scholarship of precarity in creative economy.

Key words: women; digital creative industries; entrepreneurialism; precarity; Shenzhen; China

Acknowledgements

Once upon a time, my friend Loretta sent me this through WhatsApp:

"You are on a journey and every conversation, encounter, success and rejection, is part of life's rich tapestry. Like a tapestry in progress, you can only see the threads underneath and then one day the big picture is revealed and it all make sense. Until then, we must trust ourselves that as long as we have the best intentions, we will be rewarded with love, prosperity and happiness."

Standing at the point to finish my MPhil, I am sincerely grateful for the support and guidance that I received along this journey. First of all, I would like to say a big thank you to my supervisors, Prof. Mike Kent, and Dr. Qian Gong. Both Mike and Qian gave me persistent and engaging academic guidance. We met every fortnight. I already miss our regular meetings.

I am truly grateful for all my interviewees – thank you all for your generous insights. My thanks also go to friends and contacts who offered me their help in my fieldwork, as well as Brett, who helped me with my language in the final draft. Without all of you, this research and its outcome wouldn't be possible.

I would also like to extend my thanks to my Prof. Michael Keane, Prof. Jianxin Zhou, Dr. Kara-Jane Lombard, Dr. Amy Dobson, Dr. Danzhou Li, and Dr. Xiang Ren for their insightful suggestions on my research. I feel grateful to all my fellows and friends at Curtin University: Anu, Waruni, Dewi, Charlie, Negar, Barad, Henry, Mary, Loretta, Steve, Got, Jenny, Chuck, Xia, Jan, Shanshan, Ann, Lil, Paul, Liwen, Yao, Guanhua, Liping, Yifan, Caroline and Penny. I am also grateful to my fellows and friends at Shenzhen University: Wen, Yurong, Chao, Miao, Zhi, Guanfei, Qiuyin, Tianmeng, Fang, Yunhui. In addition, I thank both Curtin University and Shenzhen University for their administrative support.

I would like to thank all my friends from the "Creative Labour in East Asia workshop" 2019 for creating a friendly and supportive community. Because of this workshop, I was able to share part of my fieldwork and get my first English-written paper published. I also would like to express my thanks to Dr. Elaine Jing Zhao, Dr. Tingting Liu, and Dr. Pengfei Fu for their support for my research.

I am indebted to my friends and families outside academia. My heartfelt gratitude goes to Margaret, and Luo's family, who have provided me with cosy accommodation in Australia. I thank the friendship I got from Lifestreaming Church in Perth. I have found the diversity of life through the friendship we've established. I thank the support from friends back home in China, Ningyu, Wenjie, Cheng, Erpan and Tian.

Finally, I am deeply indebted to my family. I owe a lot to my husband Deming Zhu. We've been together through ups and downs, and thank you for your caring and understanding for all of the journey.

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List of Acronyms

AI	Artificial Intelligence
CCP	China Communist Party
CNNIC	China Internet Network Information Centre
DCMS	Department of Culture, Media and Sports of United Kingdom
ECA	Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the United States
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ICTs	Information and Communication Technologies
IT	Internet technologies
KPI	key performance indicator
NPC	National People's Congress
PRC	People's Republic of China
R&D	research & development
RMB	Renminbi
SEZs	Special Economic Zones
SMEs	Small- and medium-sized enterprises
STEM	science, technology, engineering and math
VR	Virtual Reality
WTO	World Trade Organisation

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Journey to becoming a hero *(yingxiong zhi lu)*

An exciting feeling crept into my heart when I heard Rui, a female start-upper who owns a media company, associating "doing entrepreneurship" with "on the journey to becoming a hero" through our phone call on an afternoon in August 2020. A thought suddenly came to my mind: indeed, it was an inspiring "journey" or process for women like Rui. It had been more than a year since I'd seen Rui and spoken with her at a café in Beijing in May 2019 at one of my friend's referral. Although I had been keeping an eye on Rui's life through her posts in WeChat—a popular Chinese communication portal—I was still curious and wanted to know more about Rui's recent entrepreneurial practices. It was in this context that I made that follow up call.

In the middle of our call, we were talking about her visions of entrepreneurship. Rui said:

> I have an idealised understanding of entrepreneurship, namely the entrepreneur is on a journey to becoming a hero. How to understand the "journey to becoming a hero"? When you feel something is wrong, or something is bad, if you want to change this, you must create a new world by yourself.

According to Rui, she picked up the idea from *The Hero with A Thousand Faces,* a book written by Joseph Campbell, and she related her experience of entrepreneurship to what Campbell has written in the book.

Campbell (2008) said that the journey to becoming a hero consisted of several stages: (1) departure, feeling the call to adventure; (2) initiation, facing the trials and finding enlightenment; (3) return, getting back to the normal life with the freedom to live. In Rui's account, this pattern described her own journey. Dissatisfied with her previous job in a media company, Rui left her stable salaried job. She said she felt like a "screw" in a big machine. Later she set up her own media start-up, where she had wrestled with all kinds of challenges and uncertainties in her entrepreneurship. In pursuit of growth through her digital creative entrepreneurship, Rui gradually got to know the meaning of entrepreneurship, and gained a deeper understanding of her life, and herself. At that time, even though we were thousands of miles away, I could feel Rui's excitement to start up her own business, the stress she had been experiencing, and the fulfilment she finally got from her entrepreneurship, along with the uncertainties of the future.

Rui was not alone. Many of the female digital creative entrepreneurs that I met during my fieldwork in Shenzhen were experiencing similar stages of their entrepreneurial practices in a rapidly-changing society. For instance, another interviewee, Xuanzi, who runs a new media

entrepreneurship pedagogy start-up, told me that entrepreneurship was like the "practice" (*xiuxing*)[1] in the religious sense: it was full of ups and downs, aiming at the improvement of life. Though feeling excited, uncertain, stressful, or confused, they were yearning for the material rewards, the social upward mobility, and the autonomy to lead a fulfilling life.

Faced with increasing market-driven competition, rapid social changes, and the pressure to become successful and self-realised, more and more people have given up the stable salaried jobs and resorted to setting up their own businesses to grapple with their realities and desires. Based on the data from National Bureau of Statistics of China (2022), 28.9 million new firms were registered in 2021; that is 25,000 firms were registered every day, or 17.4 start-ups were born every minute, and the number of market entities exceeded 150 million. In this context, "entrepreneurship" (*chuangye*), with its connotation of knowledge, outlook, material rewards, social mobility, and self-fulfilment, as well as resources limitation, risks, and failure, has been re-introduced to Chinese society. Tse (2016, para. 12) notes a unique phenomenon in China:

> while its political system is inherited from a top-down planned economy hierarchy, its leading entrepreneurial companies, especially the young, more dynamic ones found in the internet industry, adopt much of their mindset, culture and organizational principles from Silicon Valley.

He further argues that "this osmosis is changing China in a way that we have not seen before and would lead China into a new era" (Tse, 2016, para 12).

China's booming digital economy provides a good setting for individuals to pursue entrepreneurship. Having invested heavily in the innovation and commercialisation of technology over the past few decades, China is now regarded as a technological power and is playing a leading role in the global digital economy (McKinsey, 2017). Domestically speaking, the digital economy has become an important engine driving China's economy. According to a report released by the Internet Society of China (2021), China's digital economy surged to a 38.6% share of its GDP in 2020, representing a large proportion of China's economy. In their daily lives, people are surrounded by accessible digital products and digital services. According to the 50th Survey Report conducted by China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC), China is the largest internet market globally, with more than 1051 million internet users by the end of June in 2022, 97.7% of whom are instant messaging users, about 91.5% are short-form video users, and 68.1% are online livestreaming users (China Internet Network Information Centre,

[1] It was not rare to see or hear the similar narratives that "*chuangye shi yizhong xiuxing*" (entrepreneurship is a practice) from entrepreneurs themselves, from investors, and from start-up communities during my research for this project.

2022). The abundance of digital services and people's digital lifestyles constitute what Keane and Su (2019) call a "digital civilisation" in-the-making in China.

1.2 Research significance and research questions

In China, the emerging digital creative industries are fields where the individual aspirations to be entrepreneurial are recognised and celebrated over the past few years (Huang, 2021; Wang & Keane, 2020). Digital creative industries are a collection of industries that engage in cultural and creative content, production, circulation, and services based on digital technologies and digital economy (see Xie et al., 2019). It gains popularity from the government discourses. In 2016, in the National People's Congress (NPC), Premier Li Keqiang proposed to

> launch a new round of national pilot projects for all-round service sector reform as well as projects to promote innovation in high-tech industries, and channel great efforts into developing the digital creative industries. (K. Li, 2016, para. 53)

As mentioned by PwC (2021), a leading multinational professional services network, among all the ventures in China in 2020, 49.3% were in TMT (technology, media and telecom) industries—a broad field where digital creative industries can be situated. More specific data comes from ITJuzi, one of the largest local information platforms centring on entrepreneurship and Internet industry, where the number of entrepreneurs in cultural industries accounts for 13.61% of all entrepreneurs, reaching up to approximately 20,000 entrepreneurs by mid-October of 2021.[2]

However, despite recognising the boom of entrepreneurship in China's digital creative industries, much of the scholarship overlooks the social positioning of gender, and it is urgent to bring in gendered perspectives in creative work research (see Chow, 2019). I Existing studies on China's creative industries show a preference for the topics regarding political economy, more specifically, concerning cultural policies and industry practices (Flew et al., 2019; Keane, 2013; Lin & de Kloet, 2019; Lin, 2020), as well as regarding the nation's development, for instance, the development of "soft power" and a creative nation (Fung, 2014; Hartley & Montgomery, 2009; Keane, 2004, 2006; Keane & Su, 2019; O'Connor & Gu, 2006; Wen, 2017). So far, studies on China's creative industries pay limited attention to the experience of women practitioners (see Chow, 2019; Liao, 2021; Lin, 2022). Therefore, there is still limited knowledge on the status of

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[2] The data on specific industry sectors can be found at https://www.itjuzi.com/analysis#line (accessed 11 October, 2021) and varies over time. On 7 June, 2022, the author revisited the same webpage, and the number of entrepreneurs in cultural industries had dropped to around 10,000, accounting for 6.87% of all entrepreneurs. On 12 September, 2022, the figure has dropped to 10,792, making up 6.77% of all entrepreneurs. This might be a result of Covid, where China's cultural industries were badly impacted by the constant lockdowns, and people reduced their budget for consumption in cultural industries. It is necessary to note that, in the data from ITJuzi, the cultural industries include the gaming industry, culture and entertainment industries, as well as the social media industry.

women practitioners, especially those who set up their own start-ups in China's digital creative industries.

One might ask: why focus on women digital creative entrepreneurs, who, in many ways, might be considered as the winners in the economy, while there are so many groups of women who are less privileged and are still suffering from the disadvantaged economic and social conditions? A direct answer for this question is that, compared with the large volumes of extant research on politically/economically/socially disadvantaged women, very little research is dedicated to relatively privileged well-educated and middle-class women. Apart from this direct answer, a few more considerations prompt me to focus on women entrepreneurs in China's digital creative industries.

With China's economy significantly transforming from the production of material goods towards the commercialisation of knowledge and innovation after its reforming and opening up from a planned economy to a more market-oriented one in late 1970s, more women are entering into the cultural and creative fields. According to the sixth national census conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics (2010), women accounted for 46% of the total employment in the fields of culture, sports and entertainment; more specifically, in subsectors, women made up 44% in the press and publishing industry, contributed 47% in the arts, and represented 51% in entertainment.[3] Even though these figures seem inspiring, we still have quite limited knowledge on the lived experience of women practitioners in China's creative industries, especially those who actively take up their entrepreneurial practices in the digital technologies-enabled creative industries. Thus, women's roles in digital creative industries have become a worthy research topic.

Further, it is the gender dynamic that complicates women's roles in China's creative economy. Women face tensions in regard to their roles in the private and public spheres in China. On the one hand, women's education and labour participation have experienced a significant increase since the China Communist Party (CCP) has taken power in 1949 (The State Council Information Office of China, 2019). More and more women, especially young and educated urban women, see themselves as pursuing economic independence, freedom, and self-expression through their careers and self-scripted life projects, such as transnational study (see Martin, 2014). On the other hand, however, women are still expected to shoulder the responsibility of taking care of

[3] The 7th national census had been carried out in the year of 2020 in China. By the time this thesis was being written, the full report of the 7th national census result was not accessible online (last retrieved on September 27, 2022). Please see: http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/pcsj/rkpc/7rp/indexch.htm.

the family, given the patriarchal traditions in East Asia and the post-socialist transition in China. The deep-seated conservative notion that men should support the family, and women are expected to be the main carers in the family, still runs deep in society, thus consolidating the traditional gendered division of labour.

In this sense, women entrepreneurs in China's digital creative industries, have cried out for academic attention for a long time. It is pressing to ask: how can we understand women's roles in China's digital creative industries? What are the conditions of women creatives who carry out entrepreneurial practices? What are women's experiences when attempting to make a living in this new field of work? These constitute the questions this study attempts to answer.

1.3 Analytical framework and approach

This study focuses on a group of women entrepreneurs who set up their own businesses (i.e., start-ups) in China's digital creative industries. It is important to note that digital creative entrepreneurship is diverse in nature in China. The existing literature has paid attention to other phenomena such as *wang hong*, or Internet celebrification, where people actively brand themselves through digital media and generate profits, or take up entrepreneurial practices, through their media engagement and social relations with their fans (Craig et al., 2021; Liao, 2021). In this project, I turn my attention to those women entrepreneurs who harness their cultural and commercial value through the products and services their start-up provides, rather than basing their value on their influence online.

In analysing these women entrepreneurs' lived experience, this research finds that the idea of "precarity"—a dynamic condition that is shaped by economic, political and social uncertainty and vulnerability—is useful for understanding the challenges and desires these women entrepreneurs experience (see Chapter 3). The concept of precarity originated as a novel way to think about the labour condition and the relations between labour and life in Europe from the 1990s (Millar, 2017; Neilson & Rossiter, 2008). Over the past few decades, the precarious nature of creative work has been widely acknowledged by scholars, such as the unpredictability of the working length of creative workers, and low pay, or even no pay (Gill, 2002; Morgan & Nelligan, 2015; Ross, 2009). This study extends the understanding of precarity from the domain of work in the study of creative economy. Precarity is understood, in this study, as a dynamic lived experience, or dynamic condition that is shaped by economic, political and social uncertainty (see Berlant, 2011; Butler, 2004; Standing, 2014).

Even though women and their entrepreneurship in the booming digital creative industries have attracted increasing attention among governments and media over the past few years in China, and women and entrepreneurship are usually portrayed as positive, inspiring, and empowering (Chen, 2014; The State Council Information Office of China, 2019), it is the precarity, or the insecurity and uncertainty that women digital creative entrepreneurs face, that is much neglected. Perhaps it is because the discourse on creativity has overshadowed the discourse on precarity in China's creative economy, a similar phenomenon found in authoritarian Russia (Gurova & Morozova, 2018).

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experience of those women, this study adopts qualitative research methods to collect data, as qualitative research is suitable for under-examined areas (Awasthy, 2020), and, as mentioned above, the study on gender and creative work is under-explored in the context of China. To be more specific, this study employs the methods of in-depth interviewing, observation, as well as document analysis to collect data. I conducted the fieldwork from March to November, 2019, mainly in Shenzhen, a city located in the Southern part of China. The trip resulted in a total of 31 in-depth interviews with a wide range of stakeholders, including female entrepreneurs, male entrepreneurs, academics, government staff and association managers in the areas relating to digital creative industries. I also carried out 19 observations by attending entrepreneurial activities, conferences and seminars in order to familiarise myself with the industrial process and development.

This thesis illuminates the precarious situation women start-up owners are facing in China's digital creative industries. By shedding light on the lived experiences within their socio-economic contexts, this thesis queries the socioeconomic conditions that result from precarious situations for women digital creative entrepreneurs. It facilitates a better understanding of the precariousness of women digital creative entrepreneurs as a combined outcome of different driving forces, such as the state, market forces, social expectations and practical constraints.

This study finds that the on-going "start-up culture" and the state's campaign of "Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation" (*dazhong chuangye wanzhong chuangxin*), as well as the promises brought by the burgeoning digital creative industries, can lure women into realising their potential, attain material rewards and enhance their achievements by becoming entrepreneurs in China's digital creative industries. However, it is the persistent structural discrimination and patriarchal relations that might have been concealed. The highly-celebrated discourse of technology has been highlighted in the Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation campaign, as well as the discourses within digital creative industries, and such technological

innovation is mostly associated with men in the context of China. Under these circumstances, women entrepreneurs' contribution to China's digital creative industries has not been fully acknowledged by the state. In regards to the digital creative industries themselves, the gendered segregation and bias towards women's leadership still exists, which hinders women's career progression. In addition, women entrepreneurs in the digital creative industries for this study also shoulder the "double bind", where they have to constantly negotiate between their gendered roles and expectations and their entrepreneurial careers in Chinese society.

It is also important to emphasise that, even though women digital creative entrepreneurs are facing such precarious situations which are resistant to change, women are still able to exert their agency by seeking to use patriotic ideals and take up gendered management practices to create more spaces for themselves, as well as to maximise their own choices, material gains and self-fulfilment.

This study contributes to the under-explored scholarly field of gender and creative work in contemporary China. The existing body of research on gender and creative work is mainly based on the European and American women's experience, but there are quite limited studies on gender and creative work especially women entrepreneurs in the creative sector in countries such as China. It is because of this that I believe this attempt to study the lived experience of women entrepreneurs in China's digital creative industries is important.

In addition, this study extends the current debate of precarity in the creative economy beyond the domain of labour to the domain of lived experience. Traditionally, precarity is understood as increasing flexibilisation and precarisation of employment. In this study, precarity is understood as a dynamic lived experience or dynamic condition that is mainly shaped by economic, political and social uncertainty and vulnerability. Along with the difficulties and challenges in creative economies, are the desires and the hopes for an ideal life. Those forces, as well as the agency that drive changes, shape the trajectories and life choices of creative practitioners.

1.4 Thesis outline

I present this analysis of women entrepreneurs' lived experience in China's digital creative industries over eight chapters, beginning with this introductory chapter.

In Chapter 2 I provide an account of the background and context where women's digital creative entrepreneurship takes place in China. At a time when China is seeking to transform from the investment- and export-driven economy to a consumption- and innovation-driven one, digital creative industries gain traction and quickly co-opt the "start-up culture" that has emerged

mainly from the Western context. In the state's call for Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation, some women, especially those in the urban middle-classes, actively embrace entrepreneurship in the emerging digital creative industries, entering the new work landscape.

Chapter 3 is the literature review chapter, where I provide a current landscape of academic work regarding women's roles in the creative economy. It identifies that the body of research on gender and creative economy is mainly based on the European and American women's experience, and there is quite limited research on gender and creative work in China. Behind the highly-celebrated discourses around entrepreneurship and digital creative industries, it is women entrepreneurs' precarity that should be paid more attention to in the context of China. This chapter also reconceptualises the idea of "precarity" in the study of creative economy, and suggests that precarity not only exists in the working life, but also exists in the personal life. Along with the difficulties and challenges in the creative work, are the desires or the hopes for an envisioned life. By analysing the extant literature, this chapter also points out that it is necessary to find empirical evidence to illuminate the complexities and dynamics of precarity among women digital creative entrepreneurs in the context of China.

Chapter 4 gives a detailed account of the methodology for this study. It details how I conducted the nine months of field work in China by adopting the qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, observations and document analysis. The fieldwork resulted in a total of 31 in-depth interviews with a wide range of stakeholders. With the aim to overcome the biases that arise from the in-depth interviews, and immerse myself in the start-up environment in the digital creative industries, 19 observations were conducted in this project. Document analysis was also used in terms of the government policy, media coverage and the participants' social media.

In Chapter 5 I discuss the encounter between women digital creative entrepreneurs' creativity autonomy and the state's role in developing China's digital creative industries. It illustrates that, women entrepreneurs' contribution to the digital creative industries is largely unacknowledged by the state which focussing on "technology" to pursue the economical restructure because of women's long-term under-presentation in China's technological undertakings. Apart from this, the state's ideological control over the production of China's creative economy also makes women digital creative entrepreneurs experience constraints and precarity.

Chapter 6 addresses discussions of so-called open, inclusive and meritocratic entrepreneurship in digital creative industries. The study finds that digital creative entrepreneurship is highly gendered, that the under-represented women are not only affected by masculine norms and patriarchal constraints, but also experience the reproduction of gendered divisions of work, both

of which continue to trivialise women's roles and marginalise their contributions to the industry. Furthermore, the gendered nature of digital creative entrepreneurship is a source of precarity for women digital creative entrepreneurs in terms of low levels of leadership, devaluation of their work, and the reproduction of gendered divisions of work along with a work-life imbalance.

In Chapter 7 I examine women's engagement with their digital creative entrepreneurship as well as their natural roles as daughters, wives and mothers. It points out that women digital creative entrepreneurs are stuck in a predicament, where, on the one hand, they are incorporated in the economy and supposed to earn money; while on the other hand, they are still expected to follow the traditional gendered roles in China—such as getting married, as well as fulfilling their domestic responsibilities as carers of the family—thus exposing women digital creative entrepreneurs to a situation that is full of anxiety and stress.

In the concluding chapter I revisit the key arguments as I discuss the role of women entrepreneurs in China's digital creative industries. Women digital creative entrepreneurs can be thought of as a new class of "creative workers" who actively embrace creativity, openness and flexibility. Although digital creative entrepreneurship offers women more opportunities to set up their own business, it is, at the same time, a highly-precarious career choice where they face the contested creativity autonomy from the political front, highly gendered entrepreneurial environment, and work-life conflicts.

Chapter 2: The changes in China's entrepreneurship, creative economy and gender dynamics

Women entrepreneurship in China's digital creative industries is both private and public—that is, it is both their personal choice to start up business in China's digital creative industries, meanwhile, their entrepreneurship is also a reflection of the larger socio-economic context. The breathless pace of reform in China over the past four decades has brought about profound impacts, not only in the political field, but also in the economical field, as well as technological and cultural fields. Arguably, women's digital creative entrepreneurship sits in the intersection where China's digital economy and creative economy have taken off, and where women's status has been improved since the People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded in 1949.

In this chapter, I outline the context in which women's digital creative entrepreneurship is emerging. The first section historicises entrepreneurship in China. Following this, I introduce the development of China's creative economy, as well as the emergence of digital creative industries. I then move to the gender dynamics in China, and the changing status of women. Finally, I introduce the main research site for this research, that is the city of Shenzhen in China. This chapter shows the complex dynamics of gender, entrepreneurship and creative economy in the context of China.

2.1 Entrepreneurship "fever"

Entrepreneurship can be understood as an activity that discovers, evaluates and exploits opportunities to create future goods and services (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). Entrepreneurs are those who exploit "situations in which new goods, services, raw material, markets and organizing methods can be introduced through the formation of new means, ends, or means-ends relationships" (Shane & Eckhardt, 2003, p. 165). Entrepreneurship development in China is entering into the fast lane and has attracted much attention in recent years. Between the third Economic Census in 2013 and the fourth Economic Census in 2018, the number of newly opened market entities shows a rapid growing trend, with an average annual growth rate at 14.9% (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Even during the Covid-19 pandemic, where the markets in most of the world experienced recession, according to China's State Administration for Market Regulation (2020, as cited in She, 2020), in the first three quarters of 2020, 22,000 new firms were registered per day on average in China. Apart from these figures, entrepreneurship has been a heated topic in the media, and some within the media claim that China is witnessing a rise of entrepreneurship (see Tse, 2016).

The central government in China considers entrepreneurship as an active means of employment (*chuangye shi gengjia jiji de jiuye*), which helps to ease the youth employment pressure, making entrepreneurship a particularly desirable type of work in China (Qiu, 2016). It initiated the Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation (*dazhong chuangye, wanzhong chuangxin*) campaign in 2015, whereby individuals were encouraged to set up their own business to actively pursue creative and innovative avenues (The State Council of China, 2015). I borrow the term "entrepreneurship fever" (*chuangye re*) from the narrative of *China Daily* (Chen, 2015)—a newspaper owned by the CCP—to highlight the burgeoning individual entrepreneurship driven by the transnationalism force, as well as the force from the state.

2.1.1 The changing representations of entrepreneurs in China

In China, even though entrepreneurship has grown at an exponential rate over the past few decades, it has taken time for the private-owned enterprise and the culture of entrepreneurship to take hold (Ahlstrom & Ding, 2014). In ancient China, the feudal rulers adopted the concept of "emphasising agriculture and restraining commerce" (*zhongnong yishang*) in the agricultural society, and the social hierarchy of scholar, farmer, artisan and business owners (*shi nong gong shang*) put merchants at the bottom. For much of the 20th century, the terms entrepreneurship and China were seldom correlated, except for referring to overseas Chinese entrepreneurs (Ahlstrom & Ding, 2014). The new People's Republic of China was established in 1949, and the ruling party—the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—planned to turn China into a socialist country, which is characterised by collective ownership and planned economy. At that time, what the country emphasised more was central control of ideology, rather than national economy. Against this background, private ownership was incompatible with the socialist regime, and the period from 1949–1978 has a negligible position of entrepreneurship development in the history of China.

The turning point happened in 1978, when Deng Xiaoping, one of the leaders of the CCP, proposed the "Reform and Opening up" *(gaige kaifang)* initiative. The transition from a command economy to an increasingly market-oriented one gradually lifted the constraints on market activity, and it spurred rapid development of private enterprises (He et al., 2008). Along with the gradual institutional legitimation of private entrepreneurship, is the changing public image and media representation of entrepreneurs (Liu, 2012; Ni, 2007). During the Maoist period, the term "*jian shang*" (dishonest trader) and "*ziben jia*" (capitalist) were used to portray the opportunistic and profit-seeking characteristics of private business owners. In the early times of the "Reform and Opening up" period, "*geti hu*" (self-employed individuals) and "*wanyuan hu*"

(business owners with 10 thousand Renminbi) appeared in the media and public discourses, which implicitly praised the diligence and wisdom of entrepreneurs (Ni, 2007). However, after Deng's "South Tour"[4] in 1992, more and more people started operating their own businesses and tried their luck with the opportunities that China's rapid economic development brought about. At that time, differentiated descriptors of entrepreneurs emerged including the neutral "*qiye jia*" (business owners) and more negative "*baofa hu*" (striking-it-rich people) (Liu, 2012).

With the maturity of a market-oriented economy in the 21st century, especially after China joined the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001, terms such as "CEO" and "*zhiben jia*" (private business owners with rich knowledge) were adopted in the public discourses (Ni, 2007). In recent years, words like "*keji xingui*" (Tech millionaires), "*chuangye zhe*" (start-uppers), "*shangye qicai*" (business wizards) are commonly found in the media coverage (Tang, 2016). Being positive by default, in this sense, entrepreneurship has connotations of people living a successful, dynamic, innovative, and adventurous life by the acquisitions of material rewards, upward social mobility, creativity and self-fulfilment.

2.1.2 The arrival of the "start-up culture" and Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation

The boom in digital technologies in recent years have facilitated a "start-up culture" in China, particularly the emergence of small start-ups taking advantage of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) (see Keane & Chen, 2019). For example, the ubiquity of "platformisation", where governmental, economic and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms penetrating into the web and app ecosystems (Nieborg & Poell, 2018), has facilitated people to set up their own business in China (Liao, 2020). Furthermore, digital platforms help people to make the best use of their skill sets and create portfolios or slash careers (N. Wei, 2020).

This pervasive start-up culture in China, especially in the urban areas, to a certain extent, is an extension of the Silicon Valley model of entrepreneurship coming through the Internet boom as well as returning students' localised entrepreneurship in China around the late 1990s and 2000s (Tan, 2015). At that time, returning overseas Chinese students, such as Li Yanhong and Zhang Chaoyang who received their degrees from the United States, came back to China and founded IT start-ups (Wang et al., 2011). As the most well-known tech hub in the world, Silicon Valley has

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[4] In the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was controversy as to whether to continue Reform and Opening up initiative among members of CCP. At this moment, Deng Xiaoping made a tour to south China, inspecting cities including Wuhan, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shanghai, etc. between January 18 and February 21, 1992, thus reinforcing the implementation of Reform and Opening up program.

become an icon of tech progress, and it sets the tone of the development of avant-garde technologies for other parts of the world. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the United States was burdened by economic stagnation and unemployment, a form of radically innovative, high-tech and high-growth entrepreneurship emerged in Silicon Valley, and it was quickly known as the Silicon Valley entrepreneurship (Herrmann, 2019). The expansion of the financial sector (i.e., the growth of venture capital investment), and the rise of digital economy, further intensified the celebration of entrepreneurship and start-ups in Silicon Valley (Kao, 2021, pp. 8–15).

Over the past four decades since China's reform and opening up in the late 1970s, entrepreneurship has contributed significantly to job creation, industrial output and technological innovation, laying the foundation for the government to tap into entrepreneurship to boost the economy. In order to reshape the large pool of manufacturing labour for the smart shift of China's economy, and to ease the employment pressure (especially for university graduates), China resorted to entrepreneurship, and officially launched the national campaign Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation (*dazhong chuangye, wanzhong chuangxin*) in 2015 (The State Council of China, 2015). It is in this way that the state maintains a strong presence in the on-going entrepreneurship fever. In September 2014 and January 2015, in two consecutive conferences of the World Economic Forum, also known as the Davos Forum, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang called for fostering new growth engines in China and encouraged "the masses" to start up a business and explore innovative possibilities. According to Premier Li (2015b), "every cell in society" would be activated, and mass entrepreneurship and innovation would be a "gold mine" to provide a constant source of creativity and wealth.

Following the Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation initiative, China's central government announced "Internet +" (*hulianwang jia*), a "blueprint" to "reboot" China's economy in March 2015 (Li, 2015a). This strategy offered a big-picture to utilise information and communication technologies to increase productivity and efficiency. Aspirational individuals utilised this techno-political opportunity to transform themselves into new entrepreneurial subjects by tapping into the digital technologies to set up their own businesses (see Keane & Chen, 2019).

The Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation and Internet + initiatives seemed to bring equal opportunities to every individual. In the discourse of government, commercial organisations and media, women, the traditionally socially disadvantaged group, reap the benefit from the Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation campaign. An official report issued by China's State Council Information Office (2019) indicated that more than 560,000 women had taken part in

entrepreneurship and innovation competitions conducted by All-China Women's Federation in 2017. This report also mentioned that, in the Internet field, 55% of entrepreneurs are women (The State Council Information Office of China, 2019). From 2015, Alibaba Group, one of China's multinational tech giants specialising in e-commerce and technology, has been holding the Women Entrepreneurs Conference (*nüxing chuangyezhe dahui*) every two years, focusing on the opportunities brought to women by technologies. According to a report released by Alizila—the official media source of Alibaba Group—one-third of Alibaba's founders and executive leadership are women, and women also make up nearly half of the entrepreneurs on Alibaba's platforms in 2019 (Chou, 2019).

Nowadays in China, the start-up culture is pervasive, especially in urban areas such as Beijing and Shenzhen. The start-up culture is often described by the mass media in such terms as: changing the world, meaningful work, freedom, sharing, value-drive, innovation, human-centred, problem-solving, friendship and creativity (Hyrkäs, 2016). The celebration of start-up culture in the society creates an attraction for individuals to set up their own business. Apart from this, the government's campaign of Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation seems to offer the institutional support and facilitate the grassroots to turn to entrepreneurialism. It is in this sense that entrepreneurship has been incorporated into the realisation of the "Chinese Dream"[5] of national rejuvenation (see Keane & Chen, 2019), and entrepreneurs have been described as "dream makers" or "dream chasers" (*zhuimeng ren*) through the state and media discourse[6].

However, is it true that women, the traditionally socially disadvantaged group, have now enjoyed the equality and opportunities to unleash their creativity and act in an entrepreneurial fashion in China? To what extent have women been empowered to be start-uppers in the circumstances that entrepreneurship is celebrated in urban China? In what follows, I am going to focus on the women in China's creative economy. In the broad sense, creative economy is usually described as "open", "equal", "flexible", and "diverse". Women's role in China's creative economy would shed light on women's situation in the ongoing entrepreneurship fever in China.

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[5] The term "Chinese Dream" was first used in a speech delivered by President Xi Jinping on November 29, 2012. The Chinese Dream envisions China as a great cultural power, and it encourages Chinese people to use the traditional Chinese morals, including diligence and filial piety, to fight for national rejuvenation (see Wang, 2014).

[6] Entrepreneurs are described as "dream chasers" in the state and media discourse; this can be seen in a documentary made by Mangguo TV named "We Are All Dream Chasers" *(women doushi zhuimeng ren)* which features 10 entrepreneurs and present them as representatives who try their best to practice Chinese Dream through their patriotism and endeavour. See: http://www.xinhuanet.com/ent/20211209/d3d8e2234694465186bcd65e875b275b/c.html (accessed 11 July, 2022).

In the next section, I introduce China's digital creative industries, which is a result of China's rapid development in the field of digital technologies over the recent years.

2.2 The conceptualisation of "digital creative industries" in China's context

2.2.1 The coming of the Western idea of "creative industries"

Originally defined as "those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have the potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property" by the iconic Creative Industries Mapping Document by the United Kingdom's Department of Culture, Media and Sports (DCMS) in 1998 (DCMS, 1998), creative industries, for the first time, brought together a collection of human creativity-related industries ranging from performing arts, architecture and design, to a range of new media sectors including games and software. Recognising its economic significance, the creative industries concept quickly gained traction and travelled to other economies, including the United States, Singapore, Japan and Korea (Florida, 2002; Hartley, 2005; Kong et al., 2006).

The Western-originated idea of creative industries found its way to China around the late 1990s and early 2000s, when China was about to join the World Trade Organization (WTO). The issue of "cultural security" (*wenhua anquan*)—a political concern that all individuals and groups need to be treated equally with regard to their unique cultural needs and differences—was raised in China to compete with cultural enterprises overseas. As a response to the global move towards a knowledge economy, the term "cultural industries"[7] (*wenhua chanye*) was officially put forth in China's Tenth Five-Year Plan (2001–2005) in 2000.

Apart from the economic significance, creative economy takes on multiple meanings in the context of China. Firstly, the coming of the creative economy aligns with the on-going cultural system reforms which are moving industry towards commercialisation. Before 1978 when China initiated the reform and opening up, all cultural organisations, also known as cultural work units (*danwei*), were financed and controlled by the government in China. Between 1978 and 1992, the government relaxed the restriction on arts and cultural policy with an emphasis on reform in performing arts (Han, 2005). In the performing arts field, a "dual-track system" (*shuanggui zhi*)

[7] The terminology here is not necessarily of great significance (for a discussion, see Keane, 2013, pp. 36-46). The Western-originated concept of creative industries has gained momentum particularly among those actors who look to evade the dogmatic strictures of state cultural policy in China. In this study, "creative industries", "cultural industries", "cultural and creative industries", and "cultural creative industries" are used interchangeably unless with specific explanation.

was adopted where a minority number of performing organisations were state-owned and financially supported by the government, while a majority of performing organisations implemented multiple forms of ownerships and were sponsored by various social actors.[8] This led to commercial cultural production gradually being expanded and diversified.

Secondly, the "creativity" embedded in the creative economy ignited people's imagination for a promising future. The cultural industries are envisioned especially by the government to play a pivotal role in the shift to innovation and high-value services, and creativity would bring value to the human resources (see O'Connor & Gu, 2006). For example, in his book *How Creativity is Changing China*, Li Wuwei, the former senior policy advisor with an economics background, stresses that creativity is essential for the renewal of Chinese society, such as upgrading and restructuring the economy (Li, 2011).

Thirdly, the cultural industries dovetail with the nation's attempt to brand the nation, as well as enhance China's "soft power" (*ruan shili*) and facilitate Chinese culture "going out" (*zou chuqu*) in the global market (Keane, 2013, p. 23). China is keen on repositioning itself in the global economy, from an economy with low-cost labour and a massive consumer market, to an economy with a creative workforce and high-value production; this is also to say that China aspires to move from "made in China" to "created in China" by exploiting the innovative and creative potentials (Keane, 2006).

With China's economy significantly transforming from the production of material goods towards the commercialisation of knowledge and innovation after the reforming and opening up, more women entered into the cultural and creative fields. As mentioned in the previous chapter, based on the national census in 2010 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2010), women accounted for 46% of the total employment in the fields of culture, sports and entertainment. Even though the figure seems inspiring, there is still limited knowledge on the status of women practitioners in China's creative industries, especially those who take up their entrepreneurial practices in the digital technologies-enabled creative industries. Thus, women's role in digital creative industries has become an important issue in China.

2.2.2 Economic restructure and digital creative industries in China

The well-known consultant company McKinsey refers to China as a leading force in the global digital economy as China is one of the largest investors and adopters of digital technologies, and

[8] See more on dual-track system at: http://views.ce.cn/fun/corpus/ce/dd/200901/05/t20090105_17876565.shtml (accessed on 5 October, 2021).

its favourable digital ecosystem has cultivated a large number of unicorn companies (McKinsey, 2017). The boom in digital media and technologies is largely the result of China's state-led approach to economic development and restructuring by making use of new digital technologies to achieve the economic growth and market reforms in the 2000s (Hong, 2017; Zhao, 2010). Such a techno-economic discourse gained significance particularly after the 2008 global economic crisis. China, also known as the "world's factory" *(shijie gongchang)*, started a purposeful economic transition from the export- and investment-driven growth to a consumption-based and innovation-driven economy in the late 1990s (Hong, 2017, p. 22). Much of the emphasis is now on cutting-edge technologies including AI (Artificial Intelligence), robotics, 3D printing, blockchain, and IoT (Internet of Things).

As China's economic growth edged downwards and the nation sought ways to upgrade its economic structure, digital creative industries emerged as a solution; they were significant for "strengthening supply-side structural reform to drive sustained growth" (K. Li, 2016, para. 39). The term "digital creative industries" was first introduced by Premier Li Keqiang in March 2016, when he noted:

> We will work to ensure the supply of goods and services is improved. First, we will see that the quality of consumer goods is improving . . . Second, we will work to upgrade manufacturing . . . Third, we will accelerate the development of the modern service sector. We will launch a new round of national pilot projects for all-round service sector reform as well as projects to promote innovation in high-tech services, and channel great efforts into developing the digital creative industries. (K. Li, 2016, para. 54)

In Li's speech, digital creative industries were associated with innovation in high-tech services. A few months later, in November 2016, the State Council issued further instructions in a document entitled "13th Five-Year Plan (2016-2020) for the Development of National Strategic Emerging Industries". This document served as a milestone in the government discourse on digital creative industries, a belief that it could propel the development of culture and technology simultaneously. Digital creative industries, shown in this document, were listed as one of the five strategic emerging industries, along with next generation information technology, high-end equipment and materials, biotechnology, and green low-carbon technologies (The State Council of China, 2016). This document highlights the important roles of digital technologies, along with the integration of culture and technology in digital creative industries, namely:

> To accelerate the development of cultural creativity- and innovative design-related industries with digital technology and advanced concepts. To promote the deep integration of culture and technology, as well as the convergence of related industries. By 2020, digital creative industries characterised by "culture-leading", advanced

> technologies and complete chain would be developed, with the value of related industries reaching 8 trillion RMB. (The State Council of China, 2016, para. 135)

In this sense, digital creative industries are singled out in policy discourse as a new engine for generating and upgrading consumption, and are crucial for China's economic transition from an investment-driven and export-led economy to one that is more consumption-driven (Flew et al., 2019). Furthermore, it is the Chinese government, or Chinese state, as Hong (2017) argues, that plays the constitutive role in fostering a sophisticated state-dominated communications ecosystem—a system that is propelled by entrepreneurial bureaucrats, transnational capitalists, and local digital champions.

Entrepreneurship in the digital creative industries seem to combine the advantages of digital technologies and creativity: namely, the digital technologies lower the barriers to start up the business and people may be able to realise their potential through creativity. Do these advantages apply to women? To what extent do women feel empowered in China's digital creative industries? Before I start the discussions in the empirical chapters, it is necessary to introduce the gender dynamic in China.

2.3 The gender landscape in China

Chinese women have a good record in the field of entrepreneurship worldwide. According to a report which has tracked Chinese business over 20 years, women entrepreneurs from China account for 65% of the world's self-made women billionaires in 2022, and this report also indicates that of the top 10 women billionaires listed, eight are from China (Hurun Research Institute, 2022). Does such an achievement mean that it is easy for women to become entrepreneurial and that they are able to more easily level the playing field in the business world with men in China? The answer may be "no" if we have a closer look at the gender dynamic in China.

In a patriarchal country like China, it is not easy for women to achieve high positions in business. In ancient China, traditional feudalism and Confucianism reinforced the inferior status of women, and the unequal gender power continued for thousands of years. The idea that men take care of the things outside the family while women shoulder the domestic responsibilities such as being the main caregivers, or "*nan zhu wai, nü zhu nei*", was pervasive in the male-dominated and patriarchal society (Leung, 2003). The role of a Chinese woman was confined to being "a virtuous wife and a good mother" (*xianqi liangmu*) who obeys and supports her husband, as well as raises and cares for her children (Liu, 2014). In the context of ancient China,

women were not supposed to be active in the public sphere and have very limited chances to gain an education (Leung, 2003).

When the CCP took power and established the PRC in 1949, women's significant lower social status was seen as an obstacle to the formation of a utopian socialist society. The CCP, therefore, reasoned that one of the keys to its success was its ability to emancipate women and grant them full entry into the labour force, so that women could achieve equal political and economic rights (Han, 2016; Leung, 2003). The Chinese government issued a series of legislations and regulations to protect women's rights. For example, the Marriage Reform in 1950 entailed free choice over marriage and divorce. The 1954 Constitution and new labour regulations made equal pay between men and women. In addition, paid maternity leave, and public childcare services were legitimatised. The famous slogan that "women hold up half the sky" (*funü neng ding banbiantian)* proposed by Mao Zedong was promoted in China, encouraging women to come out of the households and work in the public sphere, and that they can achieve the same as men (Han, 2016; Wallis, 2006). Women's participation in social production enhanced women's status at home because the income they earned was vital to the family in the egalitarian low-income system of the Mao era, especially in urban areas (Wang, 2003).

China's dramatic transition from a socialist planned economy to a market-oriented one complicated the gender dynamic, and women have been affected due to the resurfacing of the previously suppressed traditional and patriarchal attitudes, thus giving rise to a new gendered structure of power (Wallis, 2006; Wu & Dong, 2019). The government's eagerness for efficiency resulted in a vast number of women seeing their rights and opportunities diminish in the reforming era (Wallis, 2006). The restructuring of the state-owned and collective factories from 1980 caused disproportionate gendered layoffs in China's history (Wang, 2003). In the 1980s, "women return home" (*funü huijia)* openly appeared in official discourses (Wang, 2003). This was mainly because women constituted the majority of the unemployed educated urban youth who were involved in "Down to the Countryside Movement" (*shangshan xiaxiang*)[9] and were previously working to support countryside and mountain areas, and, as there was no effective solution for the government to ease such employment pressure, women were thus called upon to return home and contribute to their families (Ouyang, 2003).

[9] Down to the Countryside Movement, also known as Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement, or *shangshan xiaxiang*, was a policy implemented in the late 1960s and early 1970s in China. At that period, millions of educated urban youth (*zhishi qingnian*) were sent to rural and mountainous areas to learn from the poor peasants and workers. Further reading materials can be found from: https://chineseposters.net/themes/up-to-the-mountains.

Gender discrimination in employment is on the rise, along with the state's retreat from ensuring egalitarian employment and welfare for women, under the pressure of the market. Since the reform and opening up, women's participation in the labour force has shown a downward trend: 73% in 1990, 70.5% in 2000, 63.6% in 2010, and 61.8% in 2020 (The World Bank, 2021). From the late 1990s, China's higher education opportunities were expanded massively, and women's representation in higher education significantly increased along with it. Women's participation in higher education has risen from 23.44% in 1980 to 50.86% in 2010, and 52.4% in 2015 (Wang & Hou, 2017). However, despite women's high representation in higher education and expected increase in opportunities in the labour market, there was also higher pressure on women to find employment. In the 2000s, a paradoxical phenomenon called "*nü daxuesheng jiuye nan*" (employment discriminations against female college graduates) occurred, and some companies favoured male candidates (C. Li, 2016; Wang, 2003).

In recent years, the Chinese government's policies regarding fertility have further impacted women's careers. In 1979, China introduced its one-child policy, under which the government restricted the population size through heavy fines, forced abortions and sterilisations (Zhang, 2017). In 2016, China relaxed its family planning policy and adopted the universal two-child policy to cope with the aging population (The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China & The State Council of China, 2016). In 2021, China further relaxed its family planning policy, allowing couples to have three children (The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China & The State Council of China, 2021). At the same time, the central government provided support in terms of taxation, insurance, education, housing and employment, to reduce the costs for families to bring up children (The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China & The State Council of China, 2021). There even exists the stigmatisation of urban professional women who are still single in their late twenties or older. All-China Women's Federation—the state feminist agency who is supposed to "protect women's rights and interests"—began a campaign using the term "leftover" women or *shengnü* to stigmatise these women and pressure them to stop being so ambitious in their career and get married (Fincher, 2016). Such a changing policy from one-child to encouraging three-child, and the state's promotion of marriage, even if it seems to benefit the whole nation in the long-term, has undermined women's competitiveness in the workplace because of women's reproduction duties, and has caused the resurgence of gender inequality, thus impacting on their career development (this will be elaborated in Chapter 6 and 7).

In summary, in parallel with the state-led gender egalitarian discourse is the gender discourse that is subject to market logic and traditional beliefs, where women ought to show their

individual competency as well as conform to their traditional roles, especially those living in urban areas in China (Fincher, 2016; Ji & Wu, 2018). How does this gender landscape impact on the roles of women entrepreneurs in digital creative industries? What kind of situations are they experiencing in such gender dynamics? An understanding of the gender landscape helps to grasp women entrepreneurs' lived experience.

2.4 The research setting

Shenzhen was chosen as the main research site for this study. Located in the Southern part of China, Shenzhen is adjacent to Hong Kong and Guangzhou. In 2019—the year that the fieldwork for this study was carried out—Shenzhen had more than 13 million people (Shenzhen Statistics Bureau & NBS Survey Office in Shenzhen, 2020) with its gross domestic product (GDP) reaching up to 2.69 trillion RMB (Renminbi) or US $381.4 million, ranking third in China after Beijing and Shanghai (Shenzhen Statistics Bureau & NBS Survey Office in Shenzhen, 2020; J. Wei, 2020). As this research is concerned with women's entrepreneurship in China's digital creative industries, Shenzhen was selected as the main field site, accordingly. There are several reasons for this choice.

Firstly, Shenzhen exemplifies China's economic development and its enthusiasm for technological innovation since China's reforming and opening up in 1978, with Shenzhen listed in the first batch of Special Economic Zones (SEZs). Originally with fewer than 30 thousand inhabitants scattered over a number of small village clusters before reforming and opening up, Shenzhen made history and grew into a first-tier city in China within four decades (O'Donnell et al., 2017). The high-tech industry is one of the four pillar industries in Shenzhen.[10] From 1998, Shenzhen municipal government proposed the idea of "taking high-tech industry as the forerunner", and started investing heavily in high-tech sectors. Since China joined the WTO and became more involved with the world industrial chain in 2001, Shenzhen quickly caught up in the areas of Information and Communication industries, and nurtured brands such as Huawei, Dji, and Tencent. Therefore, it has carved out an image of Shenzhen as "China's Silicon Valley" (Needham, 2019).

Secondly, Shenzhen's advantage in technology lays the foundation for it to develop digital creative industries, thus making Shenzhen one of the forerunners in the relevant fields. In 2003,

[10] By 2010, Shenzhen has unveiled its "four pillar industries" (*sida zhizhu chanye*), namely high-tech industry, financial industry, logistics industry and cultural and creative industries.

Shenzhen revealed its "culture underpinning the city" (*wenhua li shi*) strategy, with the hope of tapping into the culture to pursue the societal and economic development. Since then, the creative economy has developed rapidly in Shenzhen, reaching an average annual growth rate of nearly 25% (Jingbao, 2020). Relying on its advantageous high-tech sectors, Shenzhen created the model known as "culture + technology" in its creative economy, where the digital technologies are widely used in the creative economy to increase its productivity, as well as to refresh the cultural experiences (Li & Zong, 2016). This has helped speed up the development of digital creative industries in Shenzhen.

A variety of stakeholders also came on board to boost entrepreneurship within the industries. Both the municipal and local governments in Shenzhen set up special grassroots funds and spaces to facilitate the uptake of entrepreneurial practices in digital creative industries[11]. Big-name companies, such as Tencent, initiated competitions such as "Next Idea" to attract young people[12]. The company HTC set up its incubation in Shenzhen to nurture promising VR (Virtual Reality) start-ups[13]. In addition, Shenzhen University and some other public education institutes in Shenzhen invested money into the creative projects carried out by students[14]. All of these have made Shenzhen an ideal place to set up a start-up within digital creative industries.

Thirdly, Shenzhen took a leading role in China's landscape of gender equality, thereby making it a pertinent place to examine women's conditions against the background that women's work and development is still a contested field in contemporary China. As one of the SEZs who enjoys certain administrative autonomy, Shenzhen issued laws and regulations to promote gender equality, making it the forerunner in China's gender equality landscape (see Shi, 2021). In 2012, Shenzhen Municipal government passed the "Regulation of Shenzhen Special Economic Zone on the Promotion of Gender Equity" (*Shenzhen jingji tequ xingbie pingdeng cujin tiaoli*).[15] The law is the first of its kind in mainland China to ensure gender equality. In 2020, the "Shenzhen Advertising Gender Equality Review Guide" (*Shenzhen shi guanggao xingbie pingdeng shenshi*

[11] Shenzhen has revealed its Action Plan for Cultivating Digital Creative Industries Clusters (2022–2025) in 2022. See: http://wtl.sz.gov.cn/xxgk/ghjh/fzgh/content/post_9854727.html.
[12] See Tencent's Next Idea contest from: https://nextidea.qq.com/.
[13] See the VR accelerator program Vive X initiated by HTC: https://vivex.vive.com/us/.
[14] See the Innovation and Entrepreneurship Education Centre of Shenzhen University: https://www.szu.edu.cn/xysh1/cxcy.htm.
[15] See "Regulation of Shenzhen Special Economic Zone on the Promotion of Gender Equity" from: http://www.gd.gov.cn/zwgk/wjk/zcfgk/content/post_2532181.html.

zhinan) was issued, which was China's first attempt in the field of reviewing gender equality in advertising[16].

As one of the most economically developed areas in China, Shenzhen provides increasing opportunities for women. However, along with the increasing opportunities, is the entrenched patriarchy women have to deal with. Scholars, such as Pun (2005), have brought the migration women to Shenzhen and their struggling employment system in manufacturing factories into discussion in the early days in 2000s. Over the past decade, researchers, such as Lindtner (2017) and Luo and Chan (2021), have shed light on women's conditions in the digital economy. Standing at the forefront of China's economy and societal development, Shenzhen is the place where the tension between women and economic development manifests most clearly.

Finally, I have established personal connections to Shenzhen, having spent more than three years living and studying there. The Institute of Culture Industry in Shenzhen University, where I obtained my Master's degree, has gathered together a group of scholars, researchers and students who have a close connection with practitioners in Shenzhen's creative economy. The people I know through my Master's degree put me in contact with some potential participants for this project. Apart from this, during my days in Shenzhen, I worked as a research assistant for several research projects and I was a regular attendee at public creative activities, through which I was given the opportunity to meet some professionals and participate in key activities in Shenzhen's creative economy. This has enabled me to gain access to more potential participants for this project.

It is also worth mentioning that the majority of interviews were done in Shenzhen; however, I also conducted several interviews in Wuhan (with Heting and Li, separately), and Beijing (with Rui and Yuanying, separately) when taking a visit home to Wuhan, and attending a seminar in Beijing, respectively.

Given the above background information, women's entrepreneurship in China's digital creative industries is situated in the following context where: China has grown into one of the digital superpowers in the world, and where digital technologies are employed to help China restructure its economy from the export- and investment-driven growth to a consumption-based and innovation-driven economy; the Silicon Valley model of entrepreneurship is pervasive in the majority urban part of China, and the Chinese government resorted to the entrepreneurship solutionism to ease the pressure coming from the employment and economic

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[16] See "Shenzhen Advertising Gender Equality Review Guide" from: http://www.szwomen.org.cn/attachment/0/5/5231/86527.pdf.

restructure. However, it is still questionable whether the digital creative industries are a level playing field where women can fully realise their potential and become start-upper owners. Therefore, we still need to know more about the conditions of women individual creatives who carry out the entrepreneurship practices. In what follows, I review the literature in the field of women and the creative economy, as well as focus on the situation in China's creative economy.

Chapter 3: Literature review

In this chapter, I first outline the issues concerning women and entrepreneurship in the creative economy, highlighting that current studies pay more attention to developed Western countries while the cases from developing countries, such as China, remain inadequately studied. Next, by grasping how the idea of "precarity" emerged from the literature concerning women and work in the creative economy, I reconceptualise precarity as a condition that is shaped by multiple factors including political, economic, emotional and cultural factors by drawing on relevant literature, thus, extending the current debate on precarity in the creative economy beyond the domain of labour to the domain of lived experience. Then, I review the literature regarding China's creative economy, where there exists a focus on the nation's "soft power", cultural and creative policies and industry practices. However, limited academic attention has been paid to women practitioners. By doing this, I further articulate the research gaps and justify how my research can fill this gap.

3.1 Women and entrepreneurship in creative economy

The late 20th and early 21st centuries have seen dramatic changes in work and employment, especially in affluent Western countries. Among all the changes emerging from this societal transformation, two are important to better understand women's current situation in the creative economy. One is understood as the "feminisation of labour" where, quantitatively, women have flooded the pool of labour, and qualitatively, the demand for flexible, relational and emotional elements have increased in work practices, and that these elements are more likely to be part of women's experience (Morini, 2007). The other change concerns the rising precariousness of work. The shift from Fordism to post-Fordism has expanded the insecure and flexible employment, where workers have to relinquish any expectation of a career for life (Bauman, 2012; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Berlant, 2011). Against this backdrop, although working possibilities have expanded for women, and women can take part in a greater range of industries than before, we still need to be cautious about how women would be affected by work that is increasingly flexible.

The creative economy—an iconic economy that is commonly referred to as part of the service and knowledge economy—has quickly gained traction around the world following the DCMS's definition which recognised its economic significance in 1998. Existing research on creative industries has shown the close relationship between entrepreneurship and creative industries in neoliberal countries (Baines & Robson, 2001; Leadbeater & Oakley, 1999; Neff et al., 2005;

Taylor, 2015). The connection between entrepreneurship and creative industries can be understood in at least two ways. First, creative workers are assumed to have an entrepreneurial spirit and mindset. Creative workers, from its outset in the 1990s in Western countries, are rooted in the neoliberal agenda due to its discourses on individual creativity, skills and talent, as well as its advocacy on wealth creation through marketisation. Creative workers, as Ross suggests, fall into the category of "paradigms of entrepreneurial selfhood" (2008, p. 32), where they embrace self-realisation, embody a risk-taking entrepreneurial spirit, and turn out to be self-enterprising subjects.

Second, entrepreneurs, who have the abilities to discover, evaluate and exploit opportunities to create future goods and services (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000), have increased and have been constructed as one of the key agents in creative industries. In their early empirical work with cultural entrepreneurs running micro-businesses (0-2 employees) as well as those running small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), Leadbeater and Oakley (1999) observe a new breed of "Independents" who are self-employed, freelancers and micro-businesses owners, and often work as producers, retailers, designers and promoters at the same time in creative industries in the UK. The Independents, as Leadbeater and Oakley (1999) argue, are one of the driving forces of the fast growth of creative industries, especially in the context that new distribution channels for small producers to serve global markets are created through the pervasive internet and digital networks.

Now it is quite important to ask: what is the role of women in the entrepreneurship practices of creative industries? Skills traditionally considered "feminine", such as adaptability and flexibility, have made women "a strategic and particularly attractive pool of workers" in the background of the feminisation of labour (Morini, 2007, p. 46). Women, according to the extant research (Gill & Scharff, 2013; Scharff, 2016), have been positioned as ideal entrepreneurial subjects in the public discourses. As Gill and Scharff (2013) observe, women, especially young women, are required to constantly re-invent themselves to be self-disciplined and autonomous; the representation of free, empowered and agentic women makes them serve as ideal entrepreneurial subjects in the neoliberal context. These characteristics fit neatly into what the creative economy calls for: a subject who is self-managed, adaptable, social, agile, and individualistic (Gill, 2014). To conclude, women, in creative industries, are inevitably positioned as self-enterprising subjects.

This prompts us to consider what the experiences of women entrepreneurs in creative industries are. These industries present themselves as a level playing field for women, offering them

opportunities to fulfil themselves and realise themselves. Perhaps one of the most popular ideas comes from Richard Florida (2002), who endows the creative class with almost mythical qualities such as coolness, non-hierarchical and freedom. In recent years, a similar highly-celebrated idea came from Hartley, Wen and Li (2015) in their book *Creative economy and culture: Challenges, changes and futures for the creative industries*, where they envisage the creative economy as broad and as inclusive as possible. In their view, creative industries are:

- Not confined to an elite of trained artists or firms; they encompass (or could encompass) *everyone*.
- Not confined to one sector of the economy; they characterise (or could characterise) *everything*.
- Not a feature of advanced or wealthy countries; they are (or could be) *everywhere.* (Hartley et al., 2015, p. 2)

However, the existing literature suggests that creative industries are not as open, egalitarian and meritocratic as depicted by Hartley et al. (2015), and that gender inequalities and hierarchies exist (Banks & Milestone, 2011; Conor et al., 2015; Gill, 2002, 2014; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2015). Scholars in the field of gender and creative work have considered whether the aforementioned transformation, including the feminisation of labour and precarity in work, would bring new feminist politics to the work in the creative economy (Conor et al., 2015; Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017; Gill, 2002, 2014; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2015; Liao, 2020; Marwick, 2010; McRobbie, 2015). The extant research has demonstrated that women's participation in the creative economy does not overturn the entrenched patterns of gender inequality relating to relative numbers in employment, pay, and seniority, while the distinctive nature of creative work characterised by informality, flexibility and precariousness exacerbates the gendered patterns of disadvantage in the creative economy, particularly adding pressure to those women who must undertake child-rearing responsibilities and earn money at the same time (see Gill, 2002; Leung et al., 2015; Morgan & Nelligan, 2015).

The distinctive patterns of inequality exist for women workers in creative industries. McRobbie (2016) has formulated the concept of "creativity *dispositif*" attempting to understand how flexibility and romanticisation of labour operate as a self-regulating and self-monitoring mechanism. According to McRobbie (2016), in the name of passion and creativity, along with the illusion of being middle-class and aspirational, women, especially young women, attach themselves to creative work excessively and affectively, thus putting themselves in a predicament of self-exploitation. Scharff (2016) has also examined women's entrepreneurial

subjectivities in creative industries. Based on 64 in-depth interviews with young female classical musicians in London and Berlin, Scharff (2016) sheds light on how neoliberalism is lived out through examining those women musician's entrepreneurial subjectivities, especially their "psychic life"[17]. She informs us of the various ways of psychic constituting women's entrepreneurial subjectivities, including but not limited to hiding injuries and disavowing inequalities (Scharff, 2016). The disavowal of inequalities, as Gill (2014) suggests, is reinforced by the domination of post-feminist sensibility, as well as the requirement of the new forms of labouring subjectivity which favours an entrepreneurial individualistic mode that disavows structural power relations.

Increasingly, with the ubiquity of digital technologies in the twenty-first century, women can embrace entrepreneurship in creative industries by making use of digital technologies (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017). Though digital technologies are thought to lower the barriers for women to becoming entrepreneurs and allowing them more access to information and relevant resources (Gupta & Etzkowitz, 2021), scholars in the field of gender in the creative economy still find evidence for the enduring structural inequality in the traditionally masculine-coded nature of entrepreneurship (Duffy, 2016; Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017; Marwick, 2010). Situating their research at the intersection of post-feminism, neoliberal economies and social media labour, Duffy and Pruchniewska (2017) interviewed 22 independently-employed female professionals working in digital media/creative fields in the United States, providing a greater understanding of self-enterprising women's behaviours and experience. They point out the superficiality of the promises of digitally enabled meritocracy, and they use the term "digital double bind" to describe the dilemma where women digital creative professionals have to develop and present online personae that conformed to the traditional sense of femininity (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017).

However, this body of research is mainly based on the European and American women's experience, with quite limited studies on gender and creative work, as well as gender and creative entrepreneurship in countries such as China (Chow, 2019; Liao, 2020; Lin, 2022; Wang & Keane, 2020). There are at least two reasons that the empirical research in China is called for in this line of inquiry. First, the scholarship of gender and creative entrepreneurship of women with European and American backgrounds is largely embedded in their neoliberal contexts.

[17] In Christina Scharff's paper *The psychic life of neoliberalism: mapping the contours of entrepreneurial subjectivity*, she borrows the concept of "psychic life" from Butler (1997). This poststructuralist perspective, according to Scharff (2016), conveys the formation of subjectivities in and through power. Thus, the notion psychic life lends itself to Scharff's exploration of the ways in which entrepreneurial subjectivities constitute themselves in and through discourse, in this case, neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism motivates people governing themselves through operating on their interests, desires and aspirations (Read, 2009). As for China, however, controversy still exists on whether China is a neoliberal state on theoretical and methodological grounds. Some scholars hold that China is considered to be in rapid economic neoliberalisation since the opening up and reform from the late 1970s (Harvey, 2007). However, scholars such as Nonini (2008) and Yu (2011) argue that neoliberalism doesn't apply directly to China, mainly because of the Chinese state intervening directly in the market.

Second, the extant research on gender and entrepreneurship in the creative economy has shown evidence of the close relationship between women's entrepreneurial subjectivity and the ideology of post-feminism in European and American contexts (Gill, 2014; McRobbie, 2016; Scharff, 2016). In the absence of the charged legacy of successive waves of feminist movements that have been part of the Western experience, Chinese women and their subjectivities take shape in quite a different context (see Wu & Dong, 2019). In this sense, China may constitute a peculiar case that is different from their Western counterparts.

Apart from this, scholars also point out how intersectionality works: in women's entrepreneurship in the creative economy, gender, together with factors such as class, places women in a marginalised position (Duffy, 2016). Originating in Black feminism, intersectionality refers to the overlapping systems of discrimination (Crenshaw, 1994). A single-category factor (i.e., sex and race) is not enough to explain the experience by certain group of people: "Intersectionality is an analytic sensibility, a way of thinking about identity and its relationship to power [and it should bring] to light the invisibility of many constituents within groups that claim them as members" such as race, sex, class and more (Crenshaw, 2015, para. 6). As such, the intersectionality moves beyond the previous understanding of intersecting identities, where fluid social factors can be taken into consideration when examining women's experiences in the creative economy.

Overall, I suggest that the current literature on gender and creative work urges concern for historical, political and social contexts, and the specific context in which China might produce a different landscape of gender and creative work. In this particular research, I am more interested in women who initiate their own start-ups in the creative economy, in particular the conditions of women individual creatives who set up their own start-ups, and the nature of women's experiences as they attempt to make a living in this new field of work. In what follows, I employ the concept of precarity that is frequently used in the labour condition in the creative economy, but reconceptualise precarity from the domain of labour to the domain of lived

experience to better illuminate the structural conditions that shape the experience of women digital creative entrepreneurs as well as their hopes and desires in this research.

3.2 Reconceptualising precarity in creative economy for this study

The existing literature on gender and creative work has suggested that creative workers have become the poster children of precarity (Ross, 2009). Meanwhile, the distinctive nature of creative work characterised by flexibility, informality and precariousness aggravates the gendered patterns of disadvantage in the creative economy, dissolving the boundaries between life and work, production and reproduction, and the formal and informal (see Gill, 2002; Leung et al., 2015; Morgan & Nelligan, 2015). Furthermore, as an analytical tool, the lens of precarity has the potential to unpack the matter in its full complexity, which not only draws on the political economy, but also takes into consideration the subjectivity, experience and culture (Millar, 2017). In this sense, the notion of precarity would be useful to illuminate women entrepreneurs' situation in China's digital creative industries for this study. However, the current debate on precarity in the creative economy mainly lies in the domain of labour. In this study, I attempt to extend the current debate of precarity beyond the domain of labour towards the domain of lived experience in creative economy studies. In the following section, I reconceptualise the notion of precarity in creative economy studies. I firstly historicise the concept of precarity, which originated in Europe in the 1990s concerning the field of labour. Then I elaborate how an understanding of precarity can be expanded from a labour condition to an understanding of dynamic lived experience in the creative economy by drawing on relevant literature.

3.2.1 Historicising precarity in creative work

The concept of precarity has emerged as a new way to think about the labour condition and the relations between labour and life in Europe since the 1990s (Millar, 2017; Neilson & Rossiter, 2008). Before the 1990s in Europe, the working force predominantly experienced relatively guaranteed employment with relatively clear working- and non-working-time division. The labour process, however, became precarious under the impact of globalisation, information and communication technologies, as well as the changing modes of political and economic governance (Sennett, 1998). The thriving capitalism gradually dismantled the expectation of permanent full-time employment with job security, and, as a result, the precarious job becomes visible (Sennett, 1998).

In the late 1990s, the increase of temporary, part-time and casual employment forced workers to adapt to it, and it has spread to multiple sectors including the cultural sector. As Bourdieu (1998) observed:

> It has emerged clearly that job insecurity is now everywhere: in the private sector, but also in the public sector, which has greatly increased the number of temporary, part-time or casual positions; in industry, but also in the institutions of cultural production and diffusion – education, journalism, the media, etc. (p. 82)

In Bourdieu's accounts, what the precarious jobs bring is more than the un-guaranteed jobs, but also a kind of "collective mentality" (p. 83), or subjective insecurity among the workers (Bourdieu, 1998). As Bourdieu (1998) notes, precarious jobs cause anxiety to the workers, "by making the whole future uncertain, it prevents all rational participation and, in particular, the basic belief and hope in the future that one needs in order to rebel" (p. 82). This mentality with uncertainty and hopelessness causes the workers to lose confidence to project themselves into the future.

Compared to Bourdieu's negative attitudes towards precarity which brings job insecurity and subjective feelings of uncertainty, some autonomist Marxist intellectuals, however, hold relatively optimistic attitudes towards precarious labour by stressing the autonomy and creativity within precarity. Reflecting on a few labour movements in Europe since the 1970s, especially the EuroMayDay protests[18] starting from the early days of the 21st century, a group of autonomist Marxist intellectuals, to name a few, Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, and Paolo Virno, produced a powerful body of work on precarity (Hardt & Negri, 2000, 2004, 2009; Virno & Hardt, 1996). They suggest that the information transformation in advanced capitalism societies has fundamentally changed the nature of work and employment, making it casual, flexible, temporary, and insecure (Hardt & Negri, 2000). Rather than seeing the precarious labourers merely as victims of capitalism, the autonomist Marxist scholars think that precarious labourers' refusal to adapt to regular employment allow for alternative labour forms other than full-time employment in the Western model of capitalism development (Hardt & Negri, 2000). They speak highly of the refusal of work, and recognise the political power of refusal, where their refusal, detaching the labourers from the domination of work,

[18] The first EuroMayDay protest happened on 1 May 2001. On that day, more than 5,000 people gathered in Milan's city centre to raise the visibility of increasing precarity of living and working conditions, and aim to put the precarity issue onto the political agenda. Now it has become a Europe-based transnational movement network.

> is the beginning of liberatory politics. . . . Beyond the simple refusal, or as part of that refusal, we need also to construct a new mode of life and above all a new community. (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 204)

In other words, the embracing of precarity, autonomy and creativity, helps to empower the ordinary people and facilitate alternative model of life in capitalism.

Following this line of inquiry into precarity, scholars on the creative economy have provided evidence that creative work is increasingly characterised by informalisation, flexibilization, and precarisation. For example, by drawing on a series of in-depth interviews with new media developers and participant observation carried out in New York, Pratt (2000) has termed "bulimic careers", a kind of boom-and-bust pattern of working to describe the phenomenon that new media developers experience long periods with little or no work followed by intensive periods of having to work all the time. This is echoed by Gill (2002) in her study with 125 freelance new media workers in six European countries, along with some other forms of precariousness concerning pervasive insecurity and low pay. One of the more recent studies conducted by Christina Scharff (2016) with 64 classical musicians in London and Berlin also points out that the underexplored field of classical musicians is characterised as casualised, precarious, with low pay and scarcity of work, and requires multiple jobs.

Despite much discussion on the precarity in work in the creative economy, where attention has been paid to job security, limited control over wages, working time and labour protection, there has been limited empirical research exploring the workers' lived experience[19]. In the next section, I draw on the existing literature on precarity, where it is not only understood as labour conditions, but also can refer to an ontological status, to extend the current debate of precarity in the creative economy beyond the domain of labour to the domain of lived experience.

3.2.2 Reconceptualising precarity in the creative economy

Based on the previous discussion, in this section I reconceptualise precarity in the creative economy, extending the current debate of precarity in the creative economy beyond the domain of labour to the domain of lived experience. A key figure here is Judith Butler, a scholar who has made significant contributions to broadening our understanding of precarity by attaching precarity with the significance of ontological status. Following the 9/11 attacks on September 11, 2001, Judith Butler wrote five articles reflecting on the conditions of heighted vulnerability and aggression that followed the sad events. These articles were compiled in her book *Precarious*

[19] Ann Gray's description of lived experience as a "dynamic process of lived cultures" and "those forces which shape the trajectories, the life choices and the mundanity of the everyday" is helpful for me to understand the lived experience of women entrepreneurs in this study (Gray, 2003, p. 32).

life: The powers of mourning and violence (Butler, 2004). Butler (2004) suggests that precariousness is an ontological status, "a common human vulnerability, one that emerges with life itself" (p. 31). According to Butler (2004), one cannot escape the precariousness, as "it precedes the formation of 'I'" (p. 31). Humans cannot recover the source of this vulnerability as it has been constituted the social intercourse where people are dependent on and made vulnerable to each other. In this sense, precarity can be understood as a pre-embedded condition that human beings survive in, and there is no way for humans to get rid of precariousness.

As this book was written after the 911 tragedy, it shows Butler's reflection on contemporary politics, as well as the ethical transformation in a post-9/11 world. Her work challenges the seemingly justifiable idea of human life and humanity that we take for granted—not everyone's life is worth understanding or remembering. Her work is useful in the sense that Butler pushes precarity in a direction that suggests it is a life condition which is characterised by vulnerability and uncertainty. However, if precarity is a pre-embedded condition and characterises the entire human being's life, it still cannot be assumed that it has the same dynamics across everyone or everywhere, thus it needs to be understood in greater specificity.

In this sense, Guy Standing's work helps us to understand the different dynamics of precarity across different groups of people. In his book *The Precariat: The new dangerous class*, Standing considers several groups of people that easily fall into the "precariat" (Standing, 2014). Precariat, according to Standing (2014), is an identical socio-economic class with heterogenous groups ranging from migrants to part time workers, referring to those precarious workers who do not have labour security, or secure income, as well as those "denizens" who do not enjoy the full range of rights, including civil, cultural, political, social, and economic rights, as the citizens do (p. 14-16). Standing takes gender into consideration, and concludes that women fall into one of the groups who are more likely to enter the precariat (Standing, 2014, pp. 60–65). Against this backdrop, there is the trend of feminisation of labour, where women are increasingly joining the labour market and undertake flexible low-paid jobs. Standing (2014) argues that women are experiencing a "triple burden", where women need to manage triple responsibilities at the same time—earning money, rearing children, and caring for the elderly, thus driving them into the precariat (p. 61).

Standing's work is helpful for this research in the way that he views the precariat as heterogenous groups, and the precariat's conditions are shaped by the factors including their gender, occupation, political status, etc. However, Standing's understanding of the precariat

cannot be easily applied to women entrepreneurs in China's digital creative industries for this study because of its obvious limitations. Standing's work focuses on European countries, and lacks the empirical analysis of the gender dynamics, which may not be able to explain the cases in regions or countries such as East Asia or China—places which are generally perceived as male-dominated societies and which have less immigration issues. In this sense, it urges a careful consideration on the political, cultural, social and economic factors when analysing precarity in a given context.

Lauren Berlant is another scholar who informs an understanding of precarity for this research. Situating her work in the context of Europe and North American, Berlant (2011) analyses some texts of popular culture including contemporary literature, art and movies to help understand the contemporary political life in consumer culture. She uses the term "cruel optimism" for a kind of political subjectivity particular to neoliberalism, where "the dissolution of optimistic objects/scenarios that had once held the space open for the good-life fantasy, and tracks dramas of adjustment to the transformation of what had seemed foundational into those binding kinds of optimistic relation we call 'cruel'" (p. 3). The illusion of a perfect life lures humans to endure the precarity, which is:

> an economic and political condition suffered by a population or by the subjects of capitalism generally; or a way of life; or an affective atmosphere; or an existential truth about contingencies of living, namely, that there are no guarantees that the life one intends can or will be built. (Berlant, 2011, p. 192)

Berlant suggests that there exists the underlying pleasure within precarity, and precarity holds the potential promise to exert humans' autonomy. Even though abound with precarious work, it is not rare to see the idea that pleasure and autonomy co-exist in the creative economy, where the creative work is highly romanticised by the discourses of "freedom", "DWYL" (Do What You Love) and "coolness" (Florida, 2002). In addition, passion and creativity are romanticised as compensations for the absence of protection and security in creative work, putting creative workers in a predicament of self-exploitation (Gill, 2002; McRobbie, 2016). The desire for a perfect life attracts people to be involved in the creative economy.

Based on the discussion above, in this study, the understanding of precarity is not just about a labour condition, which is commonly used in the current creative economy studies, but more about a dynamic lived experience, or a dynamic condition that is mainly shaped by structural factors including economic, political and social uncertainty and vulnerability. Meanwhile, along with the difficulties and challenges in the creative work, are the desires or the hopes for an envisioned life. Those forces as well as the agency that drives changes shape the trajectories and

life choices of creative practitioners. In what follows, I move to probe into the creative economy in contemporary China, as well as women's roles within it.

3.3 China's creative economy and gender

3.3.1 In search of creativity

Upon the arrival of creative industries in China in the early 2000s, not only do the Chinese government and some scholars see its huge domestic market as a potential platform for indigenous creative economy, and see the foreign market as a stage for China's cultural soft power, but also see the creative economy as a crucial part in the shift to innovation and high-end services economy, and creativity is expected to become a critical human resource to boost China's economy in the future phase (Li, 2011; The State Council of China, 2009).

Discourses surrounding creativity, as argued by some scholars, have functioned as elements connected by Angela McRobbie's term of creativity *dispositif* in China (Lin, 2019; Lin, 2022). Following Foucault's idea on "*dispositif*" in *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-77*, Angela McRobbie refers to the specific function of creativity in the current neoliberal economy:

> Creativity is designed by current modes of biopolitical power, as the site for implementing job creation and, more significantly, labour reform; it is a matter of managing a key sector of the youthful population by turning culture into an instrument of both competition and labour discipline. The word culture fades into the background and is replaced by creativity. It is a deployment of power to encourage self-actualisation through being creative. It is a matter of putting creativity to work. (McRobbie, 2016, p. 38)

As such, the creativity *dispositif* power relations impact on workers' subjectivities and the idea of putting creativity to work attracts workers into the creative work domain in China. For example, Jian Lin (2019) offers a case study of the governance of creativity and creative labour work in the Chinese state-owned cultural enterprises, where the creative workers are expected to "be creative for the state" while compromising their creative autonomy. Such discourse of creativity *dispositif* also directs middle-class youth to work in the creative economy in urban China, as Lili Lin (2022) has shown in her empirical work on a group of young middle-class women in Shanghai. Even though adopting Angela McRobbie's concept of creative *dispositif* which is situated in the context of the Western neoliberal creative economy, both Jian Lin's and Lili Lin's work constantly remind us of the different socio-political context in China (Lin, 2019; Lin, 2022).

Different from the Western neoliberal creative economy where Angela McRobbie's work is situated, the creativity *dispositif* may have a different connotation in contemporary China. The state's role in China's creative economy, for example, is one of the concerns that scholars have towards the development of China's creative economy. As Jing Wang (2001) stresses, there is always a "state question" in China's cultural industries. Later in her writing, Wang (2004) expresses a pessimistic point of view on the Western concept of creative industries travelling to China and sees it as a compromise "where creative imagination and content are subjugated to active state surveillance" (p. 13). Keane (2004) also raises concerns regarding the growth of China's state-formed cultural conglomerates, which suggests a very different dynamic to that of the Western creative industries agenda where the small- and medium-scale enterprises need to be flourishing.

Nowadays, the state's role in China's creative economy, to some extent, is manifested more clearly in the form of state censorship influencing cultural production in China (Chen et al., 2021; Lin & de Kloet, 2019; Liu, 2016). The Chinese government has long kept tight reins on cultural production to avoid any potential subversion of its authority. It has been a long tradition that the Chinese media needs to shoulder a double agenda: "Globally . . . present [China] as a player whose values, ethics, and sensibilities are compatible with, if not superior to, its international counterparts. Domestically, it needs to avoid 'chaos' at all cost, including heavy-handed censorship, in order to ensure social stability and national unity" (Sun, 2010, p. 66). This also applies to the emerging digital creative companies who are not immune to the state's censorship. The state's requirement for "clean", "healthy" and "positive" content have influenced the content that creators produce as well as how digital platforms regulate the content from its users (Chen et al., 2021; Lin & de Kloet, 2019; Liu, 2016).

Women practitioners face gendered risks when exercising creativity in contemporary China. In her study on the women fashion designers characterised by *Shanzhai* culture or copycat culture, Liao (2020) notes that precarious creativity is embedded in these women fashion designers' production. Precarious creativity is a condition where individuals want to obtain the creative autonomy towards the cultural content or products they create; however, the financial, physical, emotional etc. constraints bring them uncertainty and insecurity (Curtin & Sanson, 2016; McRobbie, 2011). These women's fashion work, as Liao (2020) suggests, lacks the official recognition as meaningful labour, and their ability to make a case for the legitimacy of their work is further diminished as the state co-opts male-dominated *Shanzhai* for its nation-building narratives. Though the celebratory discourse surrounding creativity is dominated in extant literature on China's creative economy, the insecurity and risks among creative workers

gradually show up especially in the prevalence of the highly flexible and competitive digital economy in China, where the influx of capital running into creative economy.

3.3.2 Creative economy and the rising digital economy

Over the recent few years when the digital economy was pervasive in China, scholars propose the idea of a "creator network economy" (*chuangyi zhe wangluo jingji*). In their work *Creator network: On the evolution of creative class theory under the influence of Internet*, Huang and Xiang (2017) argue that, under the influence of Internet, diversified amateur creators have emerged and formed a broader network of creators in China in fields such as media, literature and comics. Their paper challenges Richard Florida's (2002) classical creative class idea, and stresses the possibilities that digital technologies can empower grassroots individuals to be creative through "learning from doing" (Huang & Xiang, 2017). It is in this way that celebratory discourses about meritocracy and creativity abound in China's creative economy.

The flexible digital economy and the capital-driven market, however, produce insecurity and vulnerability among the creative workers due to the intensifying competition and the strong demand for profit. A typical phenomenon in daily life is the "996" working culture, especially in China's Internet companies. The 996 work regime means working from 9am to 9pm, six days a week, a brutal mandatory overwork phenomenon (Zhen, 2021). Employers are expected to work overtime to fit into the working ethic of "diligence" and satisfy the company's key performance indicator (KPI) evaluation to survive in the competitive company. Another example is the phenomenon of the "35-year-old glass ceiling" in Internet companies in China (Yuan et al., 2021). Ageing employers are faced with being kicked out of their companies because of their relatively lower efficiency and higher pay compared with their younger counterparts.

The insecurity and vulnerability also step into in the creative economy in China. Elaine Jing Zhao (2017) provides a good example to better understand the increasing precarity in China's booming digital creative industries. In her paper, *Writing on the assembly line: Informal labour in the formalised online literature market in China*, Zhao (2017) examines the emerging online literature production in China, a site in the digital creative economy where the market has formalised while the labour practices remain largely informal against the backdrop of China's booming digital economy and the increasing capital investment seeking to capitalise on the booming market. Zhao (2017) points out that the informal labour practices and the commercialisation of the online literature market have led to augmented precarity for most writers, they are facing the risks of higher work intensity, diluted creative autonomy, dubious contract terms and less negotiation power against publishers. Zhao's work is thought-provoking

for this study as she illuminates the logic or the contexts of the formation of the formal online literature market. In addition, her work sheds light on the tensions between the formal market and the informal labour, and illustrates that precarity—an increasing informalisation, flexibilization and precarisation of employment—is associated with the evolving labour market.

Similar to Zhao's work, Zhongxuan Lin and Yupei Zhao (2020) have demonstrated how eSports players suffer from severely precarious working and living conditions with limited social protections in China's emerging but competitive eSports field. Different from the Western's pleasurable gaming idea, Lin and Zhao (2020) suggest that China's eSports players have turned the enjoyment of play to boring training, and they dedicate to the training, leaving themselves very little time for other entertainment or recreation. By using the methods of ethnographic participant observation and in-depth interviews, Lin and Zhao (2020) demonstrated the precarities eSports players are suffering, such as a lack of stable income, weak work protection, the blurring of work and play, and the fear of alternative replacements. Apart from this, by following Berlant's (2011) idea that precarity is also "an effective atmosphere" (p. 192) in daily life, Lin and Zhao (2020) directs us to the mental and psychological pressure suffered by the eSports players. This, as I suggest, could be regarded as an effort that Lin and Zhao have made to expand the dominant understanding of precarity beyond the domain of labour in the context of China. Their work points out the structural constraints faced by eSports players; however, it doesn't elaborate on individual or collective agency that eSports players adopt.

Yiu Fai Chow (2019) offers a book-length work and provides a significant perspective to understand the predicament as well as the autonomy of single women creative workers in China. Departing from the dominating critical scholarship on the exploitation of creative labour, Chow (2019) focuses on the subjective experiences of a group of single women working in China's creative economy, and notes their strategies in the face of the prevailing precarity and pressure from their work and the pressure to marry. In his book, Chow (2019) explores how they choose to do good creative work (for example, they run their own businesses), how they arrange their single life (such as their urban dwelling), and how they pursue creative interests as individuals and as community (for instance, they share their fondness for *Kunqu*, a traditional Chinese operatic art). Chow (2019) calls for an ethics of care for this marginalised group of people. It is in this way that Chow has made an effort to extend the debate of precarity into the domain of care.

To conclude, the intensifying competition in the digital economy and the money-driven market have made the precarisation of employment of the workers in the emerging digital creative

industries visible. Existing scholarship has examined the insecure, uncertain and vulnerable working conditions that creative workers are facing. Emerging literature has also added an affective dimension to the discussion of creative workers' precarity (i.e., mental pressure and care) in China's creative economy, extending the debate of precarity beyond the domain of labour. Continuing this line of inquiry, I focus my thesis on the emergence of women digital creative entrepreneurs, to illuminate their lived experience of precarity as well as their hopes for an ideal life.

3.3.3 Forging new entrepreneurial positions in creative economy

In contemporary China, women and creative work have both been associated at the intersection of the feminisation of labour, the discourse of creativity, and the discourses of post-feminism (Chow, 2019; Liao, 2021; Lin, 2022). Based on her in-depth interviews with male and female creative workers in Shanghai, Lin (2022) finds that the flexibility provided by the creative work is attractive for young women, especially those who want to escape standard and fixed work patterns. At the same time, the discourse of creativity, underpinned by the joint forces from the state and the market, is attractive for young women wanting to join the creative economy: not only do they feel that they can exert greater autonomy, but they can also aspire to secure their middle-classness (Lin, 2022).

As a popular cultural form and sensibility that originated in Western countries in the 1980s, post-feminism considers women to be empowered, self-pleasing, freely-choosing, but also self-disciplined and self-regulated (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). In particular, post-feminism embraces individualistic ideologies and practices related to neoliberal consumer culture such as being self-entrepreneurial (Genz, 2015; Gill, 2014). Post-feminism has appeared in China over the past few decades (Thornham & Feng, 2010; Yang, 2020).[20] Through her exploration of the *wang hong* phenomenon, Liao (2021) identifies that *wang hong* embraced post-feminism to take

[20] Chinese feminism is a complex subject (Leung, 2003; Spakowski, 2011; Zhu & Xiao, 2021). The Chinese case can speak to the post-feminism theory and politics formation in the Western countries, yet retains its own complexities and specificities (Thornham & Feng, 2010; Yang, 2020). For example, Yang (2020) coins the term "consumerist pseudo-feminism" (*xiaofei zhuyi wei nüquan)* as a Chinese equivalent of post-feminism. By doing this, Yang (2020) acknowledges the buzzwords "consumerism" and "pseudo-feminism". Defining and distinguishing feminism in China is not the purpose for this project, and will be not discussed much further. Here, in the literature review chapter, I adopt the "post-feminism" to contextualise women and creative work in China for two reasons. First, it has reached certain consensus that post-feminism, which highlights women's freedom of choice, empowerment and independence has appeared in China, and lays a certain foundation for women to join the creative economy in China (Chow, 2019; Liao, 2021). Second, in the inquiry line of women and creative work especially in the Western societies, post-feminism has been consistently associated with women's self-selection to creative economy (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017; Gill, 2014). The adoption of post-feminism in this research, I believe, would help readers to better understand the Chinese context.

up their fashion practices. *wang hong,* a group consisting mostly of women, express their understandings and imaginings of a glamorous fashion world as being characterised by flexibility, autonomy, and independence; and they profit from their media engagement and social relations with their fans. Liao (2021) argues that the practices of *wang hong* manifests post-feminism as they interweave their individual pursuit of growth, material success, freedom and empowerment. It shows that women's self-selection to China's creative economy is situated in the context of post-feminism sensibilities.

Given the consideration of women's high presence in the consumption market, it seems that women have more opportunities to be included in the technology companies to produce products that can satisfy women consumers' needs; however, women still face the gendered hierarchisation and labour division, and are restricted to "low-tech" positions. For example, drawing on semi-structured interviews with 10 professionals who previously worked in China's leading beauty app company, Peng (2021b) critically examines the beauty apps which seem to provide female users with a sense of empowerment and, in this way, facilitates female professionals in the high-tech industries. Peng (2021b) points out that the beauty app not only reinforces existing standards of beauty, but also confines women professionals to certain positions that are still within the traditional gendered profession boundaries.

Increasingly, women are attracted to take up entrepreneurial practices in the creative economy in pursuit of freedom, autonomy, social upward mobility, and material rewards against the backdrop of entrepreneurial fever and the state's promotion of Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation. Both Chow (2019) and Lin (2022) have observed the phenomenon that women workers embrace the self-enterprising culture and set up their own business to capitalise on their skills and experience. However, their works don't delve into the lived experience of women digital creative entrepreneurs in particular. In addition, both Chow (2019) and Lin (2022) empirical evidence only comes from the city of Shanghai, which suggests there is a need for empirical evidence from other cities to enrich the scholarship of gender and creative work in China. The literature on women entrepreneurs and creative work in China's creative economy is quite limited (see Liao, 2017, 2021; Wang and Keane, 2020). Among the limited work, Wang and Keane (2020) use empirical evidence to show that women start-up owners struggle to develop and sustain a creative-based entrepreneurial identity in China. It is within the context of an increasingly market-oriented economy and self-enterprising subjectivities among women that the research on women digital creative entrepreneurs gains significance. It is necessary to have a more systematic understanding of the lived experience of self-enterprising women practitioners in China's digital creative economy.

The literature from the field of entrepreneurship is helpful to identify some of the main structural barriers faced by women entrepreneurs in China's digital creative industries. In their paper, *Women entrepreneurship in China: Where are we now and where are we heading*, Cooke and Xiao (2021) conduct a holistic analysis of the barriers women entrepreneurs are facing in China. They categorise these into three types, namely macro level barriers from the institutional and societal, meso-level barriers from the industry, as well as micro-level challenges from the organization and individual (Cooke & Xiao, 2021) (See Table 1, below). This is informative for my research in the way that it provides the outline of the macro/meso/micro level barriers women entrepreneurs are facing in China's business world from the discipline of entrepreneurship, which has been focusing on the dynamics and politics of entrepreneurship.

Table 1

Barriers that women entrepreneurs face at different levels in China

Level	Barriers
Macro	Institutional and societal: • Lack of efficient legislation and policy support • Imperfect credit markets, product markets, and supply chains • Different retirement ages between men and women • State-owned companies enjoy more power than private firms in the market • Gender prejudice and male-dominated social culture • Gender norm that prioritizes women's social role as family-oriented • Media coverage about women in business less common than that for men and sometimes reported in distorted manner • Chinese traditional culture like *guanxi* network
Meso	Industry: • Imbalanced industrial distribution for women-led businesses, concentrated in the tertiary industry • The industrial structure issues, demand for restructure and industry upgrade
Micro	Organizational and individual: • Inequality in human resource management practices such as recruitment, training and development • Male-dominant organization culture • Gender role cognition bias • Perceived physical and psychological characteristics of women • Family-work conflict

To conclude, the current literature on women and entrepreneurship in the creative economy mainly focuses on the Western countries, and there is quite limited empirical work from Asian countries such as China. This study is interested in women who set up their own start-ups in China's emerging digital creative industries against the backdrop of entrepreneurship fever and Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation. Based on the existing literature, "precarity" is understood beyond the precarisation of employment, but as a dynamic lived experience that is mainly shaped by structural political, economic and cultural factors, as well as the agency that is driven by hopes and desires in this study. This research brings the perspective of "precarity" into the discussion of women's roles in digital creative entrepreneurship.

Chapter 4: Methodology

With the aim of analysing the role of women entrepreneurs in China's emerging digital creative industries, this research employs a variety of qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews, observation and document analysis as they allow me to go further with the social realities my participants are in, as well as their subjective experiences (Awasthy, 2020; Hammarberg et al., 2016). Qualitative research can be understood as an "inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological approach to inquiry that explores a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture; analyses words; reports detailed views of participants; and conducts the study in natural setting" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 418). In this sense, qualitative methods are commonly employed to answer the questions concerning the lived experience, meaning and perspectives, mostly from the standpoint of the researched individuals, groups, organizations, and societies (Awasthy, 2020; Hammarberg et al., 2016). More specifically, qualitative research helps to understand the participants' feelings, behaviour and actions in a certain context (Awasthy, 2020). In qualitative studies, researchers visit the site where problems are encountered, and use themselves as the instruments to collect data and gain a deeper understanding by adopting methods such as interviews, observations, focused group discussions, and anything that helps to understand the world of the participants (Awasthy, 2020). Therefore, qualitative research offers opportunities to design research in an under-explored area (Awasthy, 2020).

I conducted the fieldwork from March to November in 2019 mainly in Shenzhen, a city located in the Southern part of China. The trip resulted in a total of 31 in-depth interviews with a wide range of stakeholders, including female entrepreneurs, male entrepreneurs, academics, government staff and association managers in the areas relating to digital creative industries. I also carried out 19 observations by attending entrepreneurial activities, conferences and seminars in order to widely immerse myself into the relevant ecosystem. In what follows, I first explain the three qualitative methods adopted by this study with reflections on my fieldwork, then further introduce the ethical considerations for this study.

4.1 In-depth interviewing

Qualitative interviewing enables researchers not only to recount participants' stories in their own words, but also to "understand the research participant holistically, as an experiencing, meaning-making person" (Josselson, 2013, p. viii). It also helps researchers understand the meanings of participants' experience, conversations, and behaviour, as well as the specific socio-

cultural-political context of where participants live (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). The method of in-depth interviews has been widely used in the study concerning gender, work and creative economy to collect data (Chow, 2019; Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017; Gill, 2002; Lin, 2022; Scharff, 2016). Therefore, in-depth interviewing was used in my study as the main research method to obtain rich data on the subjective experience and perceptions of women entrepreneurs in China's digital creative industries.

In order to gain a better idea of the conditions women entrepreneurs were in, this project collected data from a wide range of stakeholders, including entrepreneurs, scholars and government officers in the areas relating to digital creative industries. The criteria for the selection of women entrepreneurs were: they must have set up their own business in the digital creative industries after 2014—the year when the Chinese government initiated the Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation campaign and invested heavily in digital creative industries. It also means that their business was still in the early stages of operation or in a start-up period when the research data were collected in 2019. The start-up stage is worth investigating as they have fewer resources for survival and development, or, in other words, the businesses experience precarity. For the rest of the participants, including the male practitioners, academics and government officers, the criteria for selection were that they were involved in digital creative industries, including working, researching, or policy-making, and they were willing to be part of the research.

I posted my project outline with a recruitment notice on China's most popular communication portal, WeChat. However, no participants responded to me via this channel. I recruited some participants from my personal network and from some public activities that I attended. Beside this, a snowballing method was used to recruit more participants through the help of existing participants; specifically, I asked the existing participants to name others in their community who fall into the categories that I sought to study in this project. It is worth noting here that interpersonal networks (also known as *guanxi* in Chinese) existed within the participants that were recruited through the snowballing method, mainly through business networks. For example, the media start-up runner Feixue referred me to Xiaoyuan, a media start-upper, and Kira, a fashion studio owner. Feixue and Xiaoyuan cooperated in several business projects. Kira was introduced to Feixue by an investor who invested in both Kira's and Feixue's businesses, and Kira was also invited as a guest for Feixue's project. It shows that local networks and interaction mesh within the community of digital creative entrepreneurs in Shenzhen. The existing literature has shown that other kinds of networks might exist in the start-up community as well, such as family, friends, alumni, colleagues, etc. (see Leung, 2019, Chapter 2).

When I recruited my interviewees, I either verbally explained my research to the potential participants, and explained them their rights and obligations, or I sent potential participants my project outline and content forms through WeChat for convenience. If they showed interest and were willing to join the project, I arranged the face-to-face interview which suited my interviewees most. In our face-to-face interview, I usually presented my interviewees with the printed project outline and consent forms at the beginning, and further explained to them while they read it, and told them that, if they agreed to be interviewed, they would need to sign the consent form. For ethical reasons, I have anonymised all of the interviewees by using pseudonymisation when writing up the thesis.

It is noteworthy that I encountered a government officer named Cheng, who refused to be recorded and only allowed me to take notes while interviewing. Cheng didn't give me specific reasons for this. I assume it is perhaps because I enrolled in an overseas institute, and there were risks that I may produce some "politically-sensitive" outcome. To some extent, it shows the cautious attitudes Chinese government officers have towards some academic research projects. Apart from this, I encountered one male participant named Jun, who refused to sign the consent form and refused to be recorded in our face-to-face interview, and finally decided to withdraw from my project before we started the interview. He told me that he welcomed me to have a conversation with him, but he felt uncomfortable to sign the official document and be recorded. In his PhD thesis on the publishing industry in China, Ren (2013) also mentions that some of his participants felt uncomfortable when asked to sign consent forms or be recorded. Ren assumes it is because the academic research in China does not have very restrictive requirements in terms of research ethics, thus people have limited awareness of ethical considerations. I believe the less restrictive ethical requirement in China's academia cannot fully explain why people without academic backgrounds feel so cautious when signing consent forms. Another interpretation as to why people feel cautious is related to their social status (such as a person with certain fame), their occupation/affiliation (such as government), as well as their own personality (would like to keep a low-profile).

A total of 31 interviews were carried out as face-to-face conversations during my fieldwork in China in 2019, including interviews with 18 women digital creative entrepreneurs, 11 practitioners in the digital creative industries (6 male entrepreneurs, 1 female practitioner, and 4 association managers), 3 academics and 1 government officer (Table 2 and 3). The interviews lasted from 1-6 hours each. Interviewing locations varied according to the interviewees' convenience and preference, with their offices, café and meeting rooms included. All the interviews have been recorded except Cheng, who only allowed me to take notes during our

interviews. After the formal interviews, I have kept in contact with several interviewees. Further discussions were carried out through WeChat, and phone calls when I was analysing the data from previous formal interviews and sought more detailed data concerning certain questions. The follow-up phone calls have been recorded. All the recordings have been transcribed and translated by the author with her best effort.

The interviewed women entrepreneurs work in a variety of fields in digital creative industries. In this study, most of them work in fields such as media and fashion. Among all 18 women digital creative entrepreneurs, 12 were aged less than 35 years old; 17 of them have university degrees, with 5 having an overseas education background. It shows similar age and education patterns with Chow (2019), who studies single women practitioners in the creative economy in Shanghai, as well as Lin (2022), who conducts research on middle-class urban women who work in the creative economy in Shanghai.

For the women digital creative entrepreneurs in this study, questions were asked about: (1) their personal background, including their age, education, and family information; (2) their entrepreneurship experience, including why and how they decided to become entrepreneurs in digital creative industries, as well as the critical people and events in this process; (3) their perceptions of gender on their entrepreneurship; (4) their perceptions on the ongoing digital transformations in the society and in the industries, as well as the celebration of technology, creativity and entrepreneurship in China. A more detailed list of questions can be found in Appendix A.

It is important to note here that it is not easy to specify the questions concerning women entrepreneurs' gendered experiences. Similar to Luo (2021), who conducts research on digital entrepreneurship and gender in Shenzhen, when asked "Do you have any disadvantages as you are a woman entrepreneur in digital creative industries", some interviewees replied "I don't think gender matters at work". For some time, I thought entrepreneurship in digital creative industries was so empowering that gender did not matter anymore. But I investigated further with more respondents and through more research methods such as observations, as well as engagement with literature, I gradually understand why some women participants said so and understand that I need to reflect more on their experience. In this sense, I would suggest that the following lessons and the triangulation method are important in this project: (1) recruiting as many diverse stakeholders as possible for in-depth interviews; (2) in-depth interviews are not enough for me to understand the whole picture; observation is important for me to understand the conditions women digital creative entrepreneurs are facing (see more on the "observation"

section in this chapter); (3) it is important to personalise the interview questions by combing the interviewees' experience (see more on the "document analysis" section in this chapter).

As for the remaining participants, questions were asked about their observations/experiences about digital creative industries, and their opinions on women practitioners within the digital creative industries.

Table 2

Information on women digital creative entrepreneur participants

No	Name	Age	Family status	Education	Fields	Origin / Working place
1	Yongying	53	Married with an adult child	Bachelor (industries economic management)	Digital visual design/2016	Qingyuan / Shenzhen
2	Heting	38	Married with a 7-year-old child	Bachelor	Incubator manager/2016	Wuhan / Wuhan
3	Li	41	Separated with a 7-year-old child	Bachelor	Gaming	Wuhan / wuhan
4	Rui	29	In relationship	Master (international relations)	Social media/2018	Anshan / Beijing
5	Yuanying	26	Single	Bachelor (international relations) with short overseas education experience	Digital short video/2015	Yanbian / Beijing
6	Jenny	28	Single	USA Master (electronic art)	VR art/2014	Beijing / USA-China
7	Xiaoyuan	36	Single	Bachelor (journalism and literature)	Digital content service/2018	Yulin / Shenzhen
8	Feixue	37	Married with a 12-year-old child	Occupational school (public relations)	Digital content service/2016	Chongqing / Shenzhen
9	Yang	29	Single	Master (media)	Digital content service/2017	Zhuhai / Shenzhen
10	Kira	30	In relationship	UK Master (media)	Fashion design/2018	Meizhou / Shenzhen
11	Liting	31	Divorced with a 6-year-old child	Bachelor (mirco-electronics)	STEAM education/2014	Shenzhen / Shenzhen
12	Xiaoli	30	In relationship	Bachelor (product design)	Online art gift trade/2019	Jinan / Shenzhen
13	Qi	26	Single	Bachelor	VR education/2016	Shenzhen / Shenzhen

<table>
<tr><td>14</td><td>Sandy</td><td>24</td><td>In relationship</td><td>Bachelor</td><td>Digital content service/2019</td><td>Hong Kong / Shenzhen</td></tr>
<tr><td>15</td><td>Minka</td><td>30</td><td>Single</td><td>USA Master (marketing)</td><td>Fashion design/2015</td><td>Chaoshan area / Shenzhen</td></tr>
<tr><td>16</td><td>Yafei</td><td>30</td><td>Married without children</td><td>Master (creative industries)</td><td>Art craft/2016</td><td>Shandong / Shenzhen</td></tr>
<tr><td>17</td><td>Xuanzi</td><td>Late 30s</td><td>Married with a 9-year-old child</td><td>Bachelor (computer)</td><td>New media entrepreneurship pedagogy/2015</td><td>Nanyang / Shenzhen</td></tr>
<tr><td>18</td><td>Yue</td><td>33</td><td>Single</td><td>France Bachelor (French)</td><td>Digital content service</td><td>Wulumuqi / Shenzhen</td></tr>
</table>

Table 3

Information on the participants other than women digital creative entrepreneurs

<table>
<tr><th>Categories</th><th>No.</th><th>Name</th><th>Gender</th><th colspan="2">Occupation</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="11">Practitioners in digital creative industries</td><td>1</td><td>Peng</td><td>male</td><td colspan="2">Founder of a VR gaming start-up</td></tr>
<tr><td>2</td><td>Cai</td><td>male</td><td colspan="2">Founder of a VR exhibition start-up</td></tr>
<tr><td>3</td><td>Zhuang</td><td>male</td><td colspan="2">Founder of a VR education start-up</td></tr>
<tr><td>4</td><td>Qiu</td><td>male</td><td colspan="2">Founder of a VR education start-up</td></tr>
<tr><td>5</td><td>YJZ</td><td>male</td><td colspan="2">Founder of a digital art start-up</td></tr>
<tr><td>6</td><td>Daxiong</td><td>male</td><td colspan="2">Founder of a VR gaming company</td></tr>
<tr><td>7</td><td>Yali</td><td>female</td><td colspan="2">Operating manager of a well-known internet company</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">8</td><td>Tan</td><td>male</td><td>Manager of an industrial association</td><td rowspan="2">In one interview</td></tr>
<tr><td>Rong</td><td>female</td><td>Deputy manager of an industrial association</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">9</td><td>He</td><td>female</td><td>Manager of a local creative industries association</td><td rowspan="2">In one interview</td></tr>
<tr><td>Liu</td><td>female</td><td>Manager of a local creative industries association</td></tr>
<tr><td>academics</td><td>10</td><td>Huang</td><td>male</td><td colspan="2">Professor of media</td></tr>
</table>

	11	Zhang	male	Program director of a creative industries program
	12	Wang	male	Director of a digital creative industries research institute
Government officer	13	Cheng	male	Local government officer in creative industries department (refused to be recorded)

4.2 Observations

With the aim to (1) immerse myself into the social, cultural and economic environment this project concerns, (2) triangulate the information I gained from in-depth interviews, and (3) get access to more potential interviewing participants, observation was adopted as a data collection method for this study. Observation studies "involve the systematic recording of observable phenomena or behaviour in a natural setting" (Gorman & Clayton, 2005, p. 40). This method has been used by some scholars in their empirical work (Leung, 2019; Liao, 2017; Pratt, 2000).

It is noteworthy that this method is particularly useful for this study in the sense that it provides me with raw material and enables me to overcome some information limitations I found from in-depth interviews, and to understand the existing problems better. Or, in other words, observation is used in this project as a triangulation to help explore and explain complex human behaviours, and to overcome the biases that arise from the use of in-depth interviews, thus offering a more balanced explanation to readers (see Noble & Heale, 2019).

As this research is not ethnographic, observation only accounts for a small part of the methodology. Nineteen observations were carried out during my fieldwork. These can be roughly divided into four categories: entrepreneurship and industries-oriented programs, women entrepreneurs-focused programs, government-oriented programs, and academic programs[21] (Table 4). In what follows, I explain these four types of observations in this study.

For the entrepreneurship and industries-oriented programs, I pay special attention to the following questions: (1) are there many female participants?; (2) are there many female speakers?; (3) how do people address women entrepreneurs or women digital creative entrepreneurs, or what are the attitudes towards them?; (4) who are the women entrepreneurs or women digital creative entrepreneurs? What are their backgrounds? What kind of businesses

[21] This is a rough categorization, as some programs would concern more than one category.

are they running? What are their expectations for joining these programs? Most of the time, I only observed, and sometimes I joined these programs through the Question & Answer sessions. The observations of these entrepreneurship and industries-oriented programs helped me familiarise myself with some key figures in the entrepreneurial environment and industrial environment, including the technologies, policies, international communications, domestic employment, as well as venture capital.

For the women entrepreneurs-focused programs (Figure 1), I paid special attention to the following points: (1) the demographics of the women participants and speakers; (2) the topics that were raised in the programs; (3) how women participants or speakers interact with each other; and (4) the possibility of recruiting some of the participants or speakers as my interviewees. On most occasions, I remained completely as an observer. The women entrepreneurs-focused programs helped me to better understand some main concerns for women entrepreneurs in general entrepreneurship and women entrepreneurs in digital creative industries. These concerns include: the feminine characteristics and the competitive industries; work and life balance; women and the technological future; women's health; as well as women and contemporary culture in China.

For the government-oriented programs, such as the policy discussions in creative economy and some government-initiated exhibitions, I paid special attention to the following points: (1) how do the government officers propose new policies?; (2) do government officers take gender into consideration?; (3) how does the government publicise itself and does it take social justice into consideration? For the government-oriented programs, I was an observer. These programs helped me to understand the policy agenda, particularly in Shenzhen.

As for the academic programs, my roles were both participant and observer. These programs offered me: (1) the opportunity to understand the research agenda and industrial process and progress in domestic China; (2) the opportunity to grasp the research agenda in an international level; (3) the opportunity to further discuss my research with academic peers.

Notes were taken after each observation. I also took pictures, archived the news reports, and collected brochures to enrich my data. As in the majority of the observations, the environment was noisy, and recording was not used, except during the Women Techmaker Shenzhen and 2019 Brand Women Summit where the environment allowed.

It is worth noting that there are some limitations for my observations. For reasons such as limited preparation time, limited public information of these activities, and limited personal

networks, I was not always well-prepared in terms of knowing the best time to observe, as well as recruiting the best candidate to interview. It serves as a reminder that the pre-training is important for researchers who adopt the method of observation (Baker, 2006). Those observations, however, helped me to enrich my data. It enabled me to better understand the social, political and economic environments women digital creative entrepreneurs were in. Furthermore, it also revealed that gender was not a salient topic in the academic, political and industrial agenda in the context of China. Therefore, the gender dimension is under-explored in China's creative economy, and it calls for more examination in future studies.

Table 4

List of observations

No.	events	time	place
1	Qianhai cultural and creative policy discussion	11 April, 2019	Shenzhen
2	Women Techmaker Guangzhou	21 April, 2019	Guangzhou
3	Women Techmaker Shenzhen	27 April, 2019	Shenzhen
4	"Creative Labour in East Asia" academic workshop, with a tour to Bytedance	16-18 May, 2019	Beijing
5	2019 Brand Women Summit	23 May, 2019	Beijing
6	"*Pengcheng wenchuang*" Forum of digital cultural economy	11 June, 2019	Shenzhen
7	WeWork and YC alumni sharing	13 June, 2019	Shenzhen
9	Tour to Shenzhen New Media Art Festival	13 June, 2019	Shenzhen
9	Sandbox Immersive Festival	25 June, 2019	Qingdao
10	Shenzhen-Spain Startup Mixer Event	11 July, 2019	Shenzhen
11	Yomov VR internal experience and testing	14 July, 2019	Shenzhen
12	3D printing program in Shenzhen Open Innovation Lab	27 July, 2019	Shenzhen
13	Shenzhen Slush	8 August, 2019	Shenzhen
14	"Building personal brand" open course	10 August, 2019	Shenzhen
15	Litchi Makerspace	11 August, 2019	Shenzhen
16	2019 Global Conference on Women and Entrepreneurship	28 August, 2019	Hangzhou
17	SucSEED and female fashion creativity	20 September, 2019	Shenzhen

18	“She Power” designer sharing	27 October, 2019	Shenzhen
19	Maker Faire Shenzhen	9 November, 2019	Shenzhen

Figure 1. Example photo taken in the observation. 2019 Global Conference on Women and Entrepreneurship. Taken by the author on 28 August, 2019.

4.3 Document analysis

Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating both printed and electronic material (Bowen, 2009). Document analysis plays an important role in this research, as it not only provides valuable secondary data and materials, but also helps specify some interviewing questions in the in-depth interviews. A variety of documents have been analysed in this research. These secondary materials fall into three categories, namely government reports and policies, media coverage, and participants’ social media posts. I attach a sample list in Appendix B, below. The first one is the policies relating to entrepreneurship/women entrepreneurship, women development, as well as creative economy. This helps me to

understand political orientations towards gender, entrepreneurship and the creative economy, as the political factor is important in the context of China.

The second source is the relevant media coverage and articles, as well as printed/online materials I collected from observations. I have paid attention to the materials published by certain media, to name a few: 36Kr, who focuses on news in the industries such as technology, the creative economy, and retailing in China; and Sup China, a New York-based, China-focused news platform. I have also paid attention to the programs, brochures and public materials from my observations. These documents provided me with timely information and data on the features, problems and trends in the digital creative industries, women's roles in the industries, and some industrial practices. Due to the absence of up-to-date and in-depth documents in English language, this research mainly uses the data from Chinese language, though priority was given to English documents as much as possible for better communications with the readers for this research.

The third source is the participants' social media posts, mainly in WeChat, which is the most frequently used social media platform among my participants, and it is also the main vehicle for contacting my informants. I went through all the posts in my participants' WeChat before we started the formal interview with note-taking and specifying questions. It has helped me to better understand my participants' background and better specify my interviewing questions. As mentioned earlier, in my interviews, I found it was not easy to specify the questions concerning gendered experiences for the women digital creative entrepreneurs, thus I could not get rich data as I expected. However, the participants' social media posts helped me to understand their experience and smoothed the communication between the participants and me. For example, instead of asking one of my participants, Jenny, "Do you face any disadvantages as a woman entrepreneur?", I asked her "Why do you play an active role in the public activities and talk about gender" after I saw several posts that she attended the public activities to raise up people's awareness of women's conditions in the industries. This question helped to motivate the participant to bring out more about the contexts they were in, how they felt and why they behaved in certain way.

Overall, my research does not aim to present a whole picture of women's experiences in this cohort, but it is intended to present some key aspects of social realities that my participants face in their lived experience. I tried to recruit a variety of stakeholders and adopt multiple research methods to collect data. However, because of various limitations such as the limited budget and limited fieldwork time, there were several limitations with my research. Apart from the

limitations mentioned above, I would suggest that future studies take the following into consideration: (1) as this research does not distinguish the characteristics between different industries within digital creative industries, future studies could focus on specific industry such as gaming and new media; (2) as this research was mainly carried out in Shenzhen, and some existing research has been carried out in Shanghai (Chow, 2019; Lin, 2022), future studies could examine gender and the creative economy in cities such as Beijing.

4.4 Ethical considerations

This project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Office at Curtin University (approval number HRE2019-0087). As required by Curtin University's guidelines for ethical research, I prepared a project outline, as well as consent forms in both English and Chinese for my interviewees. The project outline not only introduces the research itself, but also states the obligations and rights of the interviewees, such as the right to refuse to be recorded and their involvement will not be monetarily compensated. The data have been stored in a Curtin registered computer and backup was stored in a hard drive issued by Curtin University.

Chapter 5: The contested creativity autonomy and the intervening of the state

In order to illuminate the complex experience women digital creative entrepreneurs are facing, in what follows, I separate their lived experiences thematically, and shed light on three examples of the positive rhetoric referenced consistently by government, media and entrepreneurs themselves, namely creativity, meritocracy and flexibility. This should not be taken to imply that these themes exhaust the range of women digital creative entrepreneurs' lived experience; rather, I have separated these categories for heuristic purposes, in the hope of illuminating some interesting aspects of women digital creative entrepreneurs' experience. In this chapter, I focus on the rhetoric of creativity, and see how it is manifested through women' entrepreneurship in the digital creative industries.

The state plays an important role in setting the agenda for the development of entrepreneurship, digital creative industries, as well as the liberation of women in the context of China. It seems that the booming digital creative industries, especially when they are co-opted into the state's promotion of Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation, are expected to enable "everyone" to get involved. According to the government and some commercial institutions, women, traditionally positioned as the socially disadvantaged, may be able to take these opportunities and set up their own businesses in the digital economy to further improve their social status (Chou, 2019; The State Council Information Office of China, 2019). However, it is unclear as to what extent this might hold true to women digital creative entrepreneurs if we examine the current situation of women entrepreneurs in China's digital creative industries, especially when we have a particular look at the long-going economy-centric and technology-favouring policies, as well as the on-going ideological shaping of China's culture field. It is within this context that makes it important to examine the role of the state for this study, thus better understanding how the rhetoric of creativity takes effect in the life of women entrepreneurs in the digital creative industries.

From the data collected from my fieldwork, the ideology of creativity has attracted some women to embrace entrepreneurship in the emerging industries. However, I argue in this chapter that women entrepreneurs' contribution to the digital creative industries are largely un-acknowledged by the state which focusses on technology. Apart from this, the ideological constraints in the production of China's creative economy also make women digital creative entrepreneurs' experience precarious creativity. In such a context, some women adopt the strategy of demonstrating nationalism to carve out more space for their entrepreneurship in China's digital creative industries. That is, they identify the points where the benefits of the

nation and their own passion in business meet. Women's digital creative entrepreneurship, in tandem with the state ideology and institutional regulations and constraints, contributes to the development of China's digital creative economy while their cultural production is permeated with negotiation.

5.1 Putting creativity to entrepreneurship

The creativity provided by entrepreneurship in digital creative industries is particularly attractive for women who desire to escape the boring side of fixed working patterns, and seek ways whereby they can fully exert their creativity. Some of my participants, before they set up their start-ups, have had employment in the creative economy. However, some participants considered their employment boring and meaningless, and preferred to look for more opportunities to realise their creativity. For example, when Minka, a 30-year-old fashion studio owner with a Bachelor's degree from China and a Master's degree from the United States, was asked about her motivations to be entrepreneurial, she explained:

> I felt bored in the company. When I came back to China [after finishing the Master's in 2012], I worked in a fashion company. I felt what I did was just going to work and getting off work every day. There were more than 100 staff in the fashion company then, it was a medium-size company. I felt everyone was busy. People worked mechanically *(jixie de gongzuo)*. I even felt that the fashion company didn't do well was because its designers had no passion for design.

The fixed schedule in the employment made Minka feel bored. In her eyes, becoming an entrepreneur empowered herself to fully express her passion for design: she could work at her own pace, and demonstrate her understanding of fashion instead of doing what the bosses asked her to do. In other words, being entrepreneurial offered Minka greater autonomy to be creative in the industries than what the standard jobs in the creative economy could offer.

The creativity ideology is manifested more obviously in Kira, the owner of fashion studio. Kira is very proud of herself that she is delivering something new and refreshing through her fashion brand. Kira mentioned:

> I think I am an entrepreneur as I am doing something new, I am creating a new field, whether it is just a [fashion] brand or something else, and it doesn't exist before . . . . It's really from 0 to 1. In my field, I don't want Chanel, I don't want Givenchy, I want me, I want a brand named Kira. Once people see it, they would say it is created by Kira.

In Kira's words, she is driven by creativity. Being entrepreneurial in the digital creative industries gives her the opportunity to build up her own brand. In this way, digital creative

entrepreneurship appeared to have promised a creative lifestyle for women who seek pleasure from their creative work. However, as will be illustrated below, women entrepreneurs may find it difficult to carve out a space for their creativity autonomy.

5.2 The technology-favouring state ideology and women entrepreneurs' invisibility

Over the past few decades, the Chinese government has invested heavily in technologies, implementing policies conducive for technology development. The state's promotion on "technology" has helped China to enter the digital society, which has provided some opportunities for women to set up their own business in the digital creative industries. Some women digital creative entrepreneurs for this study, for example, told me that China's evolving digital technologies infrastructure has facilitated their entrepreneurship. Kira, the fashion studio owner, told me that the new digital technologies helped lower the barriers for her to start up her own business.

> Compared with the traditional clothing-design companies, I opened my first "shop" on WeChat "mini program" (*xiao chengxu*)[22] as I didn't have so much money and human resources to invest in the physical shops.

Throughout the history of modern China, technology has always been part of China's modernisation drive, and science and technology policies have played a significant role in bolstering the power of the state (M. Ji, 2015). In its reform and opening up period, China launched the state-led and market-driven digital revolution, pursing the rapid development of ICTs in an attempt for China not only to catch with the West, but also to "leapfrog" it into the digital age (Zhao, 2007). Over the past few years, we have seen an escalation of discourse on "network sovereignty" (*wangluo zhuquan*), "state information security" (*guojia xinxi an'quan*), "indigenous innovation" (*zizhu chuangxin*), and "mastery of core technologies" (*zhangwo hexin jishu*) at the basic industrial development strategy and technological policy levels (see Zhao, 2010). Such techno-nationalism—the pursuit of technological prowess by a nation in the context of international competition—as Qiu (2010) states, has emerged as a prominent institutional and cultural formation in China.

As mentioned in the background information in Chapter 2, the digital creative industries were proposed in the context that China was seeking to upgrade its economy through technology application and advancement. It implies that digital creative industries, as part of creative

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[22] "Mini program" in WeChat can provide a native app-like experience without leaving the WeChat interface. It helps to enhance user's convenience for low frequency interactions and social sharing, and it can free up memory space on smart phones.

industries, is primarily underpinned by digital technologies under the state ideology. Or to put it another way, it evolves in parallel with the development of digital technologies. This can also explain why the government, from the central government to the local government, puts much emphasis on technology's innovation and application when directing resources to digital creative industries.

The government's preference for technology-oriented business in the digital creative industries is echoed by Yongying, the founder of a digital technologies exhibition company whom I interviewed in my fieldwork. Yongying joined a computer graphics company as the manager in 2009, which was very successful at the time with its computer graphics technologies being adopted by the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. Later on, Yongying chose to leave the company where she had stable employment, and decided to take up entrepreneurship practices with the aim to gain more material rewards. In 2016, Yongying was invited to set up a new branch of a digital creative design company, which is how she started up her business when I met her in 2019. When asked why she took up the challenge to set up the new branch company, Yongying said:

> When I worked for the previous company, we had got more than 20 million RMB government subsidies then. This counts as the net profit, as these subsidies were used for Research & Development (R&D), they were the voluntary funding from the government.
>
> The current company I am working for has a lot R&D activities, and what they do matches what I did before. I know the government can support our R&D. The mother company promises to provide me with technological support and know-how, so I have stories to tell to the government and get support from them.

In her previous employment, Yongying was responsible for dealing with government affairs, and she understood that the government was enthusiastic about supporting technology research and development. The "stories" mentioned by Yongying means that the technical strength her company fits into the government's needs to develop and apply cutting-edge technologies. Based on Yongying's experience, the government invested heavily into digital technologies and provided millions of RMB funding to her previous company. The government's eagerness to support technological innovation and application, and its favourable policies for technology research and development, boosted Yongying's confidence to take up the challenge and set up a branch company.

Moreover, despite the rhetoric of technology innovation and application in the state ideology that is manifested through the development of China's digital creative industries and Yongying's story, it is the women digital creative entrepreneurs' contribution that has been largely un-

acknowledged by the state ideology. The technology-oriented environment from the state ideology in digital creative industries exposes women digital creative entrepreneurs to a precarious position: a lack of recognition from the state. Women who also actively embrace the digital creative entrepreneurship and seek to carve out their own spaces in digital creative industries have been largely invisible to the state ideology. Women's left-behind position in China's technology undertaking, as I find in this research, puts them in a disadvantaged position to gain the state's recognition for being critical contributors to the digital creative industries.[23] It is in this way that the state's emphasis on technology shapes a source of precarity for women entrepreneurs in the digital creative industries.

When I started the fieldwork in March 2019, it was not easy for me to recruit women entrepreneurs as my participants. No one responded to me after I posted the recruitment notice on social media. In the hope of gaining access to potential participants, I visited one of the industry associations in NS District[24] in Shenzhen. The industry association was founded in 2018, with a particular focus on promotion of culture and technology. According to the two female managers that I interviewed, the association was initiated by the local government as it wanted to be an important centre in Shenzhen, where it acted as a model for "using technology to lead culture, and integrating culture and technology" (*yong keji yinling wenhua, jiang wenhua yu keji ronghe*) in developing its creative economy. In this sense, the industry association is an institution with government endorsement. Thus, to some extent, it represents the government's ideology to strengthen the technology power and integrate culture and technology.

In our interview, I asked the two female managers whether they were familiar with any women entrepreneurs in the digital creative industries, so that I could interview them for this project in the future. One of the managers said: "I feel women entrepreneurs are not in a great number". The other manager added: "Given the consideration of NS's situation, generally speaking, the [digital creative] industries are still dominated by males."

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[23] Scholars also pay attention to the other factors, such as women entrepreneurs' affiliation to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) membership to examine their business success (Chen, et al., 2022). In my fieldwork, Heting, an incubator manager, confessed to me that her CCP-related membership was important for her business. Heting is part of China's New Social Stratum Association *(xinde shehuijieceng renshi lianyihui).* According to Heting, her CCP-related membership helped her to get access to the government officers and get support from them, which was important for her incubator business.

[24] NS is one of the local districts in Shenzhen city. As I have written in the "research setting" section in the background chapter, Shenzhen is one of the forerunners in China's digital creative industries (see Chapter 2). Within Shenzhen, NS plays a leading role in terms of digital creative industries (Sun, 2021). It is where some of the giant Internet companies such as Tencent are located. In this sense, NS and its digital creative economy is representative of China.

To understand women's lack of visibility in NS, it is important to understand NS's path of "using technology to lead culture, and integrating culture and technology" in developing its creative economy. Technology has been attached with great importance in developing its creative economy, especially in the digital age by the state (see The State Council of China, 2016). NS's adoption of using technology to lead culture, and integrating culture and technology, is, first and foremost, consistent with the statecraft of pursuing a leading place in terms of science and technology. In this sense, those digital creative entrepreneurs who make contributions to the technology innovation and application are favoured by the government.

The government's emphasis on technological strength in the creative economy and the invisibility of women digital creative entrepreneurs are echoed in my interview with a government officer Cheng, from the Office of the Development of Cultural Industries (*wenhua fazhan bangongshi*) of NS District government. In my interview with Cheng—one of the senior government officials who had witnessed the rise of creative economy in NS—he introduced me to a book entitled *Feng Qi NS* (*Wind Comes from NS*). Of significance, this book details how NS has become a role model in choosing the path of integrating technology and culture (*wenhua he keji ronghe*) in the development of its creative economy at the national level. Unsurprisingly, among all 22 representative entrepreneurs in NS's creative economy that this book has referred to, there are no women. We can see the male names such as Pony Ma, the previous IT programmer and the current CEO of the Internet giant Tencent, and Frank Wang, who is an engineer and also the founder of DJI, a global leader in commercial drones. In such a book publicising the achievement of NS's creative economy, there is no place for women digital creative entrepreneurs. It shows, to some extent, women digital creative entrepreneurs experience a lack of recognition by the state in its drive to elevate China's place as a technology superpower.

For much of China's history, women were seldom associated with technologies, and were almost absent from historical archives except for their involvement in textile and reproductive technologies (Zhang & Liu, 2015). Since China's reform and opening up initiative in the early 1980s, women have flooded into the newly industrialised areas where a large number were hired as cheap and compliant labour in the labour-intensive factories, such as toy factories (Pun, 2005). Since the 2000s, following the Internet boom in China, women are under-represented in the digital technology field. According to a survey of more than 550,000 IT programmers conducted by Proginn (2021)—one of the biggest online platforms for IT programmers in China—women only represent 6.1% of IT programmers. Women's under-representation in the

critical technological fields means their interests are not well-represented in the government's policy-making.

Apart from this, the gender disparity in technology education not only makes it hard for women to contribute to the digital creative industries in terms of the technology innovation favoured by the government, but it also impacts on women's career choices and attitudes. Due to the factors such as socialised gendered norms within people's values, education system and market preference, female students are discouraged from STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) areas in China (Yang & Gao, 2021). In this way, women lack science and technology education training, thus impacting on women's career choices in the digital creative industries.

An example comes from a young female graduate student. I met her in a VR game experience event held by one of my male participants. When asked whether she would like to set up her own business in digital creative industries, instead of giving me a "yes" or "no" answer, she replied to me in a much more detailed way. In her account, she said that if she could be part of a start-up in the digital creative industries, she would only be able to do the story-writing, as she was not interested in technologies and did not have any technical skills, so she felt she could not manage any technological job. This female graduate student further explained that "boys" loved technology and are better at it, while girls were better at liberal arts. The gender disparity in STEM education has greatly impacted on women's attitudes towards technology and influenced their career choices in the digital creative industries (explained further in "The reproduction of gendered work segregation" in Chapter 6).

The state's ideology on technology innovation has greatly neglected women digital creative entrepreneurs' contribution to the industries. Moreover, working in the digital creative industries that are spanning the boundaries between technology and creativity, women entrepreneurs, especially those who mainly work on providing creative services instead of products, feel more uncertainty and devaluation as greater emphasis is being placed on the technical side of industries by the state. Liting, for example, raised her concerns around creativity and innovation. Among all 18 women entrepreneur participants, Liting, the owner of a maker space in Shenzhen, is the only participant with a technology education background: she studied micro-electronics in her graduate study. Her education background helped her quickly become one of the pioneers in China's maker movement[25]. As a representative of China's maker

[25] Maker culture is a contemporary subculture that is a technology-based extension of DIY (Do it Yourself) culture. Makers use tools and open-source hardware such as 3D printing and lasering to create new things or tinker with existing ones, and they gather together in makerspaces or hackerspaces to share their ideas, tools and skillset (Dougherty, 2012). In the late 2000s and early 2010s, maker movement has come to

education, Liting received a number of opportunities to travel between China and America, as well as China and Europe to participate in the global maker movement[26]. Liting is aware of the Chinese government's favouring of technology, and thinks this is one of China's advantages. Liting said:

> The hardware (*yingjian*) in Shenzhen, I talk about it everywhere I go. In one of the conferences held in Buckingham Palace in London, I said, "have you ever considered that you could learn from [maker] education in Shenzhen? The [maker] education in Shenzhen is probably not the best, however, the hardware resources help its [maker] education evolve rapidly in Shenzhen" . . . . [In China], you would get a lot of resources to start, then some would die and some can survive. The surviving ones can be filtered out.

The government invests significant money and other resources to technological innovation and technology-oriented businesses. By contrast, it is the creativity side of digital creative industries that has been largely underemphasised. Liting lamented the underemphasis of creativity in digital creative industries. According to Liting:

> [Developing technology] is an advantage. However, the problem or the challenge is that people don't have enough understanding of the soft values (*ruanxing de jiazhi*)[27]. This is a common worry among the companies like mine. . . . There is not enough respect to the soft services *(ruanxing de fuwu)*. In creative economy, you are expected to make a robot if you are associated with technologies. It is very hard for you to explain to people that it is the mindset that matters. . . . But how can you explain it, it is so abstract. It is hardly affordable for start-ups like us to educate customers, that's why a lot of start-ups die. . . . Once I was invited by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) of the United States to a high-profile conference, people around me included a PhD holder of Cornell University. They spoke highly of my project, a high level of recognition that I could not possibly get in China.

In Liting's account, the creativity side or the symbolic side of the digital creative industries has been much neglected while the technology capital is highly sought after by the state ideology and market environment. Lacking in support of human-natured creativity and symbolic value is a common worry among some digital creative start-ups. This is because most of the resources have been directed to digital development, either to serve the state's demands to fulfil a

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China, and it reached its peak when China's central government initiated the Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation campaign to boost individual entrepreneurship in 2015 (Huang, et al., 2018).

[26] In her paper *Making in China: is maker culture changing China's creative landscape*, Wen (2017) investigates the kinship between the maker movement and China's creative economy, she raises the question as to whether China's creative economy is turning to a technological future. Her paper is thought-provoking for me to think about the nature of digital creative industries in the context of China. The digital innovation and technological disruption are attached with great emphasis by the Chinese government.

[27] In the context of my interview with Liting, the "soft values" and "soft services" refer to creativity and innovation.

technology superpower ambition, or to meet the needs of the capitalist accumulation. In this sense, those women digital creative entrepreneurs who work mostly on symbolic goods and services—for example, media, design and fashion—are less visible to governments who emphasise technological innovation and application.

Against the backdrop of the state's emphasis on technologies, women digital creative entrepreneurs are in less favorable positions in the technology-focusing state ideology. For this reason, women's contribution to the digital creative industries is often invisible and un-acknowledged, which makes women digital creative entrepreneurs carry a tremendous amount of stress without proper recognition from the state ideology.

5.3 The precarious creativity

Yongying, the owner of a digital technology exhibition company, was the first digital creative entrepreneur that I interviewed. When asked about the difference between the male and female entrepreneurs in the industries, Yongying stated that, "What the female entrepreneurs have in common, I feel, is that female entrepreneurs have *qinghuai* (sentiment or feelings), *zeren* (responsibility), and *dandang* (reliability). . . . They enjoy their work".

Having grown up in socialist China, I am no stranger to what Yongying mentioned in the interview: *qinghuai*, *zeren*, and *dandang.* With a connotation of responsibility, reliability and devotion, these words have become common themes that have underpinned digital start-ups in China (Xiao et al., 2020). In my following interviews with the rest of the participants and some observations, it was not rare to hear such words like *qinghuai*, *zeren*, and *dandang*. It is interesting to ask: why is it that, in the digital creative industries that claim to be free, creative and individual, such concepts as *qinghuai* (sentiment), *zeren* (responsibility) and *dandang* (reliability) are underscored by the digital creative entrepreneurs? What does it tell us about China's digital creative industries, especially when it comes to "creativity", a core factor that enables new businesses to emerge? Through my following fieldwork, I gradually found some answers.

An example comes from Rui, a 29-year-old freelancer who started up an online knowledge community which encouraged young people to work together and build up online knowledge maps. When we discussed how she got the idea to kick off such a project, Rui said:

> Young people are full of possibilities. . . . What young people embrace now would impact his/her future. . . . So I hope we can provide something that is positive, like "positive

> energy" (*zheng nengliang*). I hope our [online knowledge] community can provide a fair environment, where the young people can feel they are fairly treated. . . . Another reason is that young people represent the future. They are the mainstream in the next 10-20 years . . .

According to Rui, she has concerns (*guan qie*)[28] for the society, and she would love to make the society better. This motivates her to create more fair opportunities for young people, mainly because they will be the backbone of Chinese society in the next decades. In Rui's account, young people can upskill themselves and enjoy a fairer working environment by getting involved in her online projects. Using such ideas as "social responsibility", "youth-friendly" and "the nation's future", Rui's online community has attracted more than 2,000 volunteers by the time of the interview in May 2019.[29]

Indeed, it is not rare to see urban professionals associate their work with social responsibility and national progress in the context of China (see Hoffman, 2006; Hoffman, 2010). Hoffman (2006), for instance, observes that young professionals retain social responsibility and patriotism when they could autonomously choose their jobs instead of receiving direct state job assignments upon graduation in the post-Mao period. In her interrogation of "patriotic professionalism" in late-socialist China, Hoffman (2006) points out that patriotic professionalism becomes a new technique of governing in late-socialist China, and is part of the subjectivity of young professionals. Hoffman's insightful observation touches upon the role of the state in the subject formation process for young professionals. Likewise, the state also plays an important role in setting the agenda for China's creative economy, thus shaping cultural production as well as creative workers' subjectivity.

Since the 2000s, the state has played an active role in enacting policies and strategies to develop cultural industries and the creative economy in China. The creative economy has been folded into China's repositioning in the global economy—moving from "made in China" to "created in China" (Keane, 2006). The creative economy, in contemporary China, cannot be simply understood in the sense of commerce, it also serves as a tool to elevate China's soft power, as well as to restructure the economy by harnessing the economic value of culture and converging culture with technologies (Keane, 2004, 2010, 2016a; Keane & Chen, 2019). Therefore, creativity has moved beyond the connotations of individual traits and revenue generation which are

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[28] *Guan qie* mentioned by Rui means that she cares about the societal development of China very much.
[29] It is important to note that all the youth volunteers work for free. Rui's online community project was not profitable by the time I interviewed her in May 2019. However, according to Rui, she would love to seek means to make this project profitable. By the time I did the follow-up interview in August 2020, Rui had established cooperation with some universities in Beijing where she introduced the outcomes of the online community project to some universities, thus as an attempt to make money.

commonly seen in the Westernised context, but is instead incorporated into its political governance of practitioners in the creative economy (see Lin, 2019; Lin & de Kloet, 2019; Wang, 2004).

In my fieldwork, some women entrepreneurs shared with me the significance of conforming to the mainstream political ideology when producing creative content. The short-form video company start-upper Yuanying, for example, told me her reflections on a Master's program she was taking part in when we met in 2019:

> I think I've learnt a lot from the program. I feel China's media industry, to some extent, is the mouthpiece of the state and Communist Party. Some WeMedia[30] entrepreneurs, they think they have good writing skills, and they become aggressive in their comments on the things around them. This is not smart. Because speaking from China's political system, you need to do something that is "positive energy" (*zheng nengliang*), or do something that is to the state's benefits. You need to propagate very correct values. Mimeng, for instance, is a good example. How popular and successful she was before, but now her media channel has been blocked.[31] It shows that it is better to stick to the mainstream political ideology in China.

In Yuanying's account, conveying politically correct values in the creative content is a matter of life and death for practitioners in China's media industry. As the leader who is responsible for the development of the start-up, it is important for an entrepreneur to understand the censorship, or the "elephant in the room", and place great weight on political ideology and regulation in their entrepreneurship.

What Yuanying has mentioned brings to the fore the state's control of the production in digital creative industries, and showcases that the so-called creativity is contested in the context of China. In the Western context, creativity can entail the "artistic sensibility and practice", as well as "the agonistic struggle with the existing order" (O'Connor & Gu, 2006, p. 273). The freedom to create and produce, as Keane (2016b) argues in his interrogation of China's creative industries, exists in tandem with a system of regulation and control as the cultural production is still visibly controlled by the state.

This kind of cultural production control by the state is echoed by one of my male participants, Daxiong, a male start-upper working in the field of VR. When I met him in his office in April 2019,

[30] Also known as "self media" (*zi meiti*) in China, where individuals use communication platforms to produce text, video or audio content, thus attracting internet users to build impact. It has the potential to gain revenue.
[31] Mimeng, previously China's "social media queen" with more than 13 million followers, shutdown her social media accounts on the platforms in 2019 as the content she and her team produced violated the law to post healthy content and disseminate positive values.

he was working on a project applying VR technology to a local commercial theme park. In Daxiong's accounts, the local government welcomed his start-up as they were very happy to see that the theme park embraced VR, a cutting-edge technology in many government officers' eyes. However, while being aware that some VR effects were very hard, or even impossible to be produced because the technology itself was not mature enough at that stage, Daxiong still proposed some ambitious plans, just because "the government likes to hear this". It is in this way that Daxiong could secure his business and get the full support from the government. However, Daxiong's creativity autonomy is also undermined by the government's control.

Exemplified by Yuanying and Daxiong, the precariousness of expression affects the digital creative entrepreneurs in China. It impacts on the cultural content or services digital creative entrepreneurs produce through their work. Importantly, it is necessary for the entrepreneurs to take the institutional regulation and political ideology into consideration when doing entrepreneurship. It is in this way that the nationalism, to some extent, has been deployed by some women digital creative entrepreneurs in pursuit of the social and economic benefits, which could be considered as a compromise between the state and commercial considerations, as well as individual inspiration.

An example comes from Feixue, the runner of a media company.[32] She was working on a project named "Super M" when we met in 2019. This project included a series of interviews of working professional mums. Before starting on the Super M project, Feixue, who worked previously as a reporter, had tried to produce content on ventures, philanthropy, and entertainment. However, all of these trials failed to give her start-up a strong competitive edge over other companies, and Feixue felt "lost" in finding the right direction for her start-up. When asked about her motivations to do the Super M project, Feixue told me her story. According to her, the turning point happened in 2017, when she had some deep conversations with her dying mother. Her mother shared with Feixue her life story of being a wife, a mother and an entrepreneur. The conversation between Feixue and her mother struck Feixue with the new direction of her own entrepreneurship. Based on her own experience as "woman" and "mum", as well as what the market needed, Feixue thought there existed some business opportunities by producing media content related to working professional mums and promoting the idea that women could be empowered.

[32] Feixue's case reiterates the significance of entrepreneurial storytelling in the entrepreneurship process. Entrepreneurial storytelling helps new ventures to attract resources and establish its legitimacy (Garud, et al., 2014). As for future studies, more attention could be paid to how entrepreneurial stories are crafted in the creative economy (see Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001).

In my fieldwork, Feixue creates a narrative to celebrate the national development and the power of Chinese women, thus further legitimating her entrepreneurship. In Feixue's terms:

> China's economy ranks second in the world, and it is obvious to see it from the data and figures. But how can you make sense of China's soft power? It can be told from the stories of ordinary people. Imagine 20 years later, who would be the most active people in this society? That would be the growing children and newly-born ones. Who are the most important supporters and guides for them? That would be their mums. What kind of situations are those mums facing? What kind of support does the society provide for those mums? How do they see their lives and themselves? No one probes into these questions.

Through this inspiring project, Feixue had access to some successful professional women, including women officials from the local All-China Women Federation. These networks, helped Feixue to draw on resources, and some business opportunities came through the networks established through the Super M project, thus making Feixue and her media start-up visible.

From what Feixue explained, the reason for why she was working on the project relating to working professional mothers, showcases that Feixue is not only motivated by gaining material rewards, or satisfying the market demands, but also by her own lived experience. She capitalised on her own gendered lived experience as well as her mother's, and started a project targeting women. She associated the development of women to the soft power of China, and thought that women's progress indicated the increasing soft power of China, thus embodying her nationalist sentiment. The narrative therefore serves to promote Feixue's Super M project by associating it with a national development and women's improving status, as well as brand herself with individual inspiration. It also reminds us of what Yiu Fai Chow mentioned in his research on single women creative practitioners. Chow (2019) proposes that it is necessary to look beyond the concerns of precarity or exploitation, and have an understanding of the sense of achievement experienced by these women practitioners.

Likewise, such nationalism can also be found in Liao (2021), who studies *Wang Hong*, young celebrities and entrepreneurs selling fashion products. As Liao (2021) finds, combining a salute to the power of the nation with a call to engage in consumerist behaviour, *Wang Hong* "evoke a consumer identity that goes far beyond consumption to constitute a badge of honour" (pp. 678–679) by adopting the nationalist narrative to celebrate the national triumph, technology and individual aspiration.

In Feixue's case, rooted in their lived experience, she has adopted the nationalist sentiment to further legitimate her entrepreneurship and highlight her entrepreneurship. The adoption of the language of nationalist sentiment in their entrepreneurial stories helps her start-up to fit into

the state's regulation of production in China's creative economy. The nationalist narratives do not undermine the branding of her work as creative. Rather, the combination of her own lived experience and nationalist sentiment helps brand her as entrepreneurial and empowered, and maximises her social capital and material rewards.

The institutional regulation and political ideology have exposed women digital creative entrepreneurs to precarious creativity, where their creative autonomy is constrained by the political and institutional conditions, thus bringing them insecurity and uncertainty. However, instead of simply viewing the precarious creativity as wholly negative, it also provides an alternative space for women digital creative entrepreneurs to articulate themselves and capitalise on their lived experience. Rooting their entrepreneurship in their lived experience, some women resort to the nationalist sentiment to brand themselves as entrepreneurial and empowered. In doing so, it is possible for women digital creative entrepreneurs to maximise their social capital, material rewards and their freedom of choice in the context of China. However, it also contains the impossibility for women digital creative entrepreneurs to fully enjoy their creative autonomy in such a precarious creative context.

5.4. Conclusions

In this chapter, I shed light on how the ideology of creativity is manifested among women entrepreneurs in the emerging digital creative industries. The narrative of creativity has attracted some women into the industries. However, in the context of China, the creativity narrative is largely shaped by the state. The digital creative industries concept was proposed at a time when China was experiencing an economic downturn and sought to restructure its economy. It is in this way that technology is highlighted in the digital creative industries by state ideology. Women's long-term under-representation in China's technological undertakings, however, makes it hard for women entrepreneurs to be acknowledged by the state for their contribution to the technology-driven industries, thus putting them in a disadvantaged and less-favourable, or precarious place.

Furthermore, China's cultural governance and political ideology influences women entrepreneurs' production in the digital creative economy, and serves as an important part of the precarious creativity that they are facing. From my fieldwork, some women digital creative entrepreneurs have adopted the nationalist narrative in their entrepreneurial story telling. As such, the meaning-making process of demonstrating nationalist sensitivities, on the one hand,

showcases a strategy for women digital creative entrepreneurs to secure their business and seek to maximise their social capital and material gains in a context where the precariousness of expression effects all practitioners in China's creative economy; on the other hand, it opens up an alternative space for women digital creative entrepreneurs to articulate themselves and make their entrepreneurial stories heard.

Chapter 6: The illusion of meritocracy and the masculine nature of digital creative entrepreneurship in China

The creative economy is depicted as open, inclusive and egalitarian. With a rapid surge in the growth of digital technologies especially digital platforms, new business models are brought to creative industries, and new groups of entrepreneurs are emerging (Cunningham & Flew, 2019). In this way, China's emerging digital creative industries are considered to make the creator network (*chuangyi zhe wangluo*) possible, where digital technologies can empower grassroots individuals to be creative through "learning from doing" (Huang & Xiang, 2017). However, despite the grand rhetoric of digital creative entrepreneurship, openness, inclusiveness and meritocracy are rare, especially for women digital creative entrepreneurs.

Based on my empirical evidence, the entrepreneurship in the digital creative industries is gendered. The masculine nature of digital creative entrepreneurship means that: (1) women entrepreneurs are under-represented in China's digital creative industries; (2) women digital creative entrepreneurs are treated as inferior leaders compared to their male counterparts; and (3) gendered division of work exists in digital creative start-ups. The study finds that women entrepreneurs are affected by the masculine norms and patriarchal constraints, which have continued to trivialise women's roles and marginalise their contributions to the industries. The gendered digital creative entrepreneurship becomes a pressure point for women digital creative entrepreneurs due to the low levels of leadership, devaluation of work, the reproduction of gendered division of work, and work-life imbalances.

6.1 Under-representation of women entrepreneurs in China's digital creative industries

Confirmed by much of the extant literature (Cooke & Xiao, 2021; Nandi, 2018; Peng, 2020), business sectors are dominated by men in China. Male entrepreneurs have secured the majority of the most powerful roles in business. There is no specific data on the number of entrepreneurs in digital creative industries and its gender ratio. However, based on my fieldwork observations, it is safe to argue that the most powerful roles in digital creative industries are predominantly occupied by men. The male-domination within China's digital creative industries was echoed by Sandy's experience. Sandy, founder of a social media App, shared with me one of her experiences in an internet conference. According to Sandy, there were about 30 C-s (CEO, CFO, COO, CTO etc.) who took part in the conference. Unsurprisingly, the majority of them were men, except Sandy and another woman. In the group picture session, Sandy was invited to stand in the centre. She recalled: "Generally speaking, as the junior, I should stand at the side of the

picture. The rest are all bosses from companies bigger than mine. However, I was asked to stand in the centre."

In Sandy's understanding, surrounded by bosses from bigger companies, she was expected to stand to the side as she was only the founder of a small start-up. The reason for her standing in the centre of the group photo, however, was because she was the "rare species" in the conference: there were so many male entrepreneurs in the conference, and she was selected to stand in the centre because she was one of the few woman entrepreneurs. That women entrepreneurs' participation is lower than that of their male counterparts is echoed by Peng, a male entrepreneur who started up a VR gaming company. When I asked whether he could name some women entrepreneurs for me to interview, Peng told me that, in the field of VR, the entrepreneurs were generally men. Apart from this, as I have mentioned in Chapter 5, the managers from the industrial association also mentioned that men dominated in the digital creative industries. Beside this, from my observations at events such as WeWork[33] and YC[34] alumni sharing in June 2019 in Shenzhen, only one third were women among the 60 participants.

In his study on entrepreneurship in China's digital game industry, which serves as an important component of China's digital creative industries, Huang (2021) also suggests that male entrepreneurs were dominant in the digital game industry.

Overall, there is some evidence that women entrepreneurs are under-represented in the sector. Women's under-representation in the digital creative entrepreneurship provides evidence of the highly gendered nature of digital creative entrepreneurship. A further examination of how the digital creative entrepreneurship reproduces gender differences is provided below.

6.2 The devaluation on women's leadership

One of the co-founders of a short-form video start-up, Yuanying challenged my question when asked about her gendered experience in entrepreneurship as woman entrepreneur. She said:

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[33] WeWork is a provider of co-working spaces. Co-working space is perceived to have the liberating potential in terms of openness, collaboration, and community along with the rise of digital entrepreneurship (see Luo & Chan, 2021).

[34] YC stands for Y Combinator. YC is an American technology start-up accelerator launched in 2005. It creates a program to work intensively with the start-up for three months, helping them to get the best possible shape and refine their pitch to investors. This is also how YC builds up its alumni network. By the time I accessed its official website, YC has funded over 3500 start-ups, and built up a community of over 9,000 founders. See: https://www.ycombinator.com/ (accessed 19 August, 2022).

> Women leaders should not define them as women, or put themselves in the roles of women. This is because traditionally speaking, women need protection, and women seem weak. I think we need to get rid of this idea. You should adopt the point of view of a leader. You are a leader, not a woman, so you need to have the mindset of manager and leader, to let your partners and your team members work together. In this sense, I think gender doesn't matter much.

From Yuanying's perspective, even though women are traditionally placed in a disadvantaged place compared to men, gender should not be a barrier for females who adopt the mindset of leader. Such a gender-neutral attitude from Yuanying appears to be progressive, and it seems that digital creative entrepreneurship is inclusive for every aspirational individual. By contrast, the extant literature from Western countries suggests that, influenced by the individualistic nature of neoliberalism, women may disavow structural power relations, thus rendering it difficult to voice or speak out on issue of inequality (see Gill, 2014; Scharff, 2016). So, it is pressing to question such gender-neutral attitudes in the context of China. However, with more evidence coming from my fieldwork, such a disavowal of gender might be the fear of being identified with weakness, or the fear of being treated as different from the masculine norm of entrepreneurship, and thus being perceived as inferior entrepreneurs.

Liting, who owns a maker space[35] and devotes herself to maker education, divulged to me about the very high-representation of females in her team (4 permanent full-time staff are females with 1 male staff), and emphasised that the lack of recognition from her male colleagues was one of the reasons for this: "I think that the men's idea associated with tough guy [*ying hanzi*][36] works. Men think they are ambitious and they don't want to be led by a young woman."

According to Liting, some men identify strongly with traditional masculine qualities, such as strength, powerfulness and competition, and they are not willing to be led by women business leaders. This can be attributed to the traditional gender roles in China. In a patriarchal society such as China, women have long been in subordinate positions and have been excluded from public life in history (Liu, 2014). In Chinese tradition, exemplified by the proverb "*nan zhu wai, nü zhu nei*", men take care of the things outside the family and are the primary income

[35] Makers are a group of people who can make the best of their creativity by tinkering with technologies. A maker space is a collaborative work space for making, learning, exploring and sharing the technology-based DIY culture. The Chinese government has been promoting the maker movement from 2014, as maker movement is assumed to have the potential to unleash individual creativity, spur social innovation, and unfold a technological future. Based on these characteristics, the maker movement is of great relevancy to China's digital creative industries, and the owner of a maker space, Liting, has been chosen for this study.

[36] "Tough guy" was translated from "*ying hanzi*" in Liting's words, meaning a man who adheres to traditional masculine traits, such as strength and adventure. *Ying* is literally translated into tough, *hanzi* refers to males in Chinese.

generators for the family, while women shoulder the domestic responsibilities and take up the role as caregivers at home. Even though women have come out of the home and make achievements in their work nowadays, they are still perceived mainly as the care-givers and need to shoulder the dual responsibility as bread earners and care-givers at the same time. In the competitive business world, the defining characteristics of the entrepreneur generally fall into the category that defines masculinity, such as agency, risk-taking and competence; thus, men are considered as high-profile entrepreneurial role models, and women are positioned as reluctant entrepreneurial subjects (Ahl, 2006; Ahl & Marlow, 2012). In the example from Liting, if a man is led by a woman, this would hurt the man's self-esteem, as it goes against the socialisation of gender identity.

In this context, some women entrepreneurs seek invisibility: they either refuse to accept a self-conscious understanding of themselves as gendered actors, or they believe that the "problem" of gender disadvantage has been "solved" and therefore gender is no longer an issue (Lewis, 2006). However, it is the denial of gender that indicates that women try to fit into the gendered nature of entrepreneurship that privileges the masculine (Lewis, 2006). The case of Yuanying who holds a gender-neutral attitude as mentioned above, to some extent, prompted me to explore the masculine nature of entrepreneurship in China's digital creative industries.

As part of my research, I attended Slush Shenzhen as one of my observations in 2019. Originating in Finland in 2008, Slush, an event aiming to attract people's attention to entrepreneurship and help to create the next generation of ground-breaking entrepreneurs, has extended to a few innovation-chasing cities including Tokyo, Singapore, New York, and London.[37] The first Slush China took place in Beijing, the capital city of China in 2015. In 2019, it came to Shenzhen. I was attracted to the conference by its advertisement saying that Slush Shenzhen would be a gathering for young, open-minded and innovative entrepreneurial elites. It would also provide a chance to immerse myself in the entrepreneurship ecosystem in Shenzhen.

For the "Women in Leadership" panel at Slush Shenzhen, four women start-uppers were invited to have a panel discussion on how they practiced leadership, as well as the challenges and successful tips they got from being a leader (Figure 2). A few minutes after the panel began, I overheard a man sitting at the back talking to his companion saying: "Look, a group of women sitting on the stage talk about their leadership, no essence at all!" (*一群女人坐在台上讲领导力，一点儿干货都没有*). "Essence" here means practical takeaways. The man was complaining

[37] See more about Slush: https://www.slush.org/

that he did not get the practical tips from the “Women in Leadership” panel. Though subtle, it is still possible to read from his comments that he attributed it simply because the speakers were women, and women did not have anything to offer on leadership. To put it in another way, women are treated as inferior leaders in this context.

Figure 2. Explanatory photo on “Women in Leadership” panel, Shenzhen Slush. Taken by the author on 8 August, 2019.

Women digital creative entrepreneurs endure persistent prejudice and stereotypes where it is widely held that women’s gendered role conflicts with a masculine leadership role in the workplace. What comes with the gendered digital creative entrepreneurship is the gender bias and discrimination towards women digital creative entrepreneurs, thus, putting their effort, workability and achievement in a questionable place. It is in this way that women digital creative entrepreneurs are overwhelmed with intense feelings of precariousness in the process of doing entrepreneurship.

Yang, owner of a social media start-up, lamented that the digital creative entrepreneurship was not as meritocratic as it appeared. She shared with me a story of how she lost her business opportunity due to gender stereotyping. According to Yang, one of her potential business

opportunities was abruptly taken away as her male clients thought Yang and her female business partner were two young “girls” and inexperienced. Yang stated:

> I think entrepreneurship is really not something that ordinary women can do, especially if you want to do it well. . . . This [gender bias and stereotype] is why I feel powerless. Clearly, there is nothing wrong with my ability or my team, but he [her male client in this context] attributed to it.

In Yang’s account, her male client did not trust Yang and her female business partner, as her male client didn’t believe in the capabilities of two women. The existing gender prejudice and stereotyping in digital creative entrepreneurship, according to Yang, made her feel powerless, and she lost confidence to carry on in her entrepreneurship. She even discouraged women to take up entrepreneurial practices, claiming that the masculine-natured entrepreneurship in digital creative industries is not suitable for women as it adds uncertainty to women’s success within it, and women’s entrepreneurship carries a tremendous amount of vulnerability, insecurity and a lack of recognition.

The masculine-natured digital creative entrepreneurship pushes women entrepreneurs to take up gendered strategies to cope with the hostile environment. One of the strategies is to distinguish two spheres in their entrepreneurship, namely the public sphere and the private sphere. In the public sphere, women entrepreneurs need to interact with their clients and business partners. In the private sphere, women entrepreneurs stay with their team members, and create a sense of community. It is in this way that women digital creative entrepreneurs are able to exercise flexibility with the male-coded entrepreneurship/business rules, and their femininity.

From my fieldwork, I found that women digital creative entrepreneurs tend to emphasise a combination of masculine and feminine characteristics. In most of the cases, they use masculine characteristics to deal with the public spheres, and they use the feminine to manage private spheres. As Feixue, the owner of a media start-up, puts it:

> In the business world, I try to use the masculine mindsets to deal with things. But if there is anything wrong within my team, or if my team encounters any issues or barriers, I tend to use the feminine way to solve the problems.

In Feixue’s terms, she has distinguished two different spheres in her entrepreneurship. One is the public sphere, where she needs to interact with people outside her start-up, and she follows the masculine norms for her behaviour. The other one is the private sphere, where she interacts with team members, and she shows her feminine personal qualities such as caring. The similar idea was expressed by Yuanying, one of the founders of a media start-up. I asked Yuanying

whether she thought she had some advantages or opportunities because of her gender. Yuanying replied:

> As for team management, I think women have some advantages. For example, male leaders are more bossy. However, as for female leaders, they have more empathy and sympathy. Women can easily understand the demands of people, no matter their staff or their clients. . . . Myself is more coordinative and helpful.

In this way, Yuanying has a similar idea as Feixue, both of whom follow the masculine norm of entrepreneurship when doing business, and show feminine characteristics when interacting with their team members. Exhibiting feminine qualities showcases Yuanying's and Feixue's agency. It shows that precarity holds the potential to exert agency (Berlant, 2011). However, it is also necessary to admit that what both Yuanying and Feixue do is consistent with the existing patriarchal discourse of the relationship between gender and workability (Higgins & Sun, 2007), and reinforces the image that "women are positioned in deficit unless they acknowledge and subscribe to masculine discourse [of entrepreneurship]" (Ahl & Marlow, 2012, p. 544). In other words, women digital creative entrepreneurs' practices are still largely constrained by the traditionally masculine norms of entrepreneurship, which means that women digital creative entrepreneurs have to think in masculine ways to act out their entrepreneurship. This is similar to the career double bind women face in the workplace, namely: if a working female is considered too feminine, her leadership ability would be questioned; if she demonstrates qualities deemed too masculine, she is more likely to be harshly judged or disliked (see Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017).

Apart from the masculine-norm and gender prejudice, gender also intersects with age, putting women digital creative entrepreneurs in a disadvantaged place. Liting exemplifies how a combination of gender and age was a barrier for her to achieve recognition. Liting explained:

> When I made a keynote speech in a conference, sharing the things I had done in recent years, I didn't get much applause. In the same conference, a man coming from Taiwan, who just set up his business, talked about his startup plan without literally refining his entrepreneurial ideas then. However, he got more applause from the audience than me. Later on, I joined the panel discussion session, I think I gave good answers.
>
> After the conference, my colleague told me that the audiences around discussed why I could be given the opportunity to deliver the keynote speech as I am a woman looking so young. But [the audiences] gradually understood after hearing the panel discussion.

In Liting's terms, she clearly has better qualifications than her male peers as she is an experienced entrepreneur and has a wealth of knowledge in the sector. Her male peer, the man from Taiwan, however, had limited industrial experience. Yet, Liting didn't get the same

recognition from the audience when she joined the conference on maker education. Confused about this experience, Liting finally attributed it to her gender as a woman, and concluded with the idea that "women's achievement would be minimised [in the industries]". The audience's comment on Liting's young age also shows that women's situation in the digital creative industries intersects with their age, and Liting's leadership was not fully recognised by her peers because of her young age. I shall return to ageism in the next chapter.

Overall, the socialisation of gender roles contributes to a gendered entrepreneurship where women are treated as inferior digital creative entrepreneurs. The entrenched gender bias not only hinders women digital creative entrepreneurs' access to opportunities and breaks the meritocratic myth that the creative economy promises, but also puts them in devalued or unrecognised positions and renders the digital creative industries less inclusive. From my fieldwork, I find that women's disadvantage in the industry also intersects with their age. In what follows, I seek to understand the gendered work segregation impacting women and their entrepreneurship in China's digital creative industries.

6.3 The reproduction of gendered work segregation

From my fieldwork, I observed that very few women entrepreneurs take up technical jobs. Among the women entrepreneurs in this study, only Liting, currently the owner of a maker space, has the technical background. She still does some technology-related work in her entrepreneurship, including using 3D-printing and cutting machines. With the exception of Liting, the other women digital creative entrepreneurs I interviewed mainly remain in the so-called feminine fields, such as media content provision, and take up the management work (i.e., human resources, administration, public relations, etc.). In our interview, Feixue implicitly suggested that there existed the gendered work segregation in digital creative entrepreneurship. When I asked whether she thought the sector was women-friendly or not, Feixue said:

> I think the [digital creative] industry is quite inclusive for women. Women have opportunities. For example, women can become a co-founder. They can team up with her technical partners, and do what her technical partners cannot do, such as team coordination.

In Feixue's terms, women, as entrepreneurs in the digital creative industries, have their advantages in the field, such as team coordination and management, instead of technical work. Women can team up with her business partners who are good at technology-related work to run their business in the sector, and in most cases, men assume this kind of technical partners role.

Another example comes from Yuanying, the female co-founder of a short-form video start-up. Yuanying mentioned that, since the foundation of her start-up, she had been doing all kinds of jobs except programming and technology-related work. She did the jobs including management, finance, and public relations. Her male co-founder, who worked at Microsoft before, was in charge of the technical jobs.

Apart from teaming up with males who are good at technical jobs, some women digital creative entrepreneurs hire people to do technical work as they themselves are not good at technology-related work. Sandy, a female social media app start-up runner, disclosed that she hired a group of engineers to do the programming, and incidentally, all of her engineers were males.

As mentioned in Chapter 5, there are some institutional reasons for women to be left behind in technology in China, including the long-term occupation division in the society, as well as the gender disparity in STEM education. Partly as a result of this, the gendered labour segregation occurs within the digital creative entrepreneurship, where men mainly take up the technical jobs, while women mainly take up supporting roles or management roles. Apart from these institutional constraints, there are other factors which contribute to such gendered work segregation.

From my fieldwork, the socialisation of gender roles also leads to the gendered work division in digital creative industries. For instance, Cai, a male VR start-up runner, has put it directly that "women are weak in the programming-related work. In most of the cases, women are inferior in terms of logical reasoning, and women might be less resistant to pressure," manifesting an implicit denigration of women as inferior to men in terms of technology.

The gendered work segregation can be explained by the perception that women have relatively low technical literacy compared with men (see Peng, 2021b). The long history of male's domination in the sciences has led to the stereotype that men have the ability to use and manage technology (Wajcman, 2006). In his research on China's most popular beauty app—Meitu— Peng (2021b) finds that female employees are restricted to relatively low-tech positions, with men comprising the vast majority of programme engineers at Meitu, while most female programme engineers being assigned the task of effect testing, which is considered "easy" in their profession. Such gendered labour segregation observation aligns with what Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2015) have found in the UK. Drawing on the secondary, statistical sources and interpreting it qualitatively, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2015) note the main forms that gendered work segregation takes, including the domination by men of technical jobs. In other words, women are marginalised in the technical positions.

However, women's marginalised roles are concealed by the narrative that qualities such as carefulness, patience, and empathy—which are deemed as feminine qualities by industrial practitioners—are required in creative jobs.[38] As part of my research, I joined the 2019 "Google Women Techmaker" in Shenzhen (Figure 3). One of the speakers named E, who is from China's giant Internet company A, shared her experience working in the A company gaming division. She mentioned that women are concentrated in the facilitating roles such as marketing and operating in this top gaming company:

> When I joined A company, I thought there would be very few females in A company. However, the reality is that there are many. Women concentrate in the marketing (*yingxiao*), operating (*yunying*) and art (*meishu*) team.

E also gave an example of the rarity of women gaming developers in A company. She said:

> When I first worked for A company, I was in the game distribution team (*faxing tuandui*), and I found quite a few females there. Later on, when I changed to the game development team (*yanfa tuandui*), I found that it was very rare to see women, especially in the positions such as game planning (*youxi cehua*) and game designing (*youxi sheji*). . . . Actually, I think this is a bias, as people think women are not frequent gamers, or women are not interested in gaming or the hard-core[39] things (*yinghe de dongxi*).

Speaking from her own experience, E found that women were concentrated in the facilitating roles while being under-represented in the core units, such as game designing, in her company. In her eyes, a gender bias existed, where women were not suitable to be game designers as they were not that much interested in games that required highly-developed skills and competition. At the end of her speech, E called for more women to join the gaming industries. In her words, women and some of their qualities are favoured by the digital gaming industries in the following ways: firstly, women love fantasy, and they pay special attention to emotional feelings, which is what some gamers are seeking in games. Secondly, being patient and careful, women can do the work that needs high accuracy, such as regulating parameters in the gaming effects. Thirdly, women have more passion for aesthetics, and the aesthetics can help a game stand out from its competitors.

[38] The discussion on feminine qualities and gender essentialism is not the main purpose for this thesis. From my observations in the fieldwork, qualities such as patience, empathy, aesthetics, and carefulness are deemed as feminine qualities by industrial practitioners.

[39] "Hard core" or *yinghe* is an internet catchphrase in China over the recent few years. Originally referred to the music that is faster and more aggressive (i.e., hard core punk), the term "hard core" is gradually used to describe something powerful and strong in Chinese. In E's example, "hard core" refers to the games that are harder and need more skills to play.

Figure 3. Explanatory photo on Google Women Techmaker Shenzhen. Taken by the author on 27 April, 2019.

E’s comments indicate that women’s inclusion in the gaming industry stems from their qualities such as carefulness, patience, empathy and aesthetics. This is echoed by several other participants in this study. When asked about the positions of his female staff, Cai, a male VR start-up runner, stated: “I might have some bias, but I think some creative works are more suitable for women. The creative works I mean refer to the work related with aesthetic, such as colour matching.”

Li, a woman entrepreneur who runs a game company, shared a similar idea. She said:

> women concentrate in the art division. This kind of job needs aesthetics. . . . This job is tedious and repeated, you need to enhance frame by frame, but men do not have the patience. . . . The difference between men and women is like the difference between right brain and left brain.

From what E, Cai and Li have said, it seems that there is a consensus within the sector that women are more suitable to take the facilitating roles and less prestigious creative roles. However, this kind of gender inequality is concealed by the narrative where qualities such as

carefulness, patience, and aesthetics, make women more suitable for the roles in the marketing and art design divisions.

The gendered work division in the digital creative industries can also be explained by its working norm, where women have been driven out of technical work because of the work-life imbalance it brings. In recent years, the brutal “996” work regime has become common in China, particularly in the high-tech industries. The 996 work regime means working from 9am to 9pm, six days a week. It has received much criticism, notably because of some cases of sudden death (see Feng, 2022). The long working hours in the technical positions have caused women to leave the occupation to reduce work-family conflicts (Li, 2021). Xiaona, a female game developer I met in the Google Women Techmaker in Guangzhou in 2019, shared her experience of a 5-year-long game developing project. She mentioned that, during those 5 years, she entered into marriage and had a daughter. However, she felt quite guilty as she always needed to work till late, leaving very little quality time with her daughter. Xiaona said that, if it was not because of her passion for her work, she would not have continued.

Overall, gendered work segregation exists in China’s digital creative industries. In most cases, technical jobs have been dominated by men, while women have been marginalised to technical jobs. Men’s domination in the technical jobs further discredits women’s value in the digital creative industries, which can also be seen from the lack of acknowledgement of women’s contribution by the state mentioned in Chapter 5. Apart from the institutional constraints for women’s left-behind position in technology, a few of the industrial practices also stops women from doing technical jobs in the sector, such as the brutal 996 working regime. The gendered work segregation is further disguised by a narrative where qualities such as carefulness and patience are deemed as feminine, and associated with women with less prestigious creative work and less technical jobs.

6.4 Conclusion

Digital creative entrepreneurship is gendered in the context of China. Women digital creative entrepreneurs are under-represented. The socialisation of gender roles leads to the result that women are treated as inferior leaders. Furthermore, the reproduction of gendered work division exists in digital creative entrepreneurship, where men dominate technical positions, and women mainly play supporting and managing roles. As discussed above, women entrepreneurs are experiencing insecurity brought about by the gendered digital creative entrepreneurship where

their contribution is made trivial without proper recognition, thus adding to their stress and anxiety and reproducing the gendered segregation in the digital creative industries.

It is also necessary to note that, even though women entrepreneurs face the aforementioned precarious situations, there exists a tendency among them to utilise some gendered strategies to exert autonomy and carve out spaces for themselves in the industries. They distinguish the public and private spheres in their entrepreneurship, and articulate their feminine qualities to gain credit for their entrepreneurship. This strategy may have the potential for women to negotiate an alternative space of entrepreneurship in digital creative industries, but we still need to be careful about the gendered nature behind it.

Chapter 7: The not-so-flexible digital creative entrepreneurship and the gendered role conflicts

The call to be creative and entrepreneurial in China has normalised a new work landscape that incites urban women to embrace entrepreneurship culture and self-select to the digital creative economy. The valorisation of digital creative entrepreneurship must be understood against the backdrop of its promise of flexibility: entrepreneurs could have better control over their own time.

By examining women's engagement with their entrepreneurship as well as their natural roles as daughters, wives and mothers, this chapter touches upon the fundamental value and culture in China's society with a special focus on gender. It points out that women entrepreneurs are stuck in a predicament, where, on the one hand, they are incorporated in the economy and supposed to earn money, while, on the other hand, they are still expected to follow the traditional gendered roles in China to get married, as well as fulfil their domestic responsibilities to be the carers of the family, thus exposing women to a situation that is full of precarity. It is not easy for women digital creative entrepreneurs to negotiate a space between individual agency and aspiration, and the patriarchal social and cultural power.

7.1 Hoping for flexibility through digital creative entrepreneurship

Among all 18 women digital creative entrepreneur participants, the majority have had stable employment before they started up their own business, with four exceptions, who established their own business after their graduation: Yuanying, 26, the co-founder of a short-form video company; Jenny, 28, the runner of a VR start-up; Yang, 29, the founder of a media company; and Sandy, 24, the co-founder of an app start-up.

According to some of the participants, the flexibility provided by digital creative entrepreneurship is particularly attractive for them to escape the standard and fixed work patterns, and search for meaningful work which offers them greater autonomy.[40] Qi, the co-founder of a VR education start-up, for example, stated that she hated the hierarchy in her previous standard employment. Before co-establishing the start-up, Qi was working for a giant Internet company in China. However, her enthusiasm for her work gradually wore off because of the bureaucracy and the communication breakdowns with the hierarchy within the company,

[40] There are a few motivations for women to become digital creative entrepreneurs. For example, some of the women digital creative entrepreneur participants, i.e., Yongying, 53, the runner of a digital visual design company, and Sandy, 24, the co-founder of an App start-up, mentioned that they embraced the entrepreneurship in digital creative industries to maximise their material rewards.

pushing Qi to give up her stable employment and embrace digital creative entrepreneurship. In our interview, Qi mentioned that, compared to the big company she worked at, her start-up was "flat" (*bianping*) in organisational structure with less hierarchical layers, making it more responsive.

Qi was not the only participant who rejected standard employment in favour of flexible digital creative entrepreneurship. Rui, the runner of a social media company, also resigned from her job at a promising medium-sized internet company. Rui used the phrase "a screw in a big machine" *(jiqi shangde yike luosiding)* to describe her status in her previous fixed work patterns, where she worked tediously. Apart from this, Rui also believed that digital creative entrepreneurship could give her greater autonomy than what the standard employment can offer. As Rui stated:

> Currently, the [standard] job market is not friendly to women. For example, women over 30, or possibly over 28 . . . Likewise, if you are not married, or if you are married without children, many corporations would say no to you from the beginning, because they don't want to shoulder the risks due to your reproduction, which increases their costs. So the [standard] job market is not friendly to women.
>
> I've seen several cases that some woman left her fixed employment after she gave birth to a baby. Or some woman quit her job before she gave birth, and found another job after giving birth to the baby. I think my starting my own business has something to do with this reason; I have witnessed the phenomenon of age discrimination and gender bias, I don't want to deal with this un-friendliness, so I choose to start up.

In Rui's terms, the "women-unfriendly" labour market made her quit her previous stable employment. Women workers suffer from the pressures of ageism and gender discrimination especially because of women's reproduction in the workplace, and she believed that embracing digital creative entrepreneurship would be a good solution to avoid such a toxic environment.

The women-unfriendly labour market is confirmed by two other participants. Daxiong, a male who owns a VR company, shared his view about women employees in the workplace, stating that, unless it is made mandatory by the government, his company and other companies in the sector have no motivation to hire females. As he stated:

> Especially those women who are going to get married and have babies [will not be hired by the companies]. Based on the most recent Labour Law, companies cannot fire pregnant women, cannot change their working roles, and cannot reduce their salaries. In a word, the company can do nothing. After the females gave birth to the babies, in the following 12 months, the women staff can get off work early and enjoy the maternity leave, while the company cannot fire the women staff, cannot change their working roles. . . If someone deliberates to join the company with knowing that she would have babies soon, it means the company would keep her for 24 months in vain.

In Daxiong's accounts, his company is very reluctant to hire females, especially those who plan to get married and have children. This is because his company is prohibited to lay off females or reduce their benefits when they enter into the reproduction stage, thus increasing the company's costs. If Daxiong's idea represents what some leaders think in the sector, what Yali said expresses what woman had been through in the working place. Yali had been married for three years without any children when I met her in 2019. She worked in a branch company of a well-known internet company in China. She told me that a team leader would like Yali to join their team in their headquarters. However, Yali's boss in the branch company asked the team leader to think again, as Yali had been married for three years and had no child. It was in this way that Yali lost the opportunity to work in their headquarters and get promoted. Yali was in a dilemma: if she gave birth at an early age, it would be hard for her to stay in the internet industries and make herself visible in her company; if she delayed her reproduction, it would be a barrier for her promotion as it was considered as an unpredictable factor in her team work. Yali, herself, also found no solution for this predicament, and felt distressed about it.

Digital creative entrepreneurship appeared to have promised a flexible and autonomous lifestyle for women, and it drives some women to embrace digital creative entrepreneurship actively. But to what extent might this hold true, especially when we examine this issue with cultural sensitivities in China? In what follows, I provide more evidence from my fieldwork that women digital creative entrepreneurs who valued the flexibility and autonomy of entrepreneurship in the industries, find themselves trapped in the busy entrepreneurial life and experience work-life conflicts.

7.2 The youth-friendly digital creative industries?

As I have mentioned in the previous section, some women digital creative entrepreneurs choose to leave their stable employment in the creative economy where there exists age discrimination, and choose an entrepreneurial "age-free" career. The existing literature from Western countries has suggested that the imaginary of talent-led, "doing what you love", and autonomy of the creative economy has attracted a great number of young people to join (Campbell, 2020), with women representing the youngest cohorts of the creative industries workforce (Conor et al., 2015). However, standing in stark contrast to the dominant policy narratives of the creative economy as meritocratic and open to all, it has been becoming increasingly clear that age plays an important role in the systematic social inequalities within creative industries (Eikhof & Warhurst, 2013). According to Eikhof and Warhurst (2013), there is notable attrition amongst

early-to-mid-30s aged women working in the creative economy in the UK. Likewise, in their insightful work on the withdrawal of creative workers in Hong Kong, Wong and Chow (2020) find that the urgency posed by their "ageing" is one of the reasons that pushes creative workers to leave creative fields. In this section, I focus on the factor of age among the women entrepreneurs in this study.

During my fieldwork in China in 2019, I interviewed 18 women digital creative entrepreneurs. I divided all of the women into four age groups, aiming to have a better understanding of their participation as mediated by their age. I started from 24 years old, as this is the age of the youngest participant, Sandy. The patterns are shown in the following:

Table 5

Age distribution of interviewed women digital creative entrepreneurs

Age groups	Numbers of women entrepreneurs	percentage
24-29	6	33.3%
30-35	6	33.3%
36-41	5	27.8%
≥42	1	5.6%

It is worth noting here that there are only two women digital creative entrepreneurs who are over 40-years old, namely, Li, 41-years old, owner of a gaming startup, and Yongying, 53-years old, founder of a digital visual design company. We can see from the age divisions that young female cohorts aged from 24-35 are heavily distributed in digital creative entrepreneurship, while females over 40-years old are quite under-represented in this endeavour.

Feixue, a 37-year-old media company owner, told me that she was often teased by her younger employees for being old. Born after 1990, Feixue's younger employees thought Feixue had "old fashioned" creativity (*laodiaoya de chuangyi*) which would not satisfy the young Internet users' demands. If the company adopts Feixue's old fashioned creativity, their products would not be attractive to the market in which young customers are the mainstream.

Jenny, who was born in 1991, and was only 28-years-old when I met her in 2019, expressed a similar idea that a young workforce could have a better feel for the market's pulse within the digital creative industries. Being in the fast-paced and cutting-edge VR industries, Jenny is one of

the few woman entrepreneurs that I met. Jenny, however, thought she was already too old as a VR start-upper. She further explained that "those born in 2000s are embracing more to VR. . . . They become friends with technology when they were brought up." In Jenny's eyes, those who were born in the 2000s have advantages over those born in the 1990s, as they grew up with digital technologies, and have more open attitudes towards digital technologies.

Both Feixue and Jenny have showed that young entrepreneurs are much favoured by the competitive digital creative industries.[41] One of the reasons for this is that digital natives who grew up with digital technologies constitute the majority of users in the market. Therefore, young entrepreneurs who have a great knowledge of digital technologies and culture among youngsters, as well as high level of energy and health good productivity, are favoured by the industry.

Hiring young people to cope with the work intensification and satisfy the new trends in the internet industry is not rare in China. Indeed, "youthfication" (*nianqing hua*) has become a buzzword among China's Internet companies, referring to industries seeking young employees to build up a young and vigorous team, and to study the preferences and trends of young people (see Wang, 2020). According to a report published by Maimai Data Research Institute (2020), the average age of the employees in China's top 19 internet companies is 29.6, with Didi Chuxing reaching the highest, with 33, and Bytedance and Pin Duoduo the lowest, with 27. The same youthfication occurs in the digital creative industries, where young people are considered as the ideal workforce (see Lin & Zhao, 2020). In their empirical work on Chinese eSports players, Lin and Zhao (2020) point out the harsh reality that eSports players are doomed to face a "disposable" future in the emerging eSports industry. The competitive eSports require players to face very high physical, mental, and psychological demands, and the players are always fearful of being replaced by would-be younger professional players seeking to claim any vacated places (Lin & Zhao, 2020).

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[41] In chapter 6, there is evidence showing that young women entrepreneurs are considered inexperienced and thus lose some business opportunities. However, in this chapter, evidence shows that young women entrepreneurs are favoured by the industry as they have better knowledge of the markets. This suggests that China is still in a transitional period of its economy, where it is transitioning from an investment-driven manufacturing economy to a consumption-based and innovation-driven service economy. The former requires entrepreneurs to be equipped with resources, i.e., social networks and money, the senior entrepreneurs with a variety of resources fall into this category. By contrast, the latter prefers entrepreneurs to be armed with intangible capital such as knowledge and innovation, the vigorous young entrepreneurs are much more favoured. As China's economy is still in a transitional period, it is possible for women digital creative entrepreneurs to face such complicated situation coming along the economic transition.

The age discrimination brings insecurity to those women digital creative entrepreneurs who are not so young. Xuanzi, who runs a digital entrepreneurship education company, was the only participant who refused to divulge her age. Xuanzi called herself "middle-age young girl" (*zhongnian shaonü*), and stressed that "even though I am already old, I still think I am young, as I am interested in everything, and I would love to learn everything." In Xuanzi's words, she is biologically old, but she is psychologically young as she stays curious and would love to try different things out. The paradoxical expression between "middle-age" and "young girl" implicitly shows Xuanzi's subtle worries and fears about her future in the digital creative industries. In order to fit into the industries, Xuanzi uses youth characteristics, including the vitality and willingness to learn, to underpin her entrepreneurship in the fast-paced and competitive sector and conceals her real age. It shows that the age pressure brings women entrepreneurs further stress and insecurity.

In this section, I observe the phenomenon that young women are concentrated in the digital creative entrepreneurship where women less than 35-years-old are heavily distributed in the digital creative entrepreneurship. It can be explained by the industry's favour for young women who are perceived as ideal workers as they bring technological expertise, efficiency and creativity. This kind of age discrimination causes women digital creative entrepreneurs tremendous stress and insecurity, mainly because there is a risk that they may experience the "disposable life" in their digital creative entrepreneurship. In the next section, I elaborate more on the conflicts between women's gendered role and their digital creative entrepreneurship. It shows that the promise of flexibility might be an illusion for women entrepreneurs. It also shows that precarity not only penetrates women digital creative entrepreneurs' work life, but also their personal life.

7.3 The gendered role conflicts: marriage, reproduction and family

7.3.1 The unmarried women digital creative entrepreneurs: career or family?

Among my interviews with 18 women digital creative entrepreneurs, 11 were unmarried—either single or in relationships. For those who were single, their "singleness" seems to be an issue for themselves and their families. Some interviewees expressed the pressure they felt from their parents' generation to ask them to enter into marriage. Minka, a 30-year-old fashion studio owner, told me that her family expected more for her to get married instead of succeeding in her entrepreneurship. As Minka states:

> The biggest expectation for me from my family is that I can get married soon. I think in Chaoshan[42], it has the tradition that women should focus on family. Career is not important for women, and family is the most important.

In Minka's hometown, the deep-seated belief is that men should support the family, while women are supposed to devote themselves to taking care of the family. In this context, her family is eager to see her get married, and attach less significance to her entrepreneurial success. However, it is not easy for Minka to fulfil the role as family care-giver as a result of the busy life in her entrepreneurship. As she states:

> Bitterly, I am still single. I think entrepreneurship is time-consuming, you need to focus on your start-up, and it would drag you into pieces. It seems that it is hard for you to spend some time on dating. I really feel this is not good. Or you really need to spend some time on your personal life. I think it is necessary to rebalance myself, right? To meet more people. I think this is important. Comparing with what I was like two or three years ago, I think I shouldn't let work occupy me, I think there are some other trade-offs in life, and to add something more into my life.

In Minka's narrative, she is also looking forward to ending her singleness to follow the social norm. By contrast, her busy life as an entrepreneur makes it difficult for Minka to have temporal and spatial availabilities to meet potential dates. Instead of giving up her entrepreneurship, what Minka did was to rebalance herself, thus leaving herself more time to meet new people.

The conflict between establishing family and entrepreneurship is also raised in my interview with Kira, the fashion studio owner. When I met Kira in her office in 2019, she was 30-years-old, and in a relationship. Kira told me that there had been several fights between Kira and her mother, mainly because her mother wanted her to get married soon and have babies before Kira got too old. From Kira's perspective, she didn't worry about the marriage and reproduction issue very much. She would like to focus on her entrepreneurship first, and devote herself more to entrepreneurship. Kira even considered resorting to the medical solution of egg freezing just in case she didn't get married and have babies at a biologically suitable age.

Minka and Kira's stories reflect two influential yet contradictory discourses that Martin (2014) finds among Chinese female students who study in Australia. Martin (2014) observes that overseas Chinese female students are exposed to the neoliberal-style discourse of shaping themselves as free and self-interested personhood, while at the same time, they are influenced by the discourse that constructs adult women as "naturally" focused on the care of family

[42] Chaoshan is an area that is located in the east of Guangdong province in Southern China. Chaoshan area is considered to have business tradition, and men in Chaoshan usually go out to do business, while women in Chaoshan stay at home to take care of their families.

members (Martin, 2014). On the one hand, Minka and Kira aspire to achieve greater achievements in their careers, while, on the other hand, they both face the reality of following the social norm and get married at a certain age.

However, the two contradictory discourses may not be easy to reconcile, and some single women digital creative entrepreneurs have shown pessimistic attitudes towards ending their singleness, especially when facing a busy and energy-consuming entrepreneurship.

At the age of 36, the social media start-up owner Xiaoyuan was the oldest women entrepreneur who was unmarried when I met her in my fieldwork. Instead of choosing to “embrace the contradictory” like Minka and Kira, Xiaoyuan, chose to concentrate on her entrepreneurship and doesn’t expect to enter into marriage. Knowing that it requires much devotion to the family and children, Xiaoyuan confessed to me that she would like to remain single and devote her time into her start-up. Xiaoyuan explained:

> I think entrepreneurship really takes courage, especially for women. . . . I don’t want to sacrifice for the family. . . . Because I feel when you have marriage or have children, you have to take responsibilities for the family and your children. For people like me, if you can devote yourself to your career or your start-up, you have to devote equally to your family. However, this is not possible. People have limited energy and abilities, and I know myself, I don’t want to sacrifice.

Xiaoyuan added that:

> I know some people would feel that I don’t want to take responsibilities by doing that. That’s not true. When I was in my 20s, I was busy dating, and I know how romantic relationship is like. . . . If I have children, a person like me who is perfectionistic, once my kids encounter any problem while I cannot tend to, I would feel I am not a responsible mother, and I am not a responsible wife. That’s what I cannot afford.

Xiaoyuan understands the tensions between gender norms and the increasing opportunities of their entrepreneurship, and she decided to focus on her career instead of embracing the two contradictory discourses as Minka and Kira did. What Xiaoyuan chose to do is not rare in contemporary China. In their research on the marriage market in post-socialist China, Wu and Dong (2019) identify two made-in-China or China-specific feminisms. The first strand is “entrepreneurial” feminism, which encourages women to give up traditional wife duties and exercise their autonomy on the marriage market to maximise their personal returns; the second is called the “non-cooperative” strand as it encourages women to aspire to career advancement and economic self-reliance instead of steering women to the marriage market. Knowing the difficulty of handling the family and entrepreneurship at the same time, Xiaoyuan finally chose to devote herself to the career and give up her traditional duties.

7.3.2 The delay of reproduction

Among the 18 women digital creative entrepreneurs, 7 participants were married. Compared with those women who are free of family obligations and can devote themselves to their work, the married women digital creative entrepreneurs are expected to spend more time with their family. Among the seven married participants, Yafei is the only one who was married without children. In order to pursue her career, Yafei chose to delay reproduction.

Yafei married in 2017, one year after she founded an art craft start-up. Yafei admitted that "sometimes I feel it's time for me to have a kid as I am already 30, . . . however, having kids will slow down my career."

At the time I met Yafei, she spent the majority of her time on her business. According to Yafei, she was learning to use Tik Tok, an emerging short-form video platform, to attract new customers. She also travelled to different cities to learn new skills such as mosaic art and even made travel plans for learning for the following year. In her own accounts, Yafei would like to gain more experience and achieve greater achievements in her career. However, having a baby is something that still lingers in Yafei's mind:

> I have contradictory mentality. Sometimes I feel I like kids, but sometimes I feel having baby would become a problem for me. Because it is a long process between preparing for pregnancy and giving birth to a baby. Once you have the baby, it doesn't mean an end, it means another new stage. Even though I would love to have babies, I haven't prepared myself well in any aspect.

In Yafei's words, entrepreneurship is time and energy-consuming, and it is the same for having children. It is hard for Yafei to devote herself to her family and cope with the work intensification of her entrepreneurship at the same time. Given this consideration, Yafei decided to delay her reproduction and prioritise her career. In this sense, the entrepreneurship in the digital creative industries does not offer Yafei the flexible lifestyle which allows her to control her work schedules without her family responsibilities, and she still worries about the balance between her entrepreneurship and family commitments. For those who already have children, as I elaborate below, the conflicts between entrepreneurship and traditional gendered roles manifested more obviously.

7.3.3 Role conflicts between care-giver and entrepreneur

Among the 18 women digital creative entrepreneur interviewees, the 7 who were married experienced greater conflicts between their entrepreneurship and traditional gendered roles. One of the obligations for those married interviews was to fulfil the role as a good mother and

take care of the children. Among all 31 interviews in my fieldwork, only 5 were interrupted by phone calls. Two of the interruptions happened to two academics, who received phone calls to remind them of other meetings. The other three interruptions happened among three women digital creative entrepreneurs. Unsurprisingly, all the phone calls came from the participants' children. The 41-year-old participant Li, got a phone call from her son to remind her of the time to pick him up from school. The 38-year-old interviewee Heting received a phone call from her daughter asking when Heting would finish her work and come back home to play with her. Xuanzi, who was in her late 30s, received a call from her son to confirm the starting time for his extra-curriculum class.

Li shared me with her feelings in her most difficult time when facing conflicts between her work and her family. Li said:

> As a woman, I think I have a very hard time. On the one hand, I need to take care of my company, on the other hand, I need to keep communication with my son, and keep my mentality well-balanced. It is very difficult. There was a time I had to struggle with anxiety. It happened in the year before last year, my company encountered some unforeseeable problems, I suddenly fell in anxiety, and my weight dramatically dropped 10 kgs within one month. . . . [At that time,] I played with my son when he came back from kindergarten. For the rest of the time, I locked myself in the room, could not meet anyone, could not speak.

Li experienced a mental break-down when facing the dual pressures of taking care of her company and her child. Having to balance her role as an entrepreneur and her role as a mother, Li had undergone unbearable anxiety. It is not easy for women digital creative entrepreneurs to manage a busy entrepreneurship and intensive motherhood at the same time. This is echoed by Feixue, a 37-year-old social media start-upper with a 12-year-old son. According to Feixue, she used to work 10–12 hours a day, 7 days a week, and sometimes she needed to take her son with her to work.

Even though women in China have become more visible due to social and economic development, the traditional patriarchal norms are never entirely absent from women's lives. The gender revolution, in particular, stopped short of the private sphere of family in China (see Y. Ji, 2015). According to the Fourth Survey on the Social Status of Chinese Women released by All-China Women's Federation and the National Bureau of Statistics (2022), women are the main care-givers in the family: more than 60% of women undertake the duties of the daily care, tutoring and pick-up of the children aged under 17; women spend 154 minutes per day on domestic labour, twice as much as men. Against the backdrop of the rapid development of the private sector and marketisation, the achievements of Chinese women, however, are still judged

by patriarchal criteria, which defines women's career successes as incomplete if they are unable to manage a perfect family-work balance in their daily lives (see Peng, 2021a). Under such circumstances, women's entrepreneurial activities in digital creative industries are conditioned by cultural norms and the patriarchal structure, and the work-life conflicts contribute to women digital creative entrepreneurs' vulnerability.

The family responsibility was raised in our talk about the entrepreneurial recognition between Liting and I. Liting, the owner of a maker space and the mother of a six-year-old daughter, told me that her family showed no recognition of her entrepreneurship, and at the peak of the conflicts within her family, she chose to get divorced two years ago. In Liting's narrative, both her parents-in-law and her mother thought Liting was wasting her time on entrepreneurship because she didn't have enough time to keep her daughter company, and she wasn't making enough money through her entrepreneurship. Her parents-in-law would want her to have a second child when China adopted the universal second child policy. This is mainly because they would prefer Liting to have a son, whereas she just had a daughter. At the same time, however, her husband faced a career crisis, and he attributed the crisis to Liting and blamed her for not fulfilling the wife's duty and being supportive for him. All of her family denied the value of her entrepreneurship and wanted Liting to focus on her familial roles. In the end, Liting chose to get divorced.

In China, women are expected to fulfil conflicting roles. As Yang (2016) suggests, Chinese women are supposed to play the role of economic contributor for the family, whilst, at the same time, they are expected to perform the role of supporter of the family. In the case of Liting, she ended up with a divorce. This is because, in her family eyes, she neither made a great economic contribution to the family through her entrepreneurship, nor fulfilled her husband's demand of her to be a virtuous wife. It echoes Standing's observation that women are more likely to enter into the precarity, as they need to manage multiple responsibilities at the same time, including making money and rearing children (Standing, 2014). Against this back drop, women digital creative entrepreneurs' success, to some extent, is not only tempered by their entrepreneurial success itself, but also by their support for their family by taking the roles of wives, mothers, daughter and daughters-in-law, thus making them suffer from precarity. It shows the patriarchal criteria for the achievements of Chinese women, where women's career successes are deemed as incomplete if they are not able to manage a perfect family-work balance in their daily lives.

7.4 Conclusion

The promise of a flexible lifestyle and better control of their own time and life within the digital creative entrepreneurship has attracted women to embrace the new work landscape. However, entrepreneurship in the digital creative industries is not as flexible as some may think. Younger women entrepreneurs are favoured by the industries, and an age glass ceiling for women still exists in the digital creative entrepreneurship.

Apart from this, despite being progressive from an economic aspect, women entrepreneurs are still expected to conform to traditional expectations of fulfilling their “inside” roles: getting married, raising children, and supporting their husbands. The cultural norms and patriarchal structure, along with women’s life course, still condition women digital creative entrepreneurs, and make them more precarious, especially when they take enormous risks when starting up their own business. From my fieldwork, there is some evidence that women entrepreneurs try to negotiate their positions at the intersections of entrepreneurship, gendered roles and their aspiration. To some extent, women entrepreneurs can exercise their autonomy; however, this agency is largely regulated by the patriarchal relations still persisting, thus making women entrepreneurs vulnerable in both their working and personal life.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

This chapter concludes by summarising the key research findings with regards to the research aims and questions and discusses the value and contribution of it. In addition, this chapter reviews the limitations of this study and offers ideas for future research.

This study aims to investigate the role of women entrepreneurs in China's emerging digital creative industries, as well as their lived experience. With China transitioning from an investment-driven and export-led economy towards one that is more consumption-driven and knowledge-oriented, entrepreneurship is highly celebrated in China's society as both a political, economic and cultural phenomenon. As a prominent part of this broader phenomenon, entrepreneurship in the digital creative industries provides a space where digital technologies, individual creativities and new business models co-exist. In the state's call for Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation, a group of middle-class women in urban China actively embrace entrepreneurship in pursuit of creativity, meritocracy and flexibility.

As the results of this study suggest, the promises brought by the emerging digital creative industries as well as the state's promotion of Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation, encourages women to realise their potential, and seek a creative and flexible lifestyle by becoming entrepreneurs in the industries.

Despite this, being an entrepreneur is a highly precarious career option for women in the digital creative industries. This can be understood from the following aspects. Firstly, digital creative industries fit into the state's socio-economic agenda of restructuring its economy, and the state's demand for cultural production and cultural rejuvenation. In this way, entrepreneurship in the digital creative industries is largely shaped by the state's ideological agenda. Women entrepreneurs' contribution to the industries, however, is considerably unacknowledged by the state's focusing on technology. For digital creative entrepreneurs, their creativity and meaning-making processes are constantly regulated by the state's demand for cultural production. This is especially the conditions in which the emerging women entrepreneurs in the digital creative industries find themselves. Some women entrepreneurs adopt the strategies of demonstrating nationalism to carve out more space for their entrepreneurship in the sector.

Secondly, entrepreneurship in the digital creative industries appears to be open and inclusive, thus inciting women to take up entrepreneurial practices. However, the evidence of women entrepreneurs' under-representation, the devaluation of their entrepreneurial practices, as well as the reproduction of gendered division of work, all point to a highly-gendered digital creative entrepreneurship landscape. Such a gendered landscape eventually adds uncertainty,

vulnerability and worries to the shoulders of women digital creative entrepreneurs, thus exposing them to a very precarious situation. Facing the gendered entrepreneurship, some women entrepreneurs take up gendered practices including re-articulating their feminine qualities to gain credit for their entrepreneurship.

Thirdly, under the influence of push factors within the women-unfriendly working environment, and the pull factor of better control of her own time, some women envisage digital creative entrepreneurship as a good option in pursuit of flexibility. However, the evidence shows that younger entrepreneurs are favoured by the industries. Beside this, precarity exists not only in the working place, but also in women digital creative entrepreneurs' personal lives. They are facing challenges posed by patriarchal power and the intensification of work at the same time, where they aspire to achieve greater career advancement while being expected to conform to the gendered roles: getting married, raising children, and supporting their family. In this sense, these work-life conflicts lead to stress and tension.

While approached separately in the analysis, these aforementioned three categories can be infused with each other, indicating the precarious lived experience of women digital creative entrepreneurs. Together, they form an explanatory framework to achieve a more textured understanding of women digital creative entrepreneurs' experiences as they constantly negotiate individual aspirations with the state's governance, entrepreneurship norms and sociocultural constraints. Embedded in the tradition of qualitative research, my findings do not claim to be representative or conclusive. Instead, it is essentially exploratory in nature, choosing to bring out gendered experiences of women entrepreneurs and tease out common threads for future research possibilities.

This research makes contributions to the following aspects. First, studies on gender and creative work rarely go beyond the western neoliberal perspective; however, this study offers a timely analysis of the lived experience of women entrepreneurs in China's digital creative industries especially in the context of Shenzhen. Given the specificity of the Chinese politico-economic context, this topic is still under-explored in the current scholarship, yet it is very important and urgent. This research brings gender politics to the fore in discourses of entrepreneurship in digital creative industries in contemporary China, and seeks to understand the lived experiences of women digital creative entrepreneurs in the specific social, economic, political and cultural contexts of China.

Second, the current debate of precarity in the creative economy mainly lies in the domain of labour; by examining the lived experience of women entrepreneurs, this study reveals that

precarity not only penetrates creative workers' work life, but also penetrates their personal life. Despite this, women entrepreneurs employ various strategies to manage the risks and uncertainty coming with their entrepreneurship. In this way, this study extends the current debate of precarity in the creative economy.

Third, the study may be useful for government officers and industrial practitioners in their real work. For government officers, suggestions made would be: (1) allowing diversified forms of entrepreneurship and a slow-burn process. While the digital technology-enabled entrepreneurship may bring more growth, gaps are evident in the support for those cultural meaning-making and art-oriented entrepreneurship, which is important to foster a vigorous creative economy; (2) reducing the gender gaps in technology. Digital technologies are the infrastructure for digital creative industries in the future, and it is necessary for women to be equipped with technology skills and capabilities.

For industrial practitioners, recommendations include: (1) better incubation and mentorship programs towards women. Entrepreneurship can be a process of "learning by doing", the experience passed on from industrial practitioners would better suit the needs for emerging women digital creative entrepreneurs; (2) more cooperation with the research-intensive institutions focusing on gender. The gender-related issues are made public mainly through the narratives of women digital creative entrepreneurs themselves, and, sometimes, women themselves don't have good solutions to cope with these issues. Therefore, it is necessary to bring in the research-intensive institutions, to better identify the issues and offer suggestions.

There are some limitations with this research as well. One principal shortcoming is that digital creative industries are broad, and any attempt to examine the entrepreneurial practices in such broad-spectrum industries may not have covered some of the more complex issues by focusing on a certain specific industry. This was given some consideration before starting this project. However, as digital creative industries are still growing, and the women digital creative entrepreneurs are not in big numbers, I finally decided to focus on the broad-spectrum industries and recruit as many participants as possible.

There are a few directions that future research on gender, entrepreneurship and the creative economy might follow. First, researchers could undertake empirical studies on women entrepreneurship with a focus on specific industry in China's digital creative economy. The digital technologies penetration in the creative economy leads to a more complicated creative economy landscape in China (Wen, 2017). A notable phenomenon is the platformisation of China's creative economy (Keane et al., 2020; Plantin & de Seta, 2019; Zhang, 2021). Industries

such as eSports (Lin & Zhao, 2020) and livestreaming (Lin & de Kloet, 2019) have emerged. Among the extant scholarship on gender and creative work, much of it focuses on the "feminine" fields, such as media, and attention has been paid to the interaction of gender, technology and platform governance (Han, 2022). However, there is very limited study on women's entrepreneurship in emerging industries. Examining women's entrepreneurship in certain industries helps us to understand more complex issues through a gendered lens.

Second, women's entrepreneurship in the digital creative industries is a highly complex process, and the long-term ethnographic exploration needs continuous efforts. Entrepreneurship, in general, consists of opportunity discovery (i.e., entrepreneur's class, personal traits), evaluation and exploitation of opportunities (i.e., social/economic/cultural capital, societal/environmental/technological variables), and even the failure of entrepreneurship. Further investigation on the issue, such as the failure of the entrepreneurship, may lead to more in-depth understanding on creative work and women entrepreneurs.

Thirdly, more research could be done in cities such as Beijing and Guangzhou in China. For this research, I mainly paid attention to women digital creative entrepreneurs in Shenzhen. In the existing literature, both Lin (2022) and Chow (2019) have focused on women creative workers in Shanghai. Relatively little attention has been paid to women creative workers in cities such as Beijing, Guangzhou, etc. Geographic locality might be a factor that induces different mechanisms in the digital creative industries because of its cultural diversity and industrial density. Furthermore, it may represent a different gender landscape. In this way, it is necessary to conduct research in some other cities to better understand women creative workers in China.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview questions to women digital creative entrepreneurs

1. Your personal information
1.1 Could you please introduce yourself, such as your age, education or training background? 1.2 Could you please describe your role in the start-up? 1.3 Do you think the digital technology can better facilitate you to apply your creativity? 1.4 How would you tell the story of your career as a woman digital creative entrepreneur? 1.5 What are the opportunities or barriers you have as a woman digital creative entrepreneur? 1.6 How would you expect your future to be? Or what do you want to achieve from work?
2. information about the start-up
2.1 How long has the start-up been running? 2.2 What kind of services or products does the start-up provide? 2.3 How to describe your company's competitive edge? 2.4 Could you please describe your workplace culture? How about gender diversity? 2.5 What kind of measures do you think the government can take to better facilitate women in digital creative industries?
3. Family information
3.1 What is your role in your family? 3.2 What are the attitudes of your family members towards your career? 3.3 What does your family expect from you? 3.4 What do you think of work-life balance?

Appendix B: Samples of document that have been analysed for this research

1. Government reports and policies

1.1 'Several Opinions on Promoting the Integration and Development of Cultural Creativity and Design Services with Related Industries' issued China's State Council in 2014. See: http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2014-03/14/content_8713.htm

1.2 'State Council's Guiding Opinions on Actively Promoting "Internet+" Action' issued by China's State Council in 2015. See: http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2015-07/04/content_10002.htm

1.3 'Opinions on Several Policies and Measures for Vigorously Advancing Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation' issued by China's State Council in 2015. See: http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2015-06/16/content_9855.htm

1.4 '13th Five Year Plan (2016-2020) for the Development of National Strategic Emerging Industries' issued by China's State Council in 2016. See: http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2016-12/19/content_5150090.htm

1.5 'Equality, Development and Sharing: The Development and Progress of Women's Cause in the Past 70 Years in China' issued by the State Council Information Office of China in 2019. See: http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2019-09/19/content_5431327.htm

1.6 '49th Statistical Report on the Internet Development in China' issued by China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) in 2022. See: https://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/hlwtjbg/202202/t20220225_71727.htm

2. Media coverage and reports

2.1 'The founder of Kuaikan Comics Chen Anne: How to achieve the 1% miracle of life' released by China Daily in 2018. See: http://m.xinhuanet.com/2018-03/13/c_129828313.htm

2.2 'Recording entrepreneurs—conversation with the founder of Zaojiu Tang Weiwei' posted by 36Kr in 2018. See: https://www.36kr.com/p/1722440679425

2.3 'Digital economy and talent development in the Guangdong-Hong Kong- Macau Greater Bay Area' released by Tsinghua SEM, Center for Internet Development and Governance (CIDG) and Linkedin in 2019. See: https://economicgraph.linkedin.com/zh-cn/research/digital-economy-talent-development-report-china-greater-bay-area-cn

3. Participants social media