

“It is Difficult to Balance Research and
Teaching Time, Let Alone Family”: An
Analysis of Women’s Experiences
Working as Academics in
Contemporary Chinese Universities

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Abstract

Teaching is widely viewed as a suitable career suitable for women in China. In 2020, women represented half of the academic body at higher education institutions (MOE, 2020). Although academics' career development and plight have recently received increasing attention from scholars and the public, women's perspectives and daily experiences in academic careers and family life have yet to receive sufficient academic attention. This thesis explores academic women's views and experiences working as academics in contemporary Chinese universities. Drawing upon in-depth interviews with 20 women academics from 14 different universities in China, this thesis focuses on three main questions: 1) why women choose academic careers 2) what are the everyday experiences of women academics 3) how gender affects women's academic recruitment and career development. The difference between expectations and actual experiences was a theme that came out of the interviews, and a conclusion is that experiences do not match perceptions in some ways. The data analysis covers three chapters, focusing on the social perceptions of academic career for women, women's gendered experiences within academia, and women's coping strategies. This thesis argues that the characteristics of the academic career fit the traditional family division of labour, reinforcing social expectations for women academics to prioritise families over careers. However, women in academia become torn between work and family demands. Universities' merit-based hiring and promotion structures ostensibly provide equal opportunities but in practice informal mechanisms operate to discriminate against women. My research indicates that women adopt a number of coping strategies in their attempt to balance work and family duties, such as planning pregnancies to fit best with the university calendar and career milestones and choosing less research-focused universities. Overall, the findings suggest that social expectations for women academics and gender inequalities in day-to-day work contribute to the disadvantages of women in academia.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Table of Contents.....	3
Acknowledgements.....	6
Declaration.....	7
Chapter 1. Introduction.....	8
Introduction.....	8
Statement of the research problem.....	9
Research questions.....	11
Thesis structure.....	12
Chapter 2. Review of Literature.....	14
Introduction.....	14
Working women in China.....	15
Gender segregation in the Chinese workplace.....	15
Gender pay gap.....	20
Work-life conflict.....	23
Academic women in Chinese higher education.....	28
Women's employment in academia in historical perspective.....	28
Academic recruitment.....	32
Promotion and gender segregation of academic ranks.....	34
Work-life balance.....	41
Conclusion.....	44
Chapter 3. Research Methodology.....	46
Introduction.....	46
Research method.....	46
Pilot interviews.....	50
Recruiting participants.....	52
Ethical practices.....	60
My position in the research process.....	63
Power relations.....	65

Data processing and analysis	69
Conclusion.....	73
Chapter 4. Social expectations of academic work for women	74
Introduction.....	74
Academic careers are <i>wending</i>	75
<i>Bianzhi</i>	76
Steady job and family.....	78
Academic careers are <i>linghuo</i>	83
Academic careers are <i>danchun</i>	88
Small social circles.....	89
Less <i>yingchou</i>	90
Educational capital	93
Children's education	96
Conclusion.....	100
Chapter 5. Work Experiences of Women Academics	101
Introduction.....	101
Academic recruitment.....	101
Recruitment criteria	102
Gender inequality in academic recruitment	104
Prestigious universities or first-tier universities	109
Academic workload	113
Heavy teaching load.....	114
The paramount importance of research work	116
Gender differences in teaching and research	119
Work-life conflict	122
Academic career development.....	123
Overlapping early career and women's reproduction	124
Gender differences in promotion speed	126
Gender inequality in professorships	129
Few women lead research projects	131
Conclusion.....	136
Chapter 6. Women's Coping Strategies.....	139
Introduction.....	139

Financial independence for increased decision-making power.....	139
Academic husband shares housework.....	143
Supports from supervisor in academic recruitment.....	147
Determining the childbearing times.....	148
Accessing academic networks.....	151
Conclusion.....	156
Chapter 7. Conclusion.....	157
Introduction.....	157
Self-reflection.....	157
Career ‘choices’ for women academics.....	159
Demanding family work.....	163
Flexible working hours— a double-edged sword.....	165
Women’s responsibility in children's education.....	168
Demanding teaching and research work.....	172
Academic motherhood penalty.....	173
Career development penalty.....	174
Motherhood wage penalty.....	177
Vertical gender segregation.....	179
Common strategies of women academics.....	181
Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.....	185
Appendices.....	187
Appendix I Interview Outline.....	187
Appendix II Consent Form for Participants.....	190
Appendix III Consent Form for Participants (Chinese version).....	191
Appendix IV Information sheet for participants.....	192
Appendix V Information sheet for participants (Chinese version).....	194
References.....	196

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Declaration

In accordance with university regulations, I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work, and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other university. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Chapter 1. Introduction

Introduction

My primary motivation for doing this research was my desire to be an academic at a Chinese university and my interest in gender equality and women's studies. Growing up in a socialist country that advocates equality between men and women, I once believed that China had achieved equality between men and women because both women and men can go to school and work. After I came to the UK to study Human Resource Management and began to learn more about the working environment from an international perspective, I started to change my previous views about gender equality in China. During my Master's study, I was particularly interested in gender management in organisations and related knowledge about gender equality. My theoretical knowledge made me pay more attention to and think about what gender equality looks like, including whether men and women can have equal pay at work and whether men and women have equal opportunities to be recruited and promoted. However, I considered that my management knowledge was insufficient to help me understand how working women in China are characterised by gendered societal and cultural norms. Thus, I chose to further my education in Women's studies with the purpose of gaining more knowledge about gender equality. During my Ph.D, I started a series of courses on gender issues that helped me reflect on my experience growing up as a woman in China. I gradually began to think about the underlying mechanisms that lead to gender inequality at work, such as career development opportunities and marriage and family relationships.

I chose to focus my doctoral study on women academics because becoming a university teacher is my dream job. Knowing that the requirements for university teachers' academic qualifications are increasing, I considered that doctoral study is a necessary step to help me get my dream job. Previously, however, a female scholar shared her experience of working in a Chinese university with me, which also aroused my interest in researching my research questions. After I told her about my plan to return to China to pursue an academic career after graduation, she shared her feelings during her career choice period with me. She felt that she was influenced by the whole society, especially by her family and friends, when choosing an academic career. This was because everyone said that a university career is friendly for women. However, after she entered

the university to work, she found that the reality was completely different from her expectations.

Her words made me reflect on my own growth as a woman and my career choice. University teachers are regarded as one of the most prestigious professions in China. Growing up, I often heard people around me say that a girl can be a teacher when she grows up. My grandparents asked me what I planned to do in the future. I replied that I wanted to be a university teacher without even thinking about it. My grandma supported my career choice, explaining that she felt being a university teacher was decent and suitable for women, especially since a university teaching position provides women stability and flexibility in scheduling. With few opportunities to speak with women academics about their everyday feelings and experiences, I became increasingly interested in hearing their voices. What this female scholar said made me wonder whether my family or the whole society influenced my career choice growing up. Like the female scholar, are there other academic women who chose academic careers because of social influences? Most importantly, what is the reality of women working in Chinese universities as academics? Therefore, I sought to listen to the voices of women academics through this research. Through this research, I hope to shed more light on issues of gender equality in the Chinese university system through the experiences and feelings of academic women.

Statement of the research problem

China has the second-largest economy in the world and continues to grow rapidly (Sung, 2023). Their economic development and performance have benefited Chinese citizens and improved their living standards. However, economic development is far from achieving gender equality within the country (Bian, 1994; Jiang, 2019; Cooke and Zhao, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2022).

An important indicator of the advancement of women's status in China is reflected in the field of education (Gaskell et al., 2004). Chinese women were denied access to education for centuries. Since the West Zhou Dynasty (1046-770BC), Chinese women were restricted to the household, and they were not permitted to acquire knowledge of the outside world because one of the virtues of women is 'ignorance', as proved by a discourse of 'ignorance is a virtue' (Chen; 2022; You and Nussey, 2022; Rofel, 1994).

Women of higher status or wealthy families were able to access education, but the purpose was to cultivate 'virtuous mothers and good wives' (Cong, 2003). In the 20th century, influenced by the New Culture Movement (May Fourth Movement),¹ women started to enter universities to study and work (Tang and Horta, 2021). Since the Communist Party came to power in 1949, women's participation in education and paid work increased rapidly. The Government had promoted women's participation in paid work, including academic work, to promote socialist construction and gender equality. Chairman Mao Zedong declared that 'women hold up half the sky' and 'what men can do, women can do', which proves that women are a resource that ought to be deployed outside of the households into the professional fields. The ideology of gender equality became the mainstream discourse in Chinese society for decades, even though studies suggest that gender equality was not actually achieved in the Mao era and even had a tendency to regress in the post-Mao era (Jie, 2007; Rofel, 1999; Barlow, 1994). In the process of tremendous social changes, including economic reform in the 1980s and the expansion of higher education in the 2000s, the proportion of women academics in higher education has been increasing and has gradually become the teaching force in Chinese universities (Tang and Horta, 2021; Zhang, 2000; Shi, 1995). In 2020, women academics made up half of the academic body (50.32%) in Chinese higher education institutions (MOE, 2020).

Although Chinese women academics have achieved numerical equality with men, they are still in a disadvantaged position. Women academics are overrepresented at the lower lecturer levels and are clustered in the liberal arts and humanities disciplines (Shuang, 2017). Male academics and female academics have different retirement ages - 60 for male academics and 55 for female academics (Luo and Wei, 2013). Women also have a double burden of domestic duties and professional responsibility because of the unequal division of labour in the home (Huang and Xiao, 2000; Zhang and Farley, 1995). Chinese scholars in the 1990s and early 2000s explored the gender issues of women academics from the women's role conflicts (Cao, 2008; Wan, 2008; Wei, 2002; Huang and Xiao, 2000; Huang, 1996; Qu, 1995), women's physical and mental health (Zheng, 2004; Liu and Liu, 2002), women's social status (Zhao, 2007; Gaskell et al., 2004; Zhang, 2000; Zhang, 1997). With the implementation of a series of reforms to improve research

¹ The New Culture Movement [新文化运动] was a movement in China in the 1910s and 1920s that criticised classical Chinese ideas and promoted a new Chinese culture based upon progressive, modern ideals like elections and science.

performance and the quality of higher education, such as introducing competition mechanisms and integrating into global research and higher education systems, academics in today's universities need to cope with higher demands, such as obtaining advanced degrees and annual academic publications of academic texts targets (Gao and Zheng, 2020; Lai and Li, 2020; Lai, Du and Lo, 2016; Gao, 2015; Flowerdew and Li, 2009). While research has begun to emerge, relatively little is known about how these changes present new challenges for women academics in their everyday work and family. Therefore, in this study, I plan to investigate Chinese women's experiences in their academic careers in contemporary Chinese universities from the perspectives of academic women to explore both the expectations and realities of academic life for women.

Research questions

My research focuses on Chinese women academics, also known as university women teachers in China (Cao, 2008). My research aims to explore women's views and experiences working as academics in contemporary Chinese universities. This investigation attempts to deconstruct how gender affects women's academic career choices and development, as well as women's overall experience of balancing academic work and family. I developed the following research questions:

- 1) Why do women choose academic careers?
- 2) What are women academics experiences of academic work?
- 3) How does work-family balance impact on women's academic careers, as well as the impact of gender on recruitment and career development?

To answer these questions, I have adopted a qualitative approach to examine women academics' narratives about their everyday work experiences. I have conducted in-depth interviews with 20 women academics from 14 different universities in China. As discussed further in my methodology chapter, I paid close attention to the ethical dimensions of the research process, power relations and my own positionality as a researcher to enable female academic participants to express their own personal stories through the interviews.

Thesis structure

There are six chapters following this introduction. Chapter 2 is this study's literature review, divided into two parts. I first explore the main themes in relevant literature pertaining to Chinese working women. I then review a range of literature that looks specifically at women academics in Chinese higher educational institutions. I discuss the history of Chinese women academics and the limited amount of research on these women.

Chapter 3 explained the methodology and research method of this study. I first introduce the interpretivist approach, viewing experience as a valid resource for generating knowledge. I then chose a qualitative research method to obtain data on women's experiences. In order to explore the experience of Chinese women academics in their everyday lives, I gathered first-hand accounts of 20 women academics through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. These women academics all have more than three years of work experience in Chinese universities that offer undergraduate degrees, and they all undertake teaching and research simultaneously. In this chapter, I also review how I recruited my participants and my interviews with them. Then, I present the key issues that arose during my interviews, such as ethical practices and power relations between researchers and participants. In the end, I explain the subsequent data analysis processes to demonstrate the reliability and validity of the research findings.

The following three chapters discuss the research findings. The analysis in Chapter 4 focuses on deconstructing the main reasons why academic women choose careers, or in other words, why women are expected by society to choose academic careers. By analysing my participants' accounts of their daily family practices, I argue that the reason why university teaching is considered a good profession for women is that it is seen as enabling women to fulfil their traditional family obligations of 'supporting their husbands and educating sons' (Zhang, 2000). Chapter 5 focuses on Chinese women academics' day-to-day working lives. The analysis is based on my participants' descriptions of academic careers, including academic recruitment, academic workload, and career development. I also look into gender differences in teaching, research, and promotion at universities. The discussions of overlapping early career and family responsibilities for women also demonstrate that women academics are disadvantaged in academic careers. In Chapter 6, I extend my discussion to women's negotiation of gender in academic work and family life. I examine my participants' accounts about how they have

improved their bargaining power in family life, including how women's earnings and having an academic husband can expand women's ability to carve out domestic time to focus on work demands. In the second half of this chapter, I explore common coping strategies for women academics at work. These strategies include how they respond to gender inequality in hiring, how they deal with reproductive demands early in their careers, and how they expand their academic networks.

In the final chapter, I present my conclusions of this thesis. I begin with a self-reflection on my fieldwork, particularly the impact of this research on my choice of an academic career. I summarise the demanding family, teaching and research work of women academics. Then I analyse gender inequality in academic careers, including the motherhood penalty and vertical gender segregation. I also present coping strategies for women facing a double burden of work and family. In the end, I consider my research's limitations and avenues for future research that builds upon this doctoral thesis.

Chapter 2. Review of Literature

Introduction

China has the world's largest labour force, with approximately 792 million in 2021, of which approximately 350 million are women (Statista, 2022; The World Bank, 2022). The Chinese government attaches great importance to the special status of women and women's education in the modernisation process and supports women's participation in higher education as both students and academics. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, women academics have made significant progress in their number. In 2020, academic women represented half of the academic body, and they are involved in many different disciplines and academic levels in Chinese higher education (MOE, 2020; Tang and Horta, 2021). This shows that academic women already play an important role in Chinese higher education, and this role is likely to continue in the coming years. However, compared to the large number of publications on women academics in higher education in Europe and North America, research on Chinese women academics is growing but still limited.

This chapter aims to present the general background and range of literature relevant to the analysis of academic women in Chinese higher education. To understand the conditions and challenges of women academics, it is important to have a basic understanding of the status of working women in broader Chinese society and then narrow it down to women working as academics in higher education institutions. The key themes addressed in this chapter are gender segregation within and across occupations, gender disparities in pay, and the work-life conflict issues faced by working women since the reform and opening up in 1978. This chapter also briefly introduces the status, role and activities of Chinese academic women from a historical perspective to better understand the situation of modern academic women. Since an academic's income is often related to position and research work, content on gender pay gaps in academic careers is discussed alongside promotions. Themes established on Chinese academic women include equal opportunity for academic recruitment and promotion, gender segregation across disciplines and academic ranks, and work-life conflicts.

Working women in China

Gender segregation in the Chinese workplace

Gender segregation is an important demographic problem across industrialised societies (Watts, 1998) and is often seen as a major source of social inequality (Charles and Grusky, 2004). There are two types of recognised gender segregation in the workplace: one type is vertical gender segregation, which concerns the gender gap in rank and level within an occupation, reflecting gender differences in status and seniority in the job they undertake (Levanon and Grusky, 2016; Barth, Kerr, and Olivetti 2021); another type is horizontal segregation, known as occupational gender segregation, which focuses on the distribution of women and men across different occupational categories (Blackburn, Browne, Brooks and Jarman, 2002). According to the data from International Labour Organization on sex and occupation in 121 countries, gender segregation still exists in global occupations (ILO, 2020). In terms of vertical segregation, across all occupations, men dominate 72% of senior management positions globally, such as CEOs, senior officials, and legislators (ILO, 2020). Across 121 countries, occupations with the largest proportion of women are personal care workers (88%), followed by health associate professionals (76%), cleaners (74%), keyboard clerks (71%) and teaching professionals (68%), while occupations with the largest proportion of men are building and related trades (97%) and drivers (97%). Desk-bound jobs, hospitality and craft work are shared almost equally between men and women. In a world in which the digital economy is desirable, related occupations often come with a high average salary, and such occupations, such as IT, science, and engineering, are dominated by men globally at about 72% (ILO, 2020).

A range of theoretical perspectives has been developed to explain why occupational gender segregation occurs. Traditional economic theory explains that men and women are allocated to different occupations because of their 'natural differences' in skills and characteristics (Becker, 1985). For example, Baker and Cornelson (2018) investigated the link between sex-based skills/characteristics and occupational segregation in the US labour market and claimed that males have a higher tolerance for noise (Velle, 1987), resulting in disproportionate employment in noisy occupations. Becker's position relies on biological essentialism. However, feminist researchers have criticised biological essentialism that uses 'natural' or 'biological' explanations in human behaviour (Richardson and Robinson, 2020). Feminist studies found that women's skills are not only devalued but that women are often excluded from acting within the male constructs

of skills through discriminatory practices in order to preserve men's perceived superiority (Lewis, 1984; Daune-Richard, 2000). As a result, occupational gender segregation is partly related to women being confined to 'female occupations' that only requires certain skills, such as 'caring' skill. These skills are assumed to arise from women's nature rather than acquired through training and career development.

Recent studies also explored different occupational preferences between men and women as an alternative explanation for occupational gender segregation, that women may prefer and choose certain occupations over others. For example, compared to men, women are more risk averse (Eckel and Grossman, 2008; Croson and Gneezy, 2009); women have a lower preference for competition when other options are available (Niederle and Vesterlund, 2007); and they are less likely to use negotiating methods to obtain higher pay and promotions (Babcock and Laschever, 2003; Bowles, Babcock and Lai, 2007). These factors, it is argued, lead women to choose and continue to work in less competitive and more stable income occupations, even though they know that these occupations tend to have lower average wages (Bonin et al., 2007). However, Akerlof and Kranton (2000) counter that gender differences in occupational preferences are influenced by gender-based social identity, i.e., what are appropriate behaviours and jobs for women and men? If a person works in the occupation of the opposite sex, he/she may experience ambivalence at work (Pierce, 1995). For example, lawyers are often seen as a men's occupation. Women in this profession consider themselves as women, but to be good lawyers, they must act like a 'rambo' or 'men' at work (Pierce, 1995). Therefore, preferences for certain jobs are not because of some natural difference between men and women but instead as the result of social conditioning.

Studies have shown that gender segregation exists within and across professional occupations in the Chinese labour market (Dong et al., 2004; Cooke, 2010; Wei, 2011; Gao, Lin and Ma, 2016; Liu, 2019; Knight, 2016; Su et al., 2021; Bai et al., 2022). It is well documented that women have difficulty accessing career advancement and are consequently underrepresented in senior positions across occupations (Leung, 2002; Liu, 2007; Wei, 2011; Gao, et al., 2016; Liu, 2019). For example, Gao et al. (2016) focused on female executives in large Chinese companies and found that women hold significantly fewer corporate executive positions and board seats than men because of gender discrimination. If the company is in a province with a higher men-to-women birth ratio, indicating a higher degree of discrimination against women in the region, then the

proportion of female executives in the top management team will be even lower (Gao et al., 2016). Knight (2016) summarises the proportion of men and women in urban employment in 15 occupational categories and finds that gender occupational segregation showed an intensifying trend. Occupations that were female-dominated in 1998 became more so in 2010, and vice versa for male-dominated occupations. Bai et al. (2022) provide similar results by exploring the top 20 occupations with the largest number of employees using large-scale data from online recruitment websites from 2014 to 2015. They found that men dominate all tech-related occupations, such as managerial engineering technicians, telecommunications engineering technicians and other professional technicians, while occupations such as accountants, office clerks and community service, which are often considered more feminine, and less pay, are still dominated by women. Su et al. (2021) used a questionnaire survey and suggest that the unbalanced distribution of males and females across occupations can also be exhibited in language. The expression '*nv bao mu*' ([女保姆] female nanny) is common in Chinese, while '*nan bao mu*' ([男保姆] male nanny) was not attested. This not only implies gender stereotyping of nannies are female but also suggests that women are overrepresented in 'female job'. This reflects nursing and service-related work, which is a continuation of women's previous non-market activities in the domestic sphere, which are still largely performed by women.

Existing study on gender segregation at work in China attempts to explain its causes in the context of Chinese culture and has identified two main causes, namely traditional Chinese gender norms and the impact of market reforms. Chinese traditional families and society were extremely patriarchal and collectivistic (Woodhams, Xian and Lupton, 2015; Chen and Ge, 2018). This patriarchy draws on Confucian values to place Chinese women in a subordinate position to men, who were excluded from public life and whose primary roles were defined as wives and mothers (Eagly, Wood, and Diekmann, 2000; Liu, Dong and Zheng, 2010; Chen and Ge, 2018). Within the family, traditional gender norms require wives to obey their husbands and support them by doing housework and raising children (Ban, 2003). Family collectivism also requires wives to put the family first and serve the collective needs of the husband's family rather than themselves (Leung, 2002; Liu, Dong and Zheng, 2010). Some of the traditional notions and practices regarding gender relations and the family still exist today, such that Chinese women are primarily responsible for taking care of children and other family members, as well as most of the housework (Xie, 2013). At the same time, women in dual-earner families should prioritise

the career development of their husbands and the welfare of their families, rather than their own careers (Yu and Yang, 1994; Granrose, 2007; Liu, Dong and Zheng, 2010).

Another aspect of gender segregation is directly related to China's economic transition, which has long-lasting negative impacts on women in the labour market (Knight, 2016; He and Wu, 2017). Evidence suggests that women are becoming more segregated to lower-paid sectors, thereby contributing to the widening gender pay gap in China (Liu, Meng and Zhang, 2000; Shu and Bian, 2003; Dong et al., 2004; Zhang, et al., 2008; Wei, 2011). At the beginning of the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese Communist government strongly supported equality between men and women and took practical measures to encourage women to participate in paid employment. The Chinese urban workplaces that provided 'iron rice bowl' [铁饭碗] jobs, such as universities, were commonly known as *danwei* ([单位] work units) (Ding, Goodall and Warner, 2006; Liu, 2007; Bodenhorn, Burns and Palmer, 2020). *Danwei* not only provides lifetime employment to their staffs but also provides welfare services, such as the provision of housing, free staff canteens, free medical care and free day nurseries, which slightly eases women's family responsibilities (Croll, 1978; Cooke, 2001; Zhang, 2018). Under this *danwei* system, the government was the main employer of the urban labour force, and all workers were assigned to work and received wages in government, institutions, and public enterprises (Wu, 2002; Zhang, 2018). As a result, the participation rate of women in full-time work has increased dramatically since 1949, along with the introduction of relatively equal pay and a strict prohibition of discrimination against women (He and Wu, 2017). However, *danwei* was not a gender-neutral workplace. Bain (1994) explored the gender division of household work in China, indicating that only male employees in *danwei* could apply for allocated housing. The housing issue was also mentioned by Gaskell et al. (2004).

This situation changed after the reform and opening up in 1978. Since the mid-1980s, the lifetime employment system has been replaced by the labour contract system and working women have lost the institutional protection afforded by the state that once committed to gender egalitarianism, which has led to overt discrimination against women in the urban labour market (Maurer-Fazio, Rawski and Zhang, 1999). Mass layoffs occurred in the mid-1990s as state-owned enterprises attempted to reduce costs and increase profitability (Liu, 2007; Ding, Dong and Li, 2009), of which 62.8% of laid-off workers were women (Zheng, 2003). Large numbers of laid-off women workers were

later absorbed into light industries and service industries, such as textiles, with high employment uncertainty and low wage (Wu, 2002). But men were more likely to be recruited into heavy industry and other high-paying occupations (Liu, 2007). This is because gender became an important factor in recruitment, with men being the preferred choice because employers expect women will invest less time to work upon getting married and giving birth. For the same reason, women workers face glass ceilings in promotion, leading to uneven distribution of men and women between levels in the same occupation (Chi and Li, 2008; Cheung and Halpern, 2010). In addition, due to the increasing pressure for profits and rapid economic reforms, most Chinese companies and government-related agencies stopped providing childcare services (Du and Dong, 2010). Instead, the number of private kindergartens has increased rapidly since the mid-1990s, but there are concerns about their quality and affordability (He and Jiang, 2008). As Chinese women are expected to take primary responsibility in the household, these childcare changes bring more pressure to childcare for women in dual-career households (Zhang, 2018). Chinese women are expected to choose jobs that are more suitable for them while completing their obligation of fulfilling family obligations (Wu, Ye and He, 2014).

Liu (2019) observed the in-work poverty issue from the dimension of gender employment segregation and found that Chinese women are over-represented in low-quality and low-paying jobs. Liu (2019) described the situation as gendered in-work poverty. Based on organisational resources, economic resources and cultural resources, Liu devised 5 classes and hierarchies (upper class, upper-middle class, middle class, lower-middle class and lower class), and found that women are at a disadvantageous position in the Chinese labour market. For example, national and community managers, managers and owners of private enterprises belong to the upper class in China, women accounted for only 25.1% in 2010. Among the upper-middle and middle classes are professionals and technical personnel, and the proportion of women is similar to that of men. However, within the upper-middle and middle classes, men dominate the well-paid sectors of scientists and technicians (60.2%), while women dominate the lesser-paid sectors such as business transaction (70.5%). As a result, since the upper and upper middle classes are dominated by men, they have a dominant position and power in economic and political decision-making and resource allocation. Conversely, the lack of women at the top has also resulted in the suppression of the interests and demands of female workers to a certain extent.

Gender pay gap

The gender pay gap, defined as the difference in average earnings between women and men, persists in most countries and has become a serious social problem (Bai et al., 2022). As a prominent factor when evaluating gender inequality, closing the gender pay gap is critical to achieving gender equality. Based on 73 countries, the Global Wage Report 2018/2019 also suggests that the global median monthly wage ratio for women to men is 78% (ILO, 2018). This means women earn 78% of what men earn every month.

China is the country with the largest labour workforce in the world, with a working population of about 792 million in 2021 (Statista, 2022). Combined with the gender ratio of the total labour force of 44.5%, the number of Chinese working women is around 350 million in 2021 (The World Bank, 2022). According to Global Gender Gap Report published in 2022, Chinese women's labour force participation rate is relatively high, ranked 54 out of 146 countries (World Economic Forum, 2022). However, in terms of gender inequality or gender gap, which is mostly evaluated from four dimensions: economic participation, educational attainment, political participation, and health welfare, China currently ranks 102 in the world (World Economic Forum, 2022).

The gender wage gap is a key issue in the dimension of economic participation, involving some 350 million women workers in China. During the stated-planned economy period (1949-1978), the gender pay gap was relatively low under the control of strong central planning and egalitarianism (Liu, Meng and Zhang, 2000; Gustafsson and Wan, 2020). Since 1978, China has embarked on large-scale economic reforms, gradually replacing the centrally controlled employment system with a labour contract system. Since then, the gender pay gap has widened and gender discrimination in the workplace has resurfaced (Xiu and Gunderson, 2013). For example, using Urban Household Survey data collected by China's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), studies by Zhang et al. (2008) and Chi and Li (2008) show that women's income relative to men declined from 86.3% in 1988 to 76.2% in 2004. This decreasing trend in the ratio of female-to-male wages was also found in the study by Gustafsson and Li (2000), Shu and Bian (2003), Bishop, Luo, and Wang (2005), and Lee and Wie (2017).

Worsening income inequality and possible social instability arouse the concern of the Chinese government (Liu, 1999). The government has taken steps to limit the wage gap,

such as intervening in wage determination in the public sector and providing administrative guidance in the private sector (Iwasaki and Ma, 2020). The government also implemented a minimum wage policy in 1993. Although this policy was intended to reduce poverty as a whole, and not specifically the gender wage gap, it is one of the potential side effects. This is because the majority of low-income workers that benefits from the minimum wage policy are women, meaning their average wage increased more than men's as a result of this policy. However, Li and Ma (2015) concluded from their DID (difference-in-differences) analysis that this effect is not obvious in the short term (Li and Ma, 2015). The 1994 Labour Law also stipulates that people have equal rights in paid work and that employers should not reject women because of their gender. Bai et al. (2022) studied the CV data of more than 10 million Chinese online job seekers and concluded that the average income of Chinese women was 71.57% of men's average income in 2015. In addition, according to reports by recruitment site Zhaopin.com, the average monthly income of women in urban China in 2020 and 2021 is 6847 RMB (817 GBP) and 7017 RMB (838 GBP), respectively, which are 75.9% and 77.1% compared to men's average monthly income (Jimu News, 2021). These studies show that the gender pay gap in China is close to the global average (78%), but Chinese women still earn less money than their male colleagues in the workplace.

Gender inequality in pay has been a key concern to feminist researchers for many years. In western societies, research has shown that the existence of a gender pay gap is associated with gender segregation, discrimination, and individual characteristics, such as education, training and work experience (Petersen and Morgan, 1995; Rubery, Grimshaw and Figueiredo, 2005; Auspurg, Hinz and Sauer, 2017; Blau and Khan 2017). Similarly, a wide range of contributing factors are also found in Asian countries (Hallward-Driemeier, Rijkers and Waxman, 2017; Deshpande Goel and Khanna, 2018; Hara, 2018). In the case of China, existing studies show that China's gender wage gap not only has the above factors but also has national characteristics. These include the human capital and political capital that determine workers' wage level (Maurer-Fazio and Hughes, 2002; Zhang et al., 2008; Xiu and Gunderson, 2013), labour force placement, including segregation of occupations, industries and sectors of ownership (Meng and Miller, 1995; Liu et al., 2017; Ma, 2018; Wang, 2022), discrimination against women workers (Meng, 1998; Gustafson and Li, 2000; Liu, Meng and Zhang, 2000; Li, Song and Liu, 2011; Yang and Peng, 2016; Zhang et al., 2021; Sung, 2023), discrimination within sectors or organisations (Gao, Lin and Ma, 2016; Feng, Cooke and Zhao, 2020).

Several studies have attempted to investigate pay inequality in China from a gender perspective. Zhang et al. (2008) analyse the China Urban Labour Survey/China Adult Literacy Survey and found that although the gender gap in observed skills, such as education, narrowed over the years, Chinese women are still significantly disadvantaged in terms of unobserved skills, especially labour market experience, which contributes to the gender pay gap. Other researchers decompose the overall pay gap into an 'explained' component (such as education and work experience) and an 'unexplained' portion (often labelled as discrimination). These studies explain that 'unexplained' or discriminatory factors have a greater impact than 'explained' factors on the gender pay gap in China (Gustafsson and Li, 2000; Bishop, Luo, and Wang, 2005; Ng, 2007; Zhang et al. 2008; Xiu and Gunderson, 2013). For example, Gustafsson and Li (2000) and Bishop, Luo, and Wang (2005) found the 'unexplained' or discrimination component to be 63.2% and 61% in 1995 respectively. Ng (2007) found that the discriminatory component is greater in the fast-growing regions of China because of the deregulation of wage settings. Xiu and Gunderson (2013) used the data set of Life Histories and Social Change in Contemporary China (LHSCCC) and found that women's base pay, performance pay, and total pay are about three-quarters of men's. They also found that gender discrimination accounts for two-thirds or more of this wage gap, while characteristics associated with higher pay accounts for only one-third. Only a small percentage of women in China offset the pay penalty by higher pay for their various other pay-determining and ability-related characteristics, such as higher education background (Xiu and Gunderson, 2013). Xiu and Gunderson (2013) predict women can obtain higher pay through additional education, which may help narrow the gender pay gap in the future. However, they also argued that taking on the responsibility of caring for children under the age of six has a large negative effect on women's earnings. Contrastingly, by using the Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition method that can quantify the separate contributions of group differences in measurable characteristics such as education, marital status and experience (Blinder, 1973, Oaxaca, 1973), Bai et al. (2022) revealed that between men and women who have similar human capital such as education and experience, there is still a significant gender pay gap. Bai et al (2022) explained that discriminatory factors are the main contributor to the gender pay gap between men and women with similar human capital, suggesting that contrary to Xiu and Gunderson's (2013) prediction, obtaining a higher level of education does not shorten the gender pay gap significantly.

Some studies have adopted the employer discrimination hypothesis (Becker, 1971), suggesting that traditional gender role assumptions underpin workplace gender discrimination, and discrimination against women, especially married women, and women with children, resulting in a widening gender pay gap in China (Zhang et al., 2008; Xiu and Gunderson, 2013; Qi and Dong, 2016; Bai et al., 2022; Ma, 2022). China has a long tradition of Confucianism that emphasises the primary responsibility of women as homemakers and caregivers, which still affects working women in contemporary society (Fan et al., 2014). For example, female workers in China are not just assumed to have more family responsibilities than men but are also under the social expectation to prioritise family roles over their work commitments (Qi and Dong, 2016). Even if female workers have the same ability and productivity as male workers, employers are likely to presume that male workers have more time and energy at work than female workers because of women's family roles, thereby employers often set female workers' wages lower than male workers.

Work-life conflict

In contemporary society, work and family are considered two of the most important areas in adult life, and both require a great amount of time and energy (Gutek, Searle and Klepa, 1991; Moen, 1992; Jacobs and Gerson, 2004). Based on Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), work-life conflict refers to the domains of work and home being incompatible due to their different norms and responsibilities. The time and energy invested in one domain make it difficult for the individual to fulfil their responsibilities in another (Byron, 2005). Work-life conflict is clearly differentiated into two directions, work interferes with home (work-to-family conflict) and family interferes with work (family-to-work conflict) (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Frone, Russell, and Cooper, 1997; Ford, Heinen and Langkamer, 2007; Amstad et al., 2011). Entering the 21st century, the issue of work and life has attracted the attention of researchers. A common finding of empirical research in different social contexts is that levels of work-life conflict have increased in recent decades and affect individual well-being and satisfaction (Pocock, 2005; Bardoel, de Cieri and Santos 2008). Working long hours has become a common trend globally (Cha, 2010; Cha, 2013; Cha and Weeden, 2014; Fein, Skinner and Machin, 2017). Increasing market competition and declining employee job security in the context of globalisation have been cited as a factor contributing to long working hours in industrialised countries (Frenkel et al., 1999). Thus, the ever-growing work-life conflicts are often related to the demands of work, such as heavy workloads and long working hours.

In China, the economic and social influence caused by the imbalance of Chinese workers' work and life has attracted the attention of Chinese academics. Related studies in the English language literature are growing but still limited (Ling and Powell, 2001; Aaltio and Huang 2007; Powell, Francesco and Ling, 2009; Xiao and Cooke, 2012; Cooke and Jing, 2009; Zuo, 2016; Zhang, 2018; Li et al., 2020). Since the start of the economic reform in 1997, the globalisation and rapid development of domestic marketisation have contributed to the development of China's economy. An obvious manifestation of the market intensification process is the excessively long working hours, which have caused Chinese working people to lose a significant amount of family and leisure time (Cooke and Jing, 2009, Xiao and Cooke, 2012; He and Wu, 2021). According to China's National Bureau of Statistics, the average weekly working hours in urban China in 2022 is 48 hours (OEIC, 2022), far exceeding the legal limit of 44 hours per week (According to China's labour laws, a standard workday is eight hours long, with a maximum of 44 hours a week). Actual hours worked per week in some private companies may be longer and may never be formally determined because employers do not disclose true hours worked to avoid overtime pay and legal sanctions (Cooke and Jing, 2009). This overtime culture is known as the '996' work schedule (meaning working from 9 am to 9 pm, six days a week) or '007' (24 hours a day, seven days a week, only resting on rotation breaks). Such toxic culture has been widely discussed on the internet and has attracted attention from the media (Xue, 2019; ChinaSource, 2020). For example, workers in industries and enterprises that encourage '996' schedule, such as IT companies and technology-intensive enterprises, often need to work at least 60 hours per week without overtime pay. Xiao and Cooke (2012) also reported that 60 working hours per week is the norm for many professional workers, particularly for those in the private sector and service industries.

In this overtime working culture in China, recent studies noted that long working hours and no/limited rest days are major sources of work-family conflicts for Chinese employees (Cooke and Jing, 2009; Xiao and Cooke, 2012). For example, employees in government departments and state-owned enterprises encounter great difficulties in work-life balance because they are required to be on stand-by during their non-working time, and they must return to the office at any time for meetings or complete tasks assigned by their superiors whether it is off-hours or not. Xiao and Cooke (2012) explained the practice of sacrificing personal time and needs for work is seen as a form

of commitment to organisations and companies, which is related to the socialist ideology that workers should demonstrate diligence, self-sacrifice, and dedication to the public. Ideal workers are those who show a commitment to working long hours (Zhang, 2018). Besides, sacrificing personal leisure time and family time for work is accompanied by a misconception that one needs to become wealthy first to enjoy life, like Cooke and Jing, (2009) pointed out, 'get rich first, enjoy life later' (p.18). In other words, this misconception further demands that individuals prioritise work over personal pleasure and family. Therefore, most studies of work-life conflict in China show that the negative impact of work on family life tends to be greater than the impact of family life on work (Lu, Shi and Lawler, 2002; Cooke and Jing, 2009).

It should be noted that work-life conflict issues are highly gendered subjects, even despite its apparent gender-neutral language of 'family'. Research has shown that working women experience more work-life conflict than men, making it harder for women to balance work and family (McKie and Callan, 2012). Studies of working women in China also reported that women struggle with work-life balance, as they spend more time than men on housework, and caring for children and family elders (Zhang et al., 2008; Tong and Zhou, 2013; Wu, Wang and Huang, 2016; Zhang, 2018; Shui et al., 2020). There is evidence that family responsibilities may affect women more than men. A 1998 qualitative study of 39 dual-earner couples found that housework fell disproportionately on women (Zuo, 2003). Zhang et al. (2008) reported that married women and mothers have heavy domestic and childcare responsibilities compared to single women, married men, or fathers. Married women spend 17.6 hours per week on housework, while men only spend 9.9 hours. After having children, women's weekly chores increased to almost 37 hours, compared with 19 hours for men (Zhang et al., 2008). Liu (2003) study also found that the most intense period of work-life conflict for professional women is between the ages of 30 and 45. when most Chinese women enter marriage and raise children. Furthermore, Zhang et al. (2008) argued that the standards for being a mother are becoming more demanding in urban China because working mothers are also responsible for the education of their children in addition to their caring responsibilities. The controversial one-child policy, introduced in 1979, limited the number of births per family and called for a better quality of children, which required parents to be responsible for their children's education (Xie, 2021). Many urban families invest more in their only child's education to ensure children's social mobility and their old-age security (Fong, 2004). A competitive education system further pushes urban parents to actively participate in their children's education from a very early stage. Working mothers spend

large amounts of time supervising children's homework and enrolling their children in after-school programs. This method of participating in children's education increases women's work-life conflict and may reduce women's time commitment to their careers. The involvement of mothers in their children's education has also emerged in other East Asian countries (Tsuya and Choe, 2004). In Japan, this phenomenon is known as education mothers (Hirao, 2001). As a result, those who are young, single and more available for long working hours tend to have fewer work-life conflict issues. As Zhang et al. (2008) found that there are no clear gender differences in employment and earnings for single women, married men or fathers, as they all have more time to invest in paid work than married women and mothers.

In addition, gender inequality in unpaid care work is a major factor that disadvantages Chinese women in their employment and earnings (Nan and Dong, 2013; Qi and Dong, 2016; Ma, 2022). This phenomenon is called the motherhood wage penalty (Cukrowska-Torzewska and Lovasz, 2020). Qi and Dong (2016) argued that gender differences in time spent on unpaid care work account for 27-28% of the gender earnings gap in China. Zhang (2011) and Yu and Xie (2014) found that Chinese working women's wage levels decrease as the number of children increases. Ma (2022) reported a slightly different finding that, in the Chinese labour market, married women with one child face the greatest motherhood wage penalty because they not only bear most of the housework and care responsibilities at home but also face suspicion and discrimination about having a second and third child in the future. The disadvantage of motherhood on the gender wage gap further exacerbates work-life conflicts for women in dual-earner households. According to Wu, Feng and Fan (2003), in Chinese dual-earner households, women with lower income weights in household income are more likely to spend more time on family work, and vice versa. Working women who earn 40-60% of household income have more work-life conflicts because their roles are more ambiguous, and they struggle between work and family.

In terms of organisational support to address work-life conflict issues, Cooke and Jing (2009) found that some companies in China introduced welfare programs, social activities and mutual aid programs in an attempt to create a happy and supportive work environment for their employees, such as organising social activities, art and cultural events during festivals and organising company-sponsored holiday trips for employees

and their family members. However, they argued that these interventions do not address work-life conflict on a day-to-day basis and address the root causes of the problem.

Family-friendly policies, such as flexible working arrangements, are often seen as key mechanisms for addressing competing work-life demands (Dulk and Doorne-Huiskes, 2007; Allen et al., 2013). Unlike the UK and many western countries, where part-time work is a useful option to reduce working hours to meet personal needs, most Chinese employees work full-time as part-time work is not an option (Gornick and Meyers, 2003; Dulk and Doorne-Huiskes, 2007; Cooke and Jing, 2009; Ren and Caudle, 2016). Job security is crucial for Chinese employees, both men and women need to work full-time in continuous employment, which is closely related to the lack of social security for unemployment and family-based state benefits in China (Xiao and Cooke, 2012). Therefore, flexible working arrangement in China mainly refers to flexible daily start and finish times and working outside the standard working hours. In Chen (2006)'s study, 37% of knowledge workers agreed that work time flexibility could reduce their work-life conflicts. However, Zhang (2018) questioned the effectiveness of working time flexibility in reducing Chinese employees' work-life conflict. She found that this arrangement in China tends to be organised in favour of the employers rather than the employees. This non-standard working time based on employer requirements could make arranging family time for childcare more difficult for working women (Zhang, 2018).

In the absence of effective organisational interventions to resolve work-life conflicts, it is usually the individuals who adopt a range of coping strategies to balance family and work. Qi and Dong (2016) found that in order to cope with long working hours and heavy domestic burdens, many Chinese workers schedule unpaid care work around paid work. Working Chinese women often complete unpaid care work before or after paid work, and some of them give up work breaks to complete household chores during working hours. Research by Chen (2006) shows that knowledge workers expect their organisations to provide child and elderly care services to support the reduction of work-life conflict. However, few companies and organisations in China offer such childcare support to their employees (Cooke and Jing, 2009). Working mothers tend to draw support for childcare and housework from nursery school, commercial domestic services, and family networks. However, the use of paid care work is largely determined by income level. Higher-income families are more likely to purchase market services, in order to reduce the time they spend on unpaid care work. For example, Aaltio and Huang (2007) study of Chinese

female IT managers found that this group of women receive support from parents or in-laws and commercial domestic helpers in children's homework, babysitting, cleaning, cooking, and shopping. Compared with the buying-in of services, recent studies found grandparent involvement in childcare and housework is more common in Chinese families (Chen, Short and Entwisle, 2000; Goh, 2008; Zhang, 2018). Grandparents, particularly grandmothers, are the people who provided the most domestic support for working mothers (Zhang, 2018). This is partly because childcare is often seen as a shared responsibility of the family in China. Plus, mandatory retirement (Retirement age: 55 for women and 60 for men) allows grandparents to leave work at a relatively young age and have the energy and time to help young couples take care of their families and children (Chen, Short and Entwisle, 2000).

Academic women in Chinese higher education

Women's employment in academia in historical perspective

In the 21st century, the number and proportion of female academics in Chinese higher education have been increasing steadily under the influence of the expansion of universities (Jia, 2015). According to the annual statistics from the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, in 2000, the number of full-time female teachers was 176,965 in regular higher education institutions (including university offering degree programs; higher vocational colleges and other institutions), which account for 38.24% of the total full-time teachers' population (MOE, 2000). This ratio increased steadily to 46.48%, 48.62% and 50.32% in 2010, 2015 and 2020, respectively (MOE, 2010; MOE, 2015; MOE, 2020). However, Tang and Horta (2021) summarised the development history of Chinese academic women based on 355 literature and papers and argued that academic women are still disadvantaged at work because the universities' hierarchies remain male-dominated and that overall, the status of women academics has not been fundamentally improved. Tang and Horta's (2021) study provides historical context on how academic women emerged and expanded, contributing to this study to a better understanding of the current situation of academic women in China and the challenges they face.

When analysing the current position of women in Chinese universities, it is useful to place contemporary relations in a historical perspective. Historically, women in Confucian Chinese society had a markedly inferior status compared to men and were mainly

restricted to activities in the domestic and private sphere (Kazuko, 1989). The traditional Chinese education system is based on Confucianism, and aims at self-cultivation, recruiting talents, governing the country, and honouring ancestors (Hayhoe, 1996). The corresponding educational institution, 'sishu' ([私塾] private school in teacher's home) was once used to train talented male students to become potential government officials. Although a small number of Chinese women had the opportunity to teach lectures occasionally, teaching work was generally accepted as being undertaken only by 'brilliant' men (Gaskell et al., 2004). Under the influence of science and technology brought about by the First Opium War of 1840, this educational model began to change (Ko and Wang, 2006). Several educational institutions were gradually established, among which Peking University is the first modern national university in China. Unlike men who were never barred from participating in higher education because of their sex, Chinese female students were not admitted to any university for study or work until the three missionary women's universities were established. In 1905, Christian Mission founded China's first women's college, called North China United Women's College, and then sponsored the establishment of South China Women's College and Ginling Women's College in 1907 and 1915, respectively. The academic staff of the three missionary universities were composed mainly of Chinese female graduates and foreign women missionaries. The three missionary women's universities played a key role in giving Chinese women access to higher education as students and academic staff. The emergence of academic women provided the basis for later China's government-run universities to recruit and hire women to teach (Xiang, 2017).

In 1919, the New Culture Movement (May Fourth Movement) indirectly promoted the participation of Chinese women in higher education and teaching (Lv and Zheng, 2013). In the same year, Beijing Women's Normal University was established, becoming the first government-run university to only admit female students, but just a year later, this university and other government-run women's universities gradually changed to coeducational. Other national universities, such as Peking University, started recruiting female students and academic staff. Since then, mixed-gender universities have become the norm in Chinese higher education, with more universities hiring academic women as tutors for students (Xiang, 2017). According to Zhang (2010), the proportion of female teachers at Chinese universities rose from 4% of the total academic staff in the country in 1925 to 10% in 1949.

However, Tang and Horta (2021) suggest that Confucianism deeply influenced the first generation of Chinese academic women at work. For example, the ideology of 'male superiority over women' led to discrimination against academic women in recruitment, promotion, and negative stereotypes of women's academic ability. Another Confucian ideology of 'men is in charge of outside business while women are in charge of the indoor' as well as the social expectation of ideal women as 'good wives and mothers' resulted in a large number of academic women resigning from universities after marriage (Sun and Han, 2018). Meanwhile, occupations such as nursing and teaching were generally considered to be in line with female characteristics and social expectations of women's family roles, and related disciplines were subsequently regarded as 'women's fields'. The separation of 'women's fields' and 'men's fields' has further intensified the barriers for women to enter the 'men's fields' as students and academic staff in the disciplines such as finance, politics, science and engineering (Lv, 2017).

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Chinese academic women made significant progress in numbers. In 1950, there were only 1,900 women academics in China, accounting for 11% of the total academics in Chinese higher education. By 1957, the number of academic women had increased to 14,300, about 20% of the total number of academics (Tang and Horta, 2021). This was partly because Mao's slogans 'Women hold up half of the sky' and 'Whatever men can do, women can do too' challenged the Confucian ideology of gender division and male superiority, encouraging women to enter the public spheres and academic work (Huang, 1999; Wu, 2009). Women were encouraged to pursue an academic career with the help of government policies that promote wider participation in higher education, such as students from working-class families could receive greater admission opportunities, tuition waivers, and financial aid (Zhang, 2002). Pan (2001) argued that these policies had largely eliminated the financial burden of women's participation in higher education. However, women's difficulty in entering higher education to study and work was also due to the lack of access to secondary education and the national unified entrance examination (Hayhoe, 1996). Overall, there had been an increase in the number of female students from urban working-class families, some of whom later became academics working at universities (Zhang, 1997), but there had been a disparity in access to higher education and academic work for urban and rural women (Hayhoe, 1996).

In addition to the favourable social conditions and policies, the People's Government followed the Soviet model. This model implemented a centrally planned economy and applied a centrally planned system of job allocation for university graduates. Chinese universities adopted the national assignment system and centrally allocated all academics to different universities across the country (Li, 2018). Female graduates who were assigned to work as academics had relatively equal employment opportunities with male graduates (Tang and Horta, 2021). Academic job at universities was subsumed into *bianzhi* ([编制] established posts, which can be loosely regarded as permanent at hire) system (Xia, et al., 2020; Liu, Xing and Zhang, 2021), which was characterised by 'centrally regulated job allocation, high job security, egalitarian pay systems and cradle-to-grave social welfare systems' (Chen and Wilson, 2003, p. 398). The university was one of the centrally controlled *danwei*, all academics working in universities had welfare services brought by their jobs, such as providing housing, free staff canteens, free medical care and free day nurseries, which slightly reduced family responsibilities of women academics (Tang and Horta, 2021).

During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), China's higher education experienced massive disruption. Almost all universities were closed, the national university entrance examination was abolished, teaching and research were suspended, and academics were sent to the countryside for re-education (Min, 2004). Before the revolution ended, universities were able to resume teaching activities and the number of academic women increased slightly. When the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, the number of academic women was 41,300, accounting for 25% of the academic body (Zhang, 1997) At this point, one's social background was more important than academic qualifications when becoming an academic. This resulted in academic faculty in this period generally having lower academic qualifications. For example, postgraduates, undergraduates and even college students could become academics working in universities after a probationary period if they had strong social backgrounds (Li, 2018).

China's economic reform and opening up in 1978 aimed at 'Four Modernisations' (industry, agriculture, national defence, and science and technology). Since then, China's higher education has aimed to cultivate advanced specialists for socialist reconstruction and scientific and technological development and has begun to expand the scale of universities and reformed the university system. This expansion benefitted academic women in their number, increasing from 49,900 in 1978 to 91,900 in 1985, with

women making up 27% of the total academic population (Zhang, 1997). In the early 1990s, the proportion of academic women increased to 30% (Hayhoe, 1996). The rapid growth in the number and proportion of academic women in the last decade of the 20th century was largely due to economic factors. According to Cao et al. (1991) and Gaskell et al. (2004), during this period, academic jobs became less attractive to men because academic jobs paid less than qualified jobs outside academia. Other welfare services and benefits associated with academic jobs, especially housing, were also withdrawn. Because Chinese women were not traditionally expected to buy a house and contribute to the whole family financially as breadwinners, they were not affected as much as men by the withdrawal of welfare benefits. Married women are usually raised by their husbands and single women are raised by their families. University teaching was still a relatively attractive job to women due to factors such as job security and flexible work schedules, allowing women to balance work and family (Zhang and Cai, 2000). These factors have led many to believe that a low-paying academic career is suitable for women, a view that persists to this day.

Academic recruitment

Although some research mentions that women are disadvantaged in the Chinese academic market, few focus on the perception and experience of women in academic recruitment (Zhao, 2008; Rhoads and Gu, 2012; Li and Shen, 2020). In the context of globalisation, Chinese higher education strives to integrate into global competition and performance and put forward high requirements for the qualification of academic faculty, which also leads to fierce competition in academic recruitment (Rhoads and Gu, 2012). An obvious basic requirement today for recruiting academic faculty is a doctorate, which was not required in the 1990s (Zhao, 2008). Not only qualifications but Ph.D graduates are also required to meet publication targets and compete with others to obtain long-term contracts within the short-term contract period (three to six years). This competitive personnel employment system is also known as 'promotion or out' or 'publish or perish' (Tian and Lu, 2017). In China, doctoral students usually complete their studies around the age of 30 (BA four years, Master three years, Ph.D. four to six years). As the academic recruitment of doctoral graduates limits applicants to those under the age of 35, the competitive 'promotion or out' system in Chinese universities means that doctoral graduates may only have one job opportunity to pursue a prestigious university, otherwise they will exceed the age limit.

While there is no difference in age limits for men and women in academic recruitment, gender is a subtle factor in the competition. Studies on women academics suggest that women's childbearing often coincides with the period of doctoral studies and their early career (Bayer and Dutton, 1977; Townsley and Broadfoot, 2008; Jung, 2014; Peng, 2020). This is an important period where women are required to devote more time to academic work to increase research outputs, but many of them need to spare time for pregnancy, childbirth and maternity leave. As a result, the intense competition for academic recruitment affects women differently than men. It is more difficult for women to start academic careers at prestigious universities (Xu and Zhou, 2015).

In addition, there is discrimination against women in the university recruitment process. Zhao (2008) noted that although men and women are given the same opportunities for career promotion, the career evaluation standards are geared toward men's life courses and ignore women's differences in a life perspective. Li and Shen (2020) explored the coping strategy of academic women towards pregnancy and publication and reported that some academic women gave birth early on to avoid discrimination against women who are 'married without a child' in recruitment. Xie (2019) explored the work and motherhood experience of Chinese academic women and indicated that women are asked personal questions, such as age, marital status, and children in recruitment interviews. Additionally, she mentioned that academic women often self-declare their personal information to increase their chances of getting hired (Xie, 2019). Adopting these strategies shows that academic women are aware of the pervasive discrimination in recruitment. As China ended the one-child policy in 2011 and replaced it with a two-child policy, the two-child policy exacerbates gender discrimination in general work recruitment (Qian and Jin, 2018), including academic recruitment (Tian and Lu, 2017). Some Chinese companies avoid hiring young women because of the potential for multiple maternity leaves (The Economist, 2018). Some companies will fire or demote women if they take maternity leaves (Human Rights Watch, 2021). And for academic recruitment, the strategy of women giving birth to their first child early as mentioned by Li and Shen (2020), and the strategy of self-declaration of family planning mentioned by Xie (2019) will become less effective due to the potential of having a second child. In 2021, the two-child family planning policy further changed to the three-child policy, allowing each couple to have three children. While the participants in my study expressed no desire or plan to have a third child, they expressed concerns that having second or three children would exacerbate the impact on their career development.

In addition to fertility discrimination against women in recruitment, in some universities, and disciplines where there are more female faculty than male, preference is given to male applicants on the grounds of balancing the number of male and female faculty. However, such measures are not adopted in universities and disciplines with a smaller proportion of academic women (Zhao, Liu and He, 2013). Such measures seem to narrow the gender gap at universities but are gender discrimination and a misinterpretation of gender equality, which directly results in unfairness to female applicants.

Overall, existing research indicates that women are at a disadvantage compared to their male peers as early as the entry point into academia, and this intense competition for college recruitment further exacerbates gender inequality in the academic profession. This can be seen in the underrepresentation of academic women at prestigious universities, such as Zhejiang University and Sun Yet-Sen University, which only have 24% and 28% of female scholars, respectively (Ji, 2014; Zhang and Gan, 2016). However, in some local universities, the number of women academics exceeds that of men, even in male-dominated disciplines, such as science and technology (Zhao, Liu and He, 2013). The large gender gap between the various levels of universities in China reflects that the status of women in academia is still not optimistic.

Promotion and gender segregation of academic ranks

In Chinese universities, the four main academic ranks are professor, associate professor, lecturer, and assistant (assistant professors, or teaching assistant), and the corresponding professional titles are senior, sub-senior, middle and junior. Most doctoral graduates start their academic careers as lecturers and are gradually promoted to associate professors and professors through evaluation. While women's participation in academia is increasing at all academic levels, the gender gap remains largest at the full professor level. According to the Ministry of Education, there were 5,257 female full-time professors and 30,825 associate professors in regular institutions of higher educational Institutions in 1997, accounting for 14.6% and 26.9% respectively (MOE, 1997). Although the Chinese Ministry of Education has not continued to publish relevant data in recent years, recent research demonstrates that vertical segregation of gender persists within Chinese universities. For example, Zhao (2007) reported that the proportion of female

professors increased from 10% to 19.3% between 1994 and 2004. Tang and Horta (2021) summarised this slowly improving trend and reported that the proportion of female professors was below 10% in 1987 and gradually increased to around 15%, 20% and 30% in 2000, 2004 and 2018, respectively.

Before the 21st century, the slow career progression of academic women and gender segregation in academic ranks were largely attributed to women's low qualifications (Sheng, 2009). For example, full-time female teachers with a Master's degree accounted for 29% of the total number of teachers with a Master's degree, while the number of full-time female teachers with a doctorate was only 1901, accounting for 12% (MOE, 1997). However, women's qualifications have become less of an obstacle for academic women's career advancement, with evidence that the proportion of full-time female teachers with Master's and doctoral degrees in today's regular higher education institutions has increased dramatically. In 2020, full-time female teachers with a Master's degree reached 418,924, accounting for 67% of the total number of teachers with a Master's degree, while the number of full-time female teachers with a doctorate reached 192,261, accounting for 37% (MOE, 2020). These data suggest that women are underrepresented in senior positions for reasons other than academic qualifications.

In recent decades, Chinese universities continue to deepen their engagement with the global research and higher education system, more and more research-intensive universities in China have begun to adopt a tenure-track system to replace the traditional permanent employment. Under this tenure-track system, doctoral graduates begin their academic careers as assistants, and after passing the tenure evaluation during a fixed, years-long probationary period, they need to reach the rank of associate professor, otherwise, their contract will not be renewed. In terms of evaluation criteria, normally, universities can set their own criteria as long as they are complying with national higher education regulations. Most universities take quantitative measures of publication and research funding to determine tenure and promotion, and the higher the university ranking, the higher the requirements in quantitative measures (Lai and Li, 2020). Since the main performance indicator of the probationary period is research (publications and grants), this tenure track is also known as 'promotion or out' and 'publish or perish'.

Ha (2018) and Gonzalez, Liu and Shu. (2012) both conducted a one-to-one comparison of Chinese and Western university personnel management systems. In these two studies, Sun Yat-sen University and Wuhan University are elite universities in China, are included in the 'Double-First-Class University Plan' (State Council, 2015). 'Double-First-Class University Plan' was proposed by the government in 2015, which aims to improve the quantity and quality of national first-class universities and first-class disciplines, and rank among the top in the world. The government invested heavily in these double first-class universities (Postiglione, 2020). In China, universities that offer undergraduate programs are divided into three levels, the first is first-tier universities, followed by second-tier and third-tier universities. Double first-class universities are included in the scope of first-tier universities. In 2022, there were 605 first-tier universities, of which only 147 were double first-class universities (Sohu, 2022). The number of double first-class universities accounting for the top 5% of the total number of universities and colleges in mainland China (approximately 3,000 higher education institutions). Ha (2018) compared personnel management reforms in Chinese and Italian public universities and argued that the probation-tenure system successfully created the premise for competitive knowledge production in both countries. Taking Sun Yat-Sen University as an example, Ha (2018) explained the two parts of the tenure track in China. The first part is a fixed-time employment contract for assistant, lecturer and associate professor, such as the initial employment contract of a lecturer is three years, and it can be renewed for three years after it expires but can only be renewed up to two times. Associate Professor signs a three-year employment contract with the university, which can be renewed or can apply for a non-fixed-term contract after the expiration. Another part of the tenure track is a non-fixed-time employment contract (tenure), which only applies to professors. From this pattern, young scholars only are able to stabilise their positions in universities if they are regularly promoted and reach the professor level.

However, A study by Gonzalez, Liu and Shu (2012) shows that even successfully passing probationary periods and reaching the level of associate professors or professors does not mean that academics can secure their positions at universities in China. Few academics in China can fully secure their positions without worrying about their promotion challenges. Gonzalez, et al. (2012) compared academic promotion systems between China and the United States. They used Wuhan University as an example to explain in detail the competitive promotion system and related specific merit selection requirements in Chinese universities, especially elite universities. Research-teaching academics need to go through 13 promotion steps to reach the highest

professor I rank (Professor I-IV, Associate Professor V-VII, Assistant Professor VIII-X, and Teaching Assistant XI-XIII). Five years after the initial appointment at a given rank, associate professors must aim to get a promotion every three years, every four years for professors. Faculty members who fail to get a promotion in two attempts are at risk of becoming unemployed. Meanwhile, every step of the promotion has detailed and specific requirements that academics must meet, such as the number and quality of research publications and the number or amount of research grants. Each discipline also has a different requirement for the number of publications in top journals. Regardless of the number of publications an academic has published, if they do not meet the quota for the number of publications in top journals, they will be regarded as not meeting the research requirements regardless of any excuses and will be disqualified for promotion assessment. Recent research also reported other promotion requirements related to publications. For example, Gonzalez et al. (2012) reported that only publications in which the candidate is the first author or corresponding author will be accepted for evaluation. Tao et al. (2019) and Flowerdew and Li (2009) also reported that more and more universities, especially first-tier ones, emphasise academics to publish their papers in English and international journals. Under this very strict merit-based promotion system, Liu et al. (2021) study show that tenure-track faculty have better research performance than non-tenure track faculty, such as publishing more articles in high-quality journals.

However, Chinese society and researchers are becoming increasingly aware of the pressures academics face in their early careers, what Jung (2014) refers to as an academic's fledging (four years or less of working experience in academia). Those young academics are also widely known in China as '*qingjiao*' ([青椒] green peppers). Tian and Lu (2017) explored young lecturers' research pressure in research-intensive universities. They suggested that the excessive evaluation of research leads to persistent pressure on young Chinese academics. Lai and Li (2020) also argued that young academics in China are regarded as easy to exploit and squeeze for cheap research labour, with limited opportunities for career advancement.

Recent research also suggests that academic women in particular have suffered significant disadvantages in this competitive promotion environment in areas such as research outputs, performance salary, research networks, and the accumulation of scientific research social capital (Tao, Zheng and Mow, 2004; Zhao, 2008; Gonzalez et al., 2012; Li and Shen, 2020; Tian and Lu, 2017; Peng, 2020). Several factors hindering

academic women's promotional prospects have been identified: firstly, most professors and a large number of academic positions are located in traditional research-oriented fields, such as science and technology, which are male-dominated. The humanities and social sciences, or what Heijstra, Steinthorsdóttir and Einarsdóttir (2017) called 'society-orientated departments' (p. 768), where academic women make up a larger proportion, are developing slower than the sciences and engineering, resulting in a relatively small percentage of female professors (Peng, 2020).

Secondly, the publication rate of female scholars is lower than that of male colleagues, which is well explored in Western research (Aiston and Jung, 2015; Kwiek, 2016). Aiston and Jung (2015) explored 5 countries to examine the research productivity of academic women, and they report that academic women generally have lower publication rates than their male counterparts because of their family burden. Similar results were identified by Peng (2020), Zhang (2010) and Zhao (2008) in the Chinese context.

In the humanities and social sciences, where women outnumber men, the publication rate is lower than in science and engineering, where men are predominant. Combined with the newly introduced tenure track system that links research publications with performance pay, fewer publications mean academic women generally earn less than men. In China, teachers' salary is mainly composed of basic salary and annual performance salary. For the first-tier universities, performance-based pay, which is greatly affected by research output, accounts for 60% of an academic's salary (Lai et al., 2016). Academics with more research output can receive significantly higher performance pay, so there is a large disparity in academics' salaries in Chinese universities. For academic women, the family burden greatly affects their time and energy for research, directly affecting their performance pay and annual salary. In addition, during childbirth and maternity leave periods, academic women only have basic salaries. However, the promotions and merit clock will not be stopped or extended for their personal matters. Therefore, Gonzalez, Liu and Shu (2012) argued that academic women's total salary in the year of childbirth may be obviously lower compared to other years.

Finally, participating in research activities and networking with other researchers, especially well-established researchers are important factors in career promotion for

young academics. Liu et al. (2022) argued that, in the highly competitive, hierarchical, and network-oriented environment of higher education in China, people with high status have the power to allocate resources and often prioritise people in their network. Lai and Li (2020) suggested that joining a research team of a well-known scholar could expand young academics' social capital and increases their chances of securing prestigious research projects and promotions in the future. At the same time, the comments of leading professors can significantly affect young academics' promotion opportunities during their evaluation process. While neither study focused on young academic women, both of their studies recognised that '*guanxi*' ([关系] relationship) plays a key role in academic promotion. Lack of *guanxi*, or exclusion from academic networks, especially from networks with powerful leaders and famous scholars can indirectly limit a person's opportunities for promotion, research publication or project application (Liu et al., 2022). Peng (2020) reported that Chinese female academics have significantly fewer publications in domestic core journals than their male counterparts, while in international publications, there is no significant difference in the number of papers published by males and females. Part of the reason for this status quo is that a small number of journal editors control the power over whether a paper can be published in highly competitive local core journals. These powerful editors are predominantly male and value *guanxi* over equality, benefiting men already with strong academic social networks (Shi, Wang and Xu, 2005). Yang (2005) also observed that women are underrepresented at the professorial level and in senior administrative positions while men dominate both academic authority and influential networks. Zhao (2008) explained that women are more likely to be excluded from academic social networks, but men can enjoy certain advantages from the 'male club' (p. 80), which makes it easier for men to pave their way to the top. Zhang (2010) and Peng (2020) also reported that academic women lag behind male academics in local publications, and further explained that young academic women often have heavy family burdens that restrict them from participating in academic network activities such as attending conferences or collaborating with other academics. For example, when young academic women have young children at home, their mobility is limited to geographically closer networks (Leberman, Eames and Barnett, 2016).

In terms of the promotion speed of Chinese academics, research shows that it takes about 12.5 years for academic faculty to be promoted from lecturer to professor, but there are gender differences. Yue (2020) explored the promotion time of 136 academic faculty in four research universities and found that the average age of teachers obtaining the title of lecturer is 29.8 years old, the average age when they are promoted to

associate professor is 34.2 years old, and the average age when they are promoted to professor is 40.8 years old (TouTiao, 2021). However, women are typically older than men when achieving associate professor, and it takes longer for women to be promoted from associate professor to professor. Research by Zhao (2008) and Li and Shen (2020) partly explains the age differences. Li and Shen (2020) mentioned that an increasing number of academic women, who face perceived gender discrimination in recruitment and intense job pressures under the 'publish or perish' culture in higher education, would choose to have children during their Ph.D. Zhao (2008) explored the life-lines of academic women and men, arguing that men's life-lines are relatively simple and smooth, as shown by the fact that men's education and academic career are rarely interrupted or intertwined, while women's higher education pursuits are easily interrupted by family and child-rearing. During women's academic careers, some would have to postpone events such as overseas study, promotion, and prestigious research projects or give up research at a certain point in life to meet family demands and childrearing responsibilities. Consequently, a proportion of academic women are older than men by the time they complete their doctoral studies. Some also delayed their academic promotion due to family factors. Additionally, the retirement age for women is 55, five years earlier than for men, resulting in female academics being restricted both early and late in their careers. This early retirement puts their careers to an end before they have the opportunity to reach their peak, which greatly reduces the ability of academic women to make professional contributions to academia (Mohrman, Geng and Wang, 2011). Zhao (2008) concluded that academic promotion is based on the male's role as traditional breadwinners, ignoring the multiple roles and associated burdens of women in their life course.

Overall, research shows that on the surface, the tenure track system imposes the same performance requirements on male and female academics and appears to promote gender equality in academic promotions. At a deeper level, the system requires academics' whole-hearted devotion during the contract period. Tian and Lu (2017) report that, regardless of gender, lecturers with fewer family responsibilities tend to survive mass lay-offs. Since women are often socially and culturally expected to take on greater family responsibilities outside of their academic careers, they are at a disadvantage under the tenure track system. Thus, Tian and Lu (2017) suggested that the personal reforms in Chinese universities do not weaken male dominance, but instead strengthen male dominance and increase gender inequality in universities.

Work-life balance

In western countries, academics encounter particular difficulties in maintaining an acceptable work-family balance (Doherty and Manfredi 2006). For example, studies in Portugal, Ireland and Australia also noted that academic work is unbounded, and open-ended, requiring academics to work long hours, leading to severe work-life conflict, and increased psychological stress (Hogan et al., 2014; Neale and White, 2014; Santos, 2015). Studies in the UK identified large workloads and long work hours as impediments to achieving work-life balance (Tytheleigh et al. 2005; Emslie and Hunt, 2009). Irish academics report also working 47 hours per week, which, according to Kwiek and Antonowicz (2013), is the longest working hours across 12 European countries. Outside of Europe, Australian academics work an average of 50 hours a week, and American academics work an average of 55 hours a week (Winefield et al., 2003; O’Laughlin and Bischoff, 2005; Winefield, Boyd and Winefield, 2014; Reaburn, 2015). Research in US and German suggests that academics’ work-to-life conflict is stronger than their life-to-work conflict, partly because society tends to prioritise work over family matters, especially for women in the academic profession (Fox, Fonseca and Bao, 2011; Dorenkamp and Ruhle, 2019).

Although both male and female academics face difficulties balancing work and family, western research shows that female academics experience more severe work-life conflict (Fox, et al., 2011; Probert, 2005). For example, Fox, et al. (2011) in their analysis of the work-family conflicts of women and men in nine US research universities, reported that women have higher interference of both family on work and work on family than male academics, especially if they have children under six years old. This is in line with research findings in other parts of the world. For example, Probert (2005) reported that Australian female academics who are mothers of young children, have strong concerns about balancing academic work and family life. Magadley (2021) reported Arab-Palestinian female academics in Israel often have heavy caring responsibilities for dependent children and multiple jobs, which lead to perpetual feelings of stress and physical exhaustion.

There are few studies on work-life balance from a gender perspective in the context of higher education in China. Fu and Shaffer (2001) conducted a questionnaire survey of 800 faculty members, including academics, at a university in Hong Kong. Their study reveals that both work and family domains affect academics’ work-family balance, but

academic women are more likely to encounter family-related factors that interfere with their work, such as marital status, spouse's profession, parental demands and time spent on household chores. Xian, Atkinson and Meng-Lewis (2022) investigated whether academic's work-life conflicts are affected by family structure and gender in the context of Chinese higher education. In China, the controversial one-child policy has significantly changed the structure of most Chinese families, presenting a 4-2-1 pattern consisting of four grandparents, two parents and one child (Cao, Cumming and Wang, 2015). This structure has led to a situation in which academics who are the only children in the family are often expected to primarily shoulder the burden of eldercare. Chinese women are expected to assume traditional gender roles as caregivers and to take care of elders even more so than men and only-child men. As a result, the one-child policy has created a substantial burden on eldercare responsibility, particularly for only-child and for women. For example, Chinese academic women in Ren and Caudle's (2016) study reported that eldercare contributes to their work-life imbalance. Xian et al. (2022) argued that academic women's career advancement depends in part on their ability to withstand work-life conflict.

Ren and Caudle (2020) adopted a qualitative research strategy and interview method to compare the different experiences between 15 Chinese-based and 15 British-based academics on work-life balance and their coping strategies in dealing with work-life conflicts. This study is in line with other studies and concludes that both Chinese and British academics experience a high level of work-life conflict due to demands from both domains (Zhang, 2010; Rhoads and Gu, 2012). What is interesting about Ren and Caudle (2020) is that they proposed that the term work-life balance is used differently in the UK and China, leading to different perceptions and coping strategies for work-life balance by Chinese and British academics. In China, the term describes an individual's efforts to promote harmony and integration at home and work, and in the UK, it describes prioritising and separating work and life (Ren and Caudle, 2020). As a result, Chinese women, including those working in academia, tend to accept work-life conflict as a personal issue and rely more on their own coping strategies (Cooke and Xiao, 2014). When faced with significant life events, such as marriage or childbirth, it is often Chinese academic women who recalibrate career expectations in a way that compromises or sacrifices their career to achieve family and work harmony (Moen and Yu, 2000; Ng, Fosh and Naylor, 2002; Lo, Stone and Ng, 2003). Some young academic women may rely on elders' support with childcare to balance their work and family time (Aaltio and Huang, 2007; Zhao, 2008; Xiao and Cooke, 2012; Peng, 2020). Ren and Caudle (2020)

explained the reasons that Chinese academic women adopt individual networks and coping strategies partly because they lack support on a national and institutional level. Unlike the UK, where employees have statutory rights to flexible work after 26 weeks of work, the Chinese government is less involved in supporting employees' work-life balance. In addition, British academics benefit from organisational flexible-working arrangements or work-life balance programmes. However, Chinese universities do not have any formal relevant policies. Additionally, annual research and teaching evaluations make it difficult for universities to provide flexible work arrangements for Chinese academics.

Furthermore, Ren and Caudle's (2020) study shows that Chinese academic women have greater family responsibilities than men, especially when it comes to parenting, which leads to gendered academic career paths. At a national level, traditional norms of women's responsibility for family and childcare are deeply ingrained in China, even well-educated academic women are no exception. Despite the dual-income family model prevailing in China, men are still widely considered to be the breadwinners and they are more responsible for earning and creating wealth for their families, while women should take on more household responsibilities. At an institutional level, the flexible working schedule in academia has differing consequences for academic women and men. Academic women often need to manage family commitments alongside work commitments, while their male counterparts can fully devote themselves to careers and follow the principle of 'work first' (Ren and Caudle, 2020). As noted by Ren and Caudle (2020), flexibility legitimises and accentuates the primary role of academic women as housekeepers and caregivers. At the individual level, while previous research has shown that partner support helps improve academic women's work-life balance (Lo et al., 2003; Ren and Foster, 2011), Ren and Caudle (2020) noted that Chinese female academics receive more emotional support than practical support from their husbands in everyday life. In other words, Chinese academic women in dual-earner households receive less practical support from their husbands for housework and childcare. As a result, household responsibilities and childcare continue to fall disproportionately on academic women who also work full-time (Zhang and Farley, 1995; Rhoads and Gu, 2012). Even with limited time and energy, male academics appear to be more ambitious and performative in research and publication than their academic female counterparts (Gaskell et al., 2004).

Conclusion

Research on Chinese academic women are limited but has increased in recent years. My research builds on this growing body of research to explore the experiences and perceptions of young women in Chinese academia. The study by Gaskell et al. (2004) used a questionnaire research method to investigate the academic women in Chinese higher education, including their experiences in recruitment, teaching, research, and women's attitudes toward academic work. Gaskell et al. (2004) study is based on the period towards the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Under the influence of globalisation, Chinese universities have accelerated their expansion and efforts to improve their global rankings and pursue international linkages in academic research. Gaskell et al. (2004) research contributes to this article's understanding of the background of female teachers who entered the academic profession at the end of the 19th century. Today, these women have worked in Chinese higher education for at least 20 years, some of whom have reached the level of professors. I have such participants in my study. Rhoads and Gu (2012) used semi-structured interviews to complement and corroborate the findings of Gaskell et al. (2004). Their research is based on the background that elite and research-intensive universities were beginning to transition from permanent employment to tenure. Therefore, Rhoads and Gu (2012) selected female participants from a comprehensive research university, which was ranked in the top 40 in the country, for exploration. Their research more specifically shows the disadvantaged position of women at such universities, including fertility discrimination in hiring, glass ceiling in academic promotion, exclusion from male-dominated networking, and difficulties in work-family balance. However, the academic competition for tenure-track positions is intensifying in today's elite Chinese universities, dubbed 'publish or perish'. The tenure-track system is increasingly being used by non-elite universities. My research adds to whether academic women at non-elite universities are affected by publishing or perish' culture. The two studies by Gaskell et al. (2004) and Rhoads and Gu (2012) provided the basis for me to determine research aims, and research methods and provided a foundation for my data analysis. My research continues and expands on the content of their study, presenting the experiences of female teachers and gender inequality in contemporary Chinese higher education.

Recent studies by Peng (2020), Li and Shen (2020), Xie (2019) and Ren and Caudle (2020) also share similarities with the content of my study and provide more basis for my data analysis. Xie (2019) analysed the age of marriage, choice of academic career and

childcare responsibilities for academic women born after 1980 under the influence of gender norms. In her research, the idea that women often choose academic careers because it's combined with women's mothering functions is echoed in the experiences of my research participants. My study deeply analysed the specificity of how academic careers is connected to and enhances female motherhood. Peng's (2020) study adopts both qualitative and quantitative methods, exploring factors influencing women's academic research and publications, as well as women's coping strategies. However, Peng's (2020) study only focuses on Chinese TEFL (Teaching English as a foreign language) academics in English teaching departments, where women are overrepresented. My research includes participants from different universities and disciplines, revealing in greater detail the research and teaching pressures of Chinese academic women. Li and Shen (2020) explored the impact of employment contracts on women's reproductive decisions. My study corroborates their conclusion that academic women often choose to give birth earlier or later to cope with the pressure of research and promotion. At the same time, my study shows more concretely how academic women arrange their work and childbearing step by step, while men are not required to rearrange their work. Ren and Caudle (2020) outline the work-life balance of Chinese academic women, including gender experiences at home and at work, the impact of work-life conflicts on career development, and women's coping strategies. My research uses the same methodology as Ren and Caudle (2020) and also focuses on work-life balance issues. My study not only validates Ren and Caudle (2020), but also expands the context of women's work-life balance if they have academic husbands.

To understand the experiences of women in Chinese academia as both women and academics, it is crucial to place them in their historical, social, and cultural context. This research provides an overview of the working conditions of Chinese women in terms of gender segregation, income disparity, and household life imbalances. Then this research narrows down to academic women who are in Chinese higher education. I briefly introduced the historical background of the emergence and expansion of Chinese academic women. Then, I summarised the literature on the current disadvantaged state of Chinese academic women, including academic recruitment, promotion, and work-life balance.

Chapter 3. Research Methodology

Introduction

This chapter aims to explain the reason for the choice of methodology and method and trace the process of practising the qualitative interview method. I conducted 20 individual interviews with women working as academics from 14 different universities in China to explore their experiences and perspectives on work and family issues. As my fieldwork was conducted against the backdrop of the epidemic, the recruiting and interviewing process was full of unexpected challenges.

In this chapter, I first explore the research interpretivist approach and qualitative research method. Followed by a discussion of in-depth interview methods and the feminist approach, such as the researcher's positions and power relations, as a guideline for ethical concerns in this study. I detail how pilot interviews helped me identify difficulties and improve my interview skills. I move on to explain the recruiting and interviewing experience. In this analysis, I examine ethical considerations and practices, including my position as 'insider' and 'outsider', and the power relations between researchers being students and participants being teachers. In the end, I discuss data processing and analysis.

Research method

Buckley and Chiang (1976) define research methodology as an architectural design in which researchers can map out an approach to spot or solve problems. Crotty (1998, p. 3) defines research methodology as 'the strategy, plan of action and process' in which researchers select and use specific methods to achieve desired outcomes. I encountered several epistemological considerations when choosing a strategy or architectural design, including whether I should take a positivistic or an interpretivist approach. As a knowledge-generating approach, the quantitative method is related to the positivistic approach, which emphasises rationality, 'the more objective, the better' (Nielsen, 1990, p. 5). Durkheim (1895) aspired to make sociology more 'scientific' by conducting value-free research, such as discarding sensation (feelings, values, and emotion). The objective of quantitative methodologies is to quantify information, emphasising 'the collection of social facts or documents the operation of particular relationships between

variables' (Jayaratne and Stewart, 2008, p.54). In this way, researchers can discover what he terms 'social facts'—facts that 'have an independent existence outside the individual consciousness' (Durkheim, 1938, p. 20). However, many social scientists, for example, (Habermas, 1987; Hesse-Biber et al., 1999; Marcuse, 2013) and feminist researchers, for example, (Nielsen, 1990; Smith, 1990; Sprague and Zimmerman, 1993; Stanley, 2018) criticised the positivism concept of scientific objectivity and argued that 'knowledge is socially constructed' (Nielsen, 1990, p.9). Qualitative methodologies are described as interpretive because it involves the exploration of in-depth knowledge from the participants, which is derived from their experiences. According to Merriam (2009, p. 14):

The overall purposes of qualitative research are to achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience.

In this regard, my study took on the interpretive approach and agreed that 'experience' is a valid resource for generating knowledge (Gray, 2003; Hesse-Biber, 2012). I was driven by a belief that women's experiences are complicated, socially constructed, and academic women's accounts are valuable as they reflect gender differences in the academic profession and broader gender-related societal issues. Such belief significantly influenced the design of my research topics and interview questions. For example, as a native Chinese, the common opinion that the teaching profession is suitable for women has influenced me to look forward to teaching at a university in the future. I was curious about whether women academics agreed with this common opinion. Thus, from the earliest stages of designing study topics, I have seen experience as a valid source of knowledge, and academic women's accounts were subsequently privileged epistemologically.

For the research methods, no one method is necessarily superior to another; it depends instead on the research topic and the questions the research seeks to answer (Zydziumaite, 2007). According to Creswell (2013), the fundamental reason for choosing a qualitative method is the research topic, which requires a detailed understanding of the topic from the participant's perspective. This study seeks to understand the experiences of academic women and their perceptions of work and family issues; it highlights the

complexity, depth and richness of respondent data rather than the relationships between numbers. A qualitative method was chosen because it could present women's own interpretations of everyday life, which cannot be efficiently achieved through quantitative methods.

Within the qualitative framework, a semi-structured in-depth interview was selected as the sole method for this study. According to Galletta and Cross (2012), semi-structured interviews acquire data grounded in participants' experiences through open-ended and theory-driven questions. Compared to structured and unstructured interviews, semi-structured flexibility enables participants to respond to a set of questions clearly related to the research purpose in detail and in varying ways (Berg, 2007; Galletta and Cross, 2012). Therefore, this method is particularly suitable to assist researchers in attending to the depth and complexity of the data. Data were collected via face-to-face interviews with individual participants. Although there were participants from the same university, I did not plan to use group interviews due to ethical concerns regarding confidentiality and anonymity.

In designing semi-structured interviews, I planned to begin with warm-up questions related to more general personal information, with the intent of leading the flow from general to specific. For example, the first generic question was, 'Could you please talk about yourself and your work' as I expected my participants to mention their educational background, disciplines, academic ranks and marital status. This question could encourage my participants to talk more, giving me a basic understanding of my participants and also relieving my embarrassment when talking with strangers by breaking the ice. In constructing the follow-up questions, I used Maso's (2003) method of 'why-interview' to help me identify interview questions. I practised this method by asking myself why this question was important to my study. For example, asking my participants about their experiences choosing an academic career allowed me to understand their motivation. Understanding their motivation allows me to analyse further whether and how they were influenced by their family and friends, which is one of my main topics of discussion.

I also conducted the research as a feminist wishing to conduct feminist research. Following the women's movement in the 1960s, feminist theorists urged scholars to pay

more attention to personal 'experiences' and to present 'truths' about women's lives in their research (DeVault and Gross, 2012, p.7). Since the 1970s, feminists have advocated qualitative research and used semi-structured in-depth interviews as the primary qualitative method for women's studies to prioritise women's voices (Oakley, 1981; Stanley and Wise, 1993; Letherby, 2003). I was influenced in particular by Ann Oakley's (1981) article, 'Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms', which challenged the prevailing 'rules' of distanced objectivity in social research, and Joan Wallach Scott's (1991) article, 'The Evidence of Experience', which valued women's own stories. I was also influenced by feminist researchers who applied qualitative semi-structured interviews in Chinese contexts, such as Zhang (2018) and Liu (2007). Their research shows that in-depth interviews allow researchers to understand women's thoughts, memories and knowledge in the women's own words rather than in the words of the researcher. The choice of semi-structured in-depth interviews allows my study to follow a fundamental principle of feminist research to respect and give a voice to women academics.

In my research, I also sought to be sensitive to the power relationships between myself and the participants. Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2003) mentioned that men often try to increase their power during the interview process through sexualisation, giving instructions and questioning their female interviewees. When I designed this study, I aimed to develop a comfortable and equal relationship with the participants. I followed the empirical advice of feminist researchers in building equal relationships, such as positioning myself as a listener (Sehgal, 2009), and respecting participants' willingness to 'speak bitterness' (McLaren, 2000). More specifically, I would not seek to gain control over my participants by criticising and questioning their experiences and choices. I also stayed alert about my 'insider' and 'outsider' positions and the dynamics of each interview (Berger, 2015). Having the same gender identity and cultural experience made me an 'insider', which could help me develop questions in a culturally sensitive manner that would not hurt my participants' feelings. For example, I understood Chinese women's concerns about safety when meeting and communicating with strangers and their embarrassment when talking about sex-related topics, such as sex life and workplace sexual harassment. Instead of asking directly about sexual harassment in the workplace, I designed this sensitive question in an indirect way, for example, by asking, 'Are you satisfied with your current working environment?'. I was also careful not to include any confrontational or leading questions, for example, instead of using the phrase 'gender inequality' directly, I asked my participants if they had experienced *gender*

differences in academic recruiting and promotions. As a result, I could provide a comfortable atmosphere where my participants feel safe and willing to share their stories.

Another aspect of conducting interviews from a feminist perspective was focusing on self-reflexivity in the fieldwork process. Feminist researchers should practice self-reflection on their inner thoughts, actions and interactions throughout the research journey to be aware of various pitfalls, and they should also explain their actions and decisions in order to make the process accountable and ethical (Finlay and Gough, 2003; Roulston, 2010; Mortari, 2015). I adopted Goodall's (2000) suggestion of using a reflective journal to record my personal feelings, ideas and responses and kept separately as an adjunct to field notes.

Pilot interviews

To help identify any difficulties that may arise and to develop my interview questions and interviewing skills, I conducted pilot interviews with two friends in this study (Allen and Carlson, 2003). My pilot interviews were conducted face-to-face.

The first interview was conducted with a female friend who had a similar overseas study experience in the UK but had no university work experience. This interview only took 30 minutes because she could not answer my interview questions about academic work and teaching. Then I had three interviews with a male friend who works at a Chinese university. He was also a gatekeeper for reaching out to participants. Given his university work experience, in our first interview, the interview questions were related to academic work and did not discuss family content in depth. This first pilot interview stopped midway because we both felt uncomfortable. For example, I asked him about his recruiting experience: 'do you think universities only consider your ability when recruiting academic faculties?'. He replied: 'I do not know, but they asked me if I was married'. His answers were short and shallow and did not have much useful information. Furthermore, he thought my interview questions were too serious and not straightforward enough, which made it difficult for him to answer. I avoided asking directly about gender-related experiences in recruitment because I did not want to make him feel uncomfortable. From this test interview, I realised that such non-direct questions could confuse interviewees, leading them to possibly misunderstand my research priorities and steer the conversation in the wrong direction.

We had a second test interview to address my overly serious questions. This time, my friend played the role of the interviewer, and I played the role of the interviewee. In this interview, we only asked basic information and recruitment questions. He started the conversation by introducing himself, the research topic and the confidentiality undertaking. He also emphasised why he needed me to join this interview. On the topic of academic recruitment, instead of asking participants to describe their recruiting experience, he started with a series of general questions, such as 'Were you directly applying for this university after graduation?'; 'Did you graduate from this university?' 'How did you find this position and communicate with the university?' and 'Did the recruitment and onboarding process go smoothly?'. The questions then turned specific towards gender-related recruiting experience, such as, 'have you been asked about your marital and fertility status in recruitment?' and 'Do you think the university would mind female academics getting married or having a baby?'. Finally, he returned to the primary questions and asked: 'Do you think gender affects academic recruitment?' and 'What is your opinion about this gender issue?'.

This interview experience as a female interviewee reminded me of two things. The first thing was that it was necessary to introduce myself and communicate casually before getting into the interview questions. This was especially important for female participants being interviewed by a stranger. These simple chats are useful for increasing the participants' trust when meeting and communicating with an unfamiliar interviewer, and increasing the trust in the confidentiality of the interview. Therefore, I used this strategy for all my interviews. Even when I already know a participant, I would still emphasise her importance in my research. Another was that I considered whether I should use a series of questions for all interview topics from general to specific, as my friend did. Leedy and Ormrod (2005) suggested that good interview questions should include perceptions about the facts, feelings, motivations, behaviours, and reasons for actions. However, this type of questioning requires more time on each topic, which increases the interview time. This was evident as our third pilot interview took more than an hour and a half.

Based on the experience of the pilot interviews, I predicted that I might encounter conflicts between guaranteeing limited time and encouraging interviewees to share more. At the same time, through pilot interviews with two people, I noticed that participants might spend different amounts of time answering the same questions. If the question

was more relevant to a participant's experience, she was more likely to use more time answering it. For example, when interviewing participants who are single, I ask more about the view of marriage rather than the division of housework. This strategy was a possible solution for me to control the interview length. Hence, I revised my interview guide and questions to be more flexible, accounting for the different personal circumstances of the participants. The revised interview guide (see Appendix I) was divided into four topics: basic information, career choice, academic work, and family life.

Recruiting participants

After obtaining ethical approval from Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology Ethics Committee (ELMPS), I asked my family and friends to help me look for women academics through their interpersonal networks. I intended to conduct 30 interviews with academic women, including 25 interviews in four different cities in China, and five interviews with female visiting scholars at the University of York. I planned to complete these interviews within five months. Before I returned to China, I had contacted four possible participants through my family members and friends, three of whom expressed their willingness to participate and agreed to meet in person after the Chinese New Year (24th January to 9th February 2020). However, I had not anticipated the outbreak of COVID -19 in China, and my fieldwork was suspended, including my interviews. I arrived in China on 16th January 2020. A few days after arriving, I heard rumours about a strange flu spreading in Wuhan, but I did not take this news seriously. Covid-19 caught up with China's Spring Festival public transportation period, and thus the spread of the epidemic was rapid and countrywide. Wuhan was on lockdown from 10 am on 23rd January 2020, then the entire country soon followed. I faced difficulty contacting my supervisors and conducting research because the house I stayed in did not have internet service, and the VPN connection through mobile data was extremely unstable. Whenever I attempted to contact my supervisors or conduct research, I used VPN, but it did not work most of the time. In order to avoid any possibility of person-to-person virus transmission, people were not allowed to leave their houses, even for basic shopping. The local community helped by providing some living necessities, but they could not help me with mental health and internet service. I was highly anxious about my academic progress, and I had no idea when I could start my fieldwork again.

Although public transport and social services were slowly reopening in mid-March 2020, scheduling long-distance travel or face-to-face interviews was still extremely challenging.

In order to receive a local green QR code (Quick Response code) on my mobile phone to prove my health, I had to complete 14 days of self-isolation in each city I travelled to due to the travel and self-isolation requirements. Without this green code, I could not leave the house and enter any common areas. I headed to city A to start my academic fieldwork at the end of March. With the help of the gatekeeper, I received positive responses to interview requests and had a spare apartment to live in temporarily.

It is important to note that due to the limitations of my personal network in academia, fourteen participants were recruited through four gatekeepers, and five participants were approached through snowball sampling. Coco was the only participant I invited directly because she was already a friend. The four gatekeepers are Liam, Morgan, Grace and William. Liam and Morgan are my friends and relative; they both work at prestigious universities as academics. Grace was introduced to me through a friend. She used to be a professor at a prestigious university and retired when I recruited her. William was introduced to me through my family. He was the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities and a professor at a first-tier university. Thus, all four gatekeepers have experience working at universities, but they are not included in my interviews. In sociological research, gatekeepers are often used as a way to help interviewers reach specific groups of respondents or 'hard-to-reach' groups of people. However, they do not necessarily participate in the interviews themselves (Miller, 2012).

According to Bell (2000), *guanxi* was culturally developed by Confucius, which values kin bonds and intimate linkage, and later extended to broader non-kin relationships through personal interaction. In China, *guanxi* is broadly defined and described as personal connections and relationships (Kriz and Keating, 2010). Snowball sampling by *guanxi* appears to be the native and primary method used by qualitative sociology and feminist researchers in the Chinese context (Kriz, Gummesson and Quazi, 2014). This is particularly applicable for research focusing on sensitive topics, as the network and knowledge of insiders or gatekeepers can help researchers find eligible interviewees. Recent studies by Liu (2007) and Zhang (2018) highlight the importance of *guanxi* in reaching eligible interviewees when conducting qualitative research in China. Liu (2007) found that it is easier for researchers to approach respondents through known and trusted intermediaries.

In my fieldwork, *guanxi* (relationships) are reflected in how my gatekeepers introduced me to potential interviewees. My gatekeepers often emphasised our relationship, including kinship, teacher-student, or close friendship. For example, one introduced me as 'my close *xuemei*² who is studying in the UK' (Liam); 'my younger sister who is studying in the UK and coming back for Ph.D research' (Morgan); 'My student's younger sister' (Grace); and 'my student that I have known for a long time' (William). During snowball sampling, participant Helen also introduced me as her younger sister instead of her husband's relative. Emphasising that I am a younger sister or *xuemei* emphasises my kinship and close relationships with the gatekeepers. Participants were willing to participate in this study and talk with me mainly because they trusted and valued the personal connection or *guanxi* with gatekeepers. As Hall (1997) noted, members of the same cultural background share the same cultural code. As a native Chinese, I felt that the choices and actions during this fieldwork sometimes followed the Chinese cultural code unconsciously. For example, when I met the participants and introduced myself, I emphasised my relationship with the gatekeepers. I also asked my participants what relationship they had with the gatekeepers, whether they were colleagues or friends.

I considered the most efficient way to reach eligible respondents and expand the interview sample variety was through gatekeepers. This is because gatekeepers have more profound and broader interpersonal relationships and networks with academics than outsiders of academia. Their *guanxi* with female academic friends and colleagues became my recruitment pool. In addition, the four gatekeepers are insiders within Chinese academia. Their knowledge helped me identify interviewees more accurately. At the beginning of finding interviewees, ambiguous definitions of women academics and university teachers caused misunderstandings in communication with my family members and gatekeepers. For example, when I asked my gatekeeper, Liam, to help me recruit 'female university teachers', he introduced me to not only academic faculties but also a handful of administrative staff. In China, academics are usually addressed by a combination of their surname and the Chinese appellation *laoshi* (meaning teacher), such as Zhang *laoshi*, which means teacher Zhang. However, in the day-to-day experience of my gatekeepers and participants, they also use the same combination to refer to university administrators. This is because the Chinese appellation *laoshi* is beyond those conducting teaching work, but a generally polite and respectful way of addressing people. In addition, gatekeeper Morgan also asked me whether research-

² Xue means study. Mei means younger sister. Together, Xuemei means junior female student.

only academics working in university research centres and institutes were suitable for my research. This is because there are three career paths for university teachers in Chinese higher education today: teaching-only academics, research-only academics, and research-teaching academics. Through these experiences, I realised I must clearly define women academics and university teachers. Based on the Gatekeeper's explanation of the three different paths, I chose research-teaching female academics as my interviewees because this is the most common career path for university academics today. Thus, my definition of women academics in this study refers only to female academics who are engaged in research and teaching, with the academic rank of lecturer, associate professor and professor.

After deciding that the interviewees must be teaching and research-oriented, I started to invite potential participants, but my gatekeepers mainly led the pre-contact process. For example, gatekeeper Liam mentioned that academics generally value efficiency. Thereby, a short message was more intuitive and effective for them than a long information sheet. I adopted this suggestion and wrote a brief message about myself and the interview for my gatekeepers to forward directly to potential participants they knew. After the participants expressed their willingness to participate, the gatekeepers would give me their WeChat contacts³. These messages were:

Hello, xxx teacher. My name is Yulin, and I am from the University of York. This interview will be used to collect data for my Ph.D thesis. This study intends to explore female academics' experiences in Chinese universities. I look forward to hearing your stories about career choice, research and teaching work, and your personal life. You do not need to prepare anything in advance. I will protect your words under the university requirement and will not display your name and university anywhere.

In addition, my expectation of this fieldwork was that I could talk to various academic women to ensure I obtain diverse viewpoints. By discussing recruitment numbers, interview duration, and the impact of the pandemic and various lockdowns during my research with my supervisors, it was agreed that my target number should change from

³ WeChat is a Chinese instant messaging and social media application similar to WhatsApp.

30 to 20. The interviews would all be completed in China during this time, I was unable to leave China and return to the UK. Although I did not set up specific demographic requirements, when the total number of participants was revised downwards, the representativeness of each participant became more important. Recruiting academics from various disciplines is one aspect of achieving the variety of the interview sample. Alice, my first participant, also told me that the work experience of women academics varies widely across disciplines. For example, in the software engineering discipline, academics are often under pressure to increase publications and research projects rather than teaching. Her information made me realise that I must consider including more participants from different disciplines in the limited population. Meanwhile, I aimed to include the experiences and opinions of women from different academic ranks and different employment systems, especially fixed-term contract lecturers. In recent years, young academics' work and living conditions have gradually attracted the public's and researchers' attention, such as Tian and Lu (2017) and Lai and Li (2020). Their research shows that lecturers who sign fixed-term contracts face enormous research pressure and work-life imbalances in today's 'publish or perish' culture of higher education. Furthermore, although having overseas study experience was not a criterion when recruiting and selecting participants, I looked forward to recruiting some participants with overseas study or visiting backgrounds. I considered that academic women with overseas studying experience might provide thinking and understanding of gender issues in a different context between Chinese and Western academia. Nearly half of the participants had experience studying abroad or visiting.

By employing the snowball sampling technique, I have attempted to include the experiences and perspectives of academic women at different academic ranks and disciplines. The general background information about my participants is shown in Table 1. I did not include information about their universities or locations for ethical reasons and to protect gatekeepers' identities and participants. The twenty participants came from fourteen different universities in China, all of which offer degree programmes. There are twelve lecturers, four associate professors and four professors for academic ranks. There are four participants in Social Science and Arts and Humanities, three in Business and Management, eight in computing disciplines, and five in Mathematics, Chemical Engineering, Medical Science and History of Science for disciplines and fields. In terms of personnel management, four participants had fixed-term contracts with their universities, while the remaining participants are in 'permanent hiring'. For marital status,

at the time of our interviews, twelve participants were married with children, three were married women with no children, and five participants were unmarried.

Table 1 Participant Profile

Name	Site of fieldwork	Discipline	Academic rank	Marital status	Children or not
Alice	City A	Software engineering	Lecturer	Married	N
Daisy	City A	Computer engineering	Lecturer	Married	One child
Faye	City A	Computer Science	Lecturer	Married	Two Children
Stella	City A	Software engineering	Lecturer	Married	One child
Tessa	City A	Computer Science	Professor	Married	One child
Coco	City B	Management	Lecturer	Relationship	N
Emma	City B	Chemical Engineering	Associate Professors	Single	N
Gina	City B	Mathematics	Lecturer	Married	One child
Helen	City B	Religious Studies	Lecturer	Married	One child
Kate	City B	Chemical Engineering	Lecturer	Married	One child
Luna	City B	Religious Studies	Lecturer	Married	N
Nora	City B	History of Science	Lecturer	Single	N
Ulla	City B	Computer Science	Professor	Married	One child
Qiana	City C	Computer Science	Associate Professors	Married	One child
Rabia	City C	Medical Science	Lecturer	Married	N
Vera	City C	Business Management	Professor	Married	One child
Wendy	City C	Computer Science	Professor	Married	One child
Paula	City C	Philosophy	Associate Professors	Single	N
Olivia	City C	Social Science	Associate Professors	Married	One child
Betty	City C	Management	Lecturer	Relationship	N

From a practical point of view, due to the difficulties of travel and to reduce the risk of infection, I reduced the number of cities in which I conducted interviews. I decided to only meet participants in three designated cities and neighbouring prefectures. The commute time should be less than two hours from my apartment, and I would not need to stay overnight in hotels. I started my fieldwork in City A, which is in the central region of China. Through gatekeeper's introduction and snowballing, I interviewed five participants in and around City A. Then eight participants were interviewed in City B and surrounding areas in Southwest China. The remaining seven participants were interviewed in City C and surrounding cities in the eastern coastal provinces of China. I had to turn down four respondents who lived too far from me.

The process of recruiting respondents can generally be divided into two stages. At the earlier fieldwork stage in city A, I did not set specific demographic requirements; I was just looking for academic women who were more accessible and willing to participate. After conducting half of the interviews, I further selected potential respondents based on the information of existing interviewees, especially their disciplines and academic ranks. For example, Grace introduced six potential participants to me, but I interviewed only three of them. The three participants are in different disciplines and different ranks. Of the three people who did not participate in the interview, two of whom I declined due to the distance, and one because she was a colleague of my existing participants. My influence in the choice of participants was more evident in the interaction with William. Knowing that he was the dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Arts, I browsed the university website and selected some academic women I would like to talk to in addition to the female academics introduced by William. The women academics I selected were in related fields and had reached associate professor positions. This is because the number of associate professors in my interviews was relatively small. William introduced five academic women, but only three participated in the research.

Finding a suitable interview place for this fieldwork was challenging. Seale (2006) suggests that interviewers should be mindful of the interview place and its impact on the conversation. Lee (1997) also suggested that the interview place must allow female interviewers to feel safe. According to Zhang's (2018) fieldwork experience in China, the interviewee's responses are affected when a third party is present at the interview place, such as an office or a house. Based on these suggestions and experiences, I avoided interviews in private spaces, such as the interviewee's home. In addition, I considered

choosing an interview location that does not have the appearance of a third party and is convenient for the interviewee to travel. Thus, according to my interview plan, I would only see participants in their private offices, empty classrooms or at least a quiet coffee shop. However, the epidemic rendered the above-mentioned interview locations unavailable. Alice was the first participant in this study; we faced great difficulties when setting the meeting location. At the time, university staff were not allowed to enter crowded commercial areas, such as shopping centres, restaurants, and coffee shops. Alice also informed me that the university did not allow public members to enter and advised staff not to engage in non-essential social activities. After several discussions with Alice, we finally decided to conduct the interview in a private car on a street near her home. This carpool interview worked mainly because of Alice's friendly personality. Not every participant could tolerate this style. Therefore, I decided to wait until universities eased social restrictions for employees to start the rest of the interviews. In addition to Alice, the meeting place with other participants, especially those in City A, was also affected by the social restrictions of the epidemic, such as their university offices being unavailable. Therefore, participants in City A were all interviewed in parks near their universities or where they lived. My friend accompanied me to the interview locations and left during the interviews, and came to pick me up after the interviews. With the interview experience in City A, I became more confident in discussing the location with City B and C participants. I suggested to my participants that I wait until they are off work and meet them at their offices or at coffee shops on their way home. 7 participants were interviewed in their offices, and no third parties were present. Notably, one participant paused for 15 minutes during our interview because she needed to go to another office to check on her son's homework completion. One participant was interviewed at a quieter tea shop. Most of my participants were interviewed in parks near where they lived, and they explained that it was convenient for them because they could go home quickly after finishing. Some of them suggested we interview while strolling. Thus, instead of just sitting on a quiet bench, we wandered in the park. During the interviews, instead of holding a notebook and a recording pen, I used my mobile phone to make notes of my feelings and put the voice recorder in my pocket. This type of interview made me and my participants feel relaxed and comfortable. Although it was in public places, my interviews had not been disturbed by third parties.

Ethical practices

Ethical issues lay at the heart of this endeavour since this study was conducted through close interaction between researchers and participants. Before I started the fieldwork, I sought ethical approval from the Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology Ethics Committee (ELMPS) of the University of York. Filling out the ethics form inspired me to think about various ethical issues and risks that could arise, from research and interview questions to data storage and practical issues.

During the application process, ELMPS asked about possible surveillance risks from the Chinese government. Initially, the risk of my participants being under surveillance was low because the government rarely intervenes in private conversations at an individual level, based on my living experience in China. Nevertheless, ethical review and approval by the university reminded me that my responsibilities as a researcher include minimising the risk and discomfort to respondents. Thus, confidentiality and anonymity were given top priority in this study to reduce the potential surveillance risks. Confidentiality and anonymity are often conflated and connected but are different concepts in qualitative research (Wiles, 2013). Confidentiality is generally understood as the need for researchers to respect the privacy and autonomy of participants throughout the research process (Wiles, Crow, Heath and Charles, 2008). Anonymity is one form of confidentiality, that is, keeping participants' identities a secret. The ultimate aim of anonymity is that the participants cannot be traceable from the data presented by the researcher (Saunders, Kitzinger and Kitzinger, 2015).

Notably, possible surveillance risks led my participants to value the confidentiality and anonymity of their identities in this study. When I formally invited participants, almost half of the participants asked about anonymity, even though I had already mentioned this in my short recruiting message. They gave me their verbal consent after I confirmed and explained the anonymity of this study. Emma told me that freedom of expression for university academics is limited. They were asked not to comment and publish anything unrelated to their academic research publicly. For example, her leadership stressed at weekly meetings that staff should not publicly comment on the government's epidemic prevention policies. Participant Faye explained that she was concerned that it would affect her career if she said something wrong. Indeed the Chinese government has come under criticism for failing to provide its citizens with freedom of speech (Emmons, 2001; The Congressional-Executive Commission on China, no date). The average Chinese

citizen may 'pay a heavy price' for publishing criticisms of or opinions contrary to the government's (Emmons, 2001, p. 269). Yang (1994) pointed out that the 'culture of fear' affects the behaviour and speech of Chinese people in daily life. Faye and Emma's accounts reflect that anonymisation was particularly important when conducting qualitative research in China. Fear of punishment may prevent respondents from participating in interviews. Respondents could be directly harmed if a researcher accidentally discloses their identities. Therefore, I avoided interviews in public offices in case a third party appeared and instead chose empty classrooms or separate offices.

My other approaches to keeping participant identities anonymous are as follows. Firstly, I was cautious about recruiting and contacting potential participants to reduce the possible surveillance risks. I avoided using university email or social media to reach academic women to ensure potential participants would not come to the attention of Chinese universities and government oversight. I only recruited and contacted my participants through my personal networks and WeChat messages. Meanwhile, when contacting potential participants, I avoided mentioning topics related to politics and human rights and avoided using sensitive words, such as gender inequality. I used this method to avoid triggering any alert from the government on the WeChat platform. To maintain anonymity when using the gatekeeper, gatekeepers were not told who accepted the interviews.

Secondly, I used an information sheet (see Appendix IV) and a consent form (see Appendix II) to help me achieve confidentiality and anonymity. I drafted a consent form and an information sheet for the participants when filling out the ethics form, which was translated into Chinese (See Appendix V and Appendix III) during the lockdown in China. Asem (2019) suggest that it is better to translate the consent form into the local language, as this helps build participants' trust and agree to participate voluntarily in the research. Every time my gatekeepers passed me the contact information of a potential participant, I sent a formal invitation message with the information sheet and consent form to the participant. This information sheet identified the purpose of this study, how the participant's views will be used and protected, and how the participant's identity will be kept confidential. This sheet also emphasised the participant's right to participate or withdraw from this study and to refuse to answer any questions. At the beginning of each interview, I introduced myself and asked the participant to read the information sheet, regardless of whether she had already read it. After they finished reading, I re-

emphasised the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants' identities. For example, I used pseudonyms on the transcripts and in the thesis, and participants' contact information was only used for recruitment and communication. It would not appear in any public format. Sieber (1992) advises researchers to pay attention to deductive disclosure, also known as internal confidentiality (Tolich, 2004). Internal confidentiality is the traits of individuals that make them identifiable by familiar people, such as their colleagues. To avoid the possibility that someone who knows the university deducing the identity of academic participants based on characteristics such as length of service, academic ranks, and disciplines, I kept the names of the universities confidential, and I did not disclose the cities where the universities are located. I also explained to the participants that the interview content would be kept from the gatekeepers. Then I asked the participant if she had any questions and answered her questions. After completing all these steps, I reconfirmed the participant's willingness to participate and asked for a signed consent form before starting the interview.

I found it particularly challenging to maintain anonymity in this study. Firstly, my participants shared very sensitive and personal information, not only about themselves but also about third parties. For example, in my first three interviews, I noticed that my participants would share their female friend's or colleagues' situations or compare their own experiences to answer my interview questions. Therefore, my participants disclosed some traceable information in the interview, such as the third party's disciplines, universities' names, and positions. In response to this, before subsequent interviews began, I reminded my participants to avoid mentioning third parties' names or work locations. Any third party information already recorded is kept confidential in the same way I kept the participant's information. Secondly, the problem of 'small population' also made the identities of some participants potentially traceable. This 'small population' problem has been discussed in ethnographic studies, which means that participants from a specific town are at greater risk of being identified because of the low population size (Van den Hoonaard, 2003; Walford, 2005). In my interviews, some participants mentioned the names of organisations and academic conferences when describing their academic networks, and one participant mentioned her position in the academic organisation. Such organisations and conferences are all aimed at people in an academic field, and the number of them is very small. My participants might be identified by members in the same research field because of 'small population' and my participants' reputation. Faced with this challenge, I reminded my participants that there was a potential risk of identification with this information. According to Iphofen (2009, p. 91),

some information is 'mundane' and does not need to be kept confidential, while some specific information should not be shared with others at the request of the participants. Therefore, I asked my participants for permission to use the names of the academic organisation in the subsequent analysis. If they minded, I further asked the participants if they wanted me to keep the name of the academic organisation private or if I want me to go 'off the record' (Wiles, 2013, p. 49) for everything about the academic organisation. One participant asked to keep the name of the organisation private. I searched for information about these organisations and conferences during the transcription process. Disclosing the names of organisations and conferences may put my participants at risk of being traced by other members of the same organisation. Thus, this thesis keeps the names of these organisations and conferences anonymous.

My position in the research process

The reflexivity of researchers' position has been discussed and considered important in qualitative research (Pillow, 2003; Dwyer and Buckle, 2009; Gair, 2012; Berger, 2015). Reflecting on my positioning in the research process, I could be both an insider and an outsider in many circumstances. Most importantly, my positions during the interviews were fluid rather than static. Looking back at how my participants responded and interacted with me, my positioning in the interviews was more appropriately called a 'potential insider'.

Berger (2015) suggested that personal characteristics, such as gender, age, personal experiences and biases, influence a researcher's positioning. The researchers' positioning could further influence the willingness of respondents to share their experiences with researchers. Kanuha (2000) defined insiders as researchers who conduct research with populations of which they are also members. Being a Chinese woman, I was in a unique insider position to explore the gendered experiences of women academics in Chinese higher education because we share gender and nationality. Many participants often began or ended their explanations of my questions with 'you also know that' or 'you must know this too', especially when they discussed social expectations of women's marriage and family responsibilities. For example, participant Paula explained her stress of being single and said: 'You also know that single women are prejudiced in this society'. Paula's account reflects her viewing me as an insider who understood and even sympathised with her singlehood situation. Because of my insider position, I was constantly vigilant during the interview not to use my opinion to influence the expression

of my participants. Because the participants assumed that I have similar experiences and understandings, I always encouraged them to share more about their experiences and views as they closed their answers. For example, I said: 'Could you talk about it specifically?' or 'Could you share an example of this?'

In addition, I was considered a stranger or an outsider when my line of questions moved to the content of academic work and their everyday experiences at work, marriage, and family life. Being regarded as an outsider is reflected in many participants explaining to me their university's system and academics' 'internal language' in great detail during the interview. For example, when I asked my first participant, Alice, about her experiences and feelings about academic recruitment, instead of answering directly, she told me: 'Let me give you a brief introduction to the university's recruitment process'. She introduced in detail her recruitment process and method as a Master's graduate and then compared it to different processes and methods for Ph.D holders. At the same time, during my interviews, my participants often brought up professional terminologies and slang often used by academics. For example, many participants mentioned the term '*ban tuo chan*' [半脱产], which can be directly translated as partly released from productive labour. However, it means that they have the experience of working while completing their doctorate part-time. Whenever these words were mentioned, my participants explained the words to me before answering my questions. Since I have no experience working in Chinese universities, my participants naturally put themselves in the expert position to respond to my questions related to university work. At the same time, I am naturally regarded as an outsider. This kind of empowering experience for participants was good for my interviews because it could encourage participants to say more and be more specific. Therefore, even though these terms had been explained to me by my first few participants, I pretended to be unfamiliar during my interviews with others, encouraging my participants to explain and share their relevant experiences.

One strategy I employed in the interview was to position myself as a 'potential insider', especially when my outsider status might influence my communication with participants. For example, when I asked participant Gina about her family life, she expressed concerns about my position as an outsider since I had no marriage or parenting experience. She stated: 'I think unmarried girls, like you, it is very difficult for you to imagine life after marriage, especially life after giving birth'. In this case, I could not claim to 'understand' the family experience of married women and mothers. I tried to position

myself as a 'potential insider' and used the following question to encourage her to talk: 'Can you share this experience and feeling with me? I may also get married and become a mother in the future.' Emphasising that I would be a mother in the future was useful; Gina explained her perspective and offered advice based on her experiences. This strategy was also frequently used in communicating with other participants. For example, I mentioned honestly in the interviews that I want to be an academic in China after graduation. Thereby the experiences they shared were also very instructive for me. In this way, many participants also regarded me as a 'potential insider', and meaningful information was shared. For example, when Stella mentioned that her research was affected by childbirth, she advised me after sharing her experience, she said: 'I think, if you become a university teacher, you better not have children for the first three years'. In the end, my participants expressed their satisfaction with my interviews, and some also encouraged me to pursue an academic career.

From my experience conducting interviews, I was very thankful for choosing the qualitative research method. My participants' life experiences and stories are meaningful to my research and career expectation. In this study, I was not a complete insider or outsider. In the grey space between insider and outsider, I positioned myself as a 'potential insider', which helped me to encourage my participants to share more information in depth during the interviews.

Power relations

Traditionally, a research interview is often seen as a one-way instrumental dialogue, with the researcher asking questions and the interviewee answering (Kvale, 2006). Researchers are often considered to have apparent power over the interviewees because they have time and skills to conduct interviews, determine research topics and interview questions, record interviews using tape recorders and pen and paper, and analyse interviewee's narratives (Letherby, 2003; Brinkman and Kvale, 2005). However, in research interviews, the power dance between the interviewer and interviewees can be complex and contextualised (Anyan, 2013; Vähäsantanen and Saarinen, 2013). Research suggests that characteristics, such as the gender of the researcher and interviewee, can contribute to unequal power relations and discomfort during interviews (Arendell, 1997; Schwalbe and Wolkomir, 2003; Pini, 2005). For example, Pini (2005) observed that male interviewees tended to position themselves as all-knowing and powerful in their interactions with female researchers. The core of feminist thought is to

challenge the male-dominated 'power-over' social structure and its manifestations in daily activities and personal relationships (Mahlstedt, 1999, p. 111). Feminist researchers seek to enable more equal relationships in the data collection stage, such as qualitative research interviews, and challenge researchers' privileged and all-knowing position in interaction (Oakley, 1981; Burman, 1992; Mahlstedt, 1999). For example, Stanley and Wise (1993) suggested that researchers should be aware of their privilege and try to balance power relationships with interviewees by showing sisterhood and mutual support. Contemporary feminist researchers have emphasised the recognition of power relations between women, that social attributes other than gender, such as age and social status, can also influence the researcher and interviewee's power positions and interaction during the interview (Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002; Ikonen and Ojala, 2007). For example, Nonaka (2015) reported unbalanced power relations when interviewing Japanese feminist scholars and the pressure she faced with the double hierarchical relationships between older and younger, teacher and student.

In this study, gender did not affect power relations and interactions, as both the researcher and participants were women. However, I noticed that the hierarchy between teachers and students in a cultural context and the power positions this entail influenced my interview framing and interactions. Confucianism has influenced China for more than 2,000 years, forming a culture of profound seniority and strict hierarchy in which the juniors should be respectful and loyal to the seniors (Huang and Gove, 2012; 2015). Likewise, the unequal relationship between teachers and students follows the same hierarchy, and students should respect and obey all teachers (Xing, 2018). East Asian countries and regions, such as China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, are generally considered to have cultural similarities because they are all influenced by Confucianism (Brinton, Lee and Parish, 1995; Raymo et al., 2015; Chin, 2016). The influence of Confucian culture on the teacher-student relationship can also be seen in studies from other East Asian countries (Nonaka, 2015; Chin, 2016). Nonaka (2015) mentioned that she faced a double hierarchy when interviewing Japanese feminist academics as a Ph.D student. As a young person, she must respect her elders, and as a junior on the academic ladder, she must respect her senior academics. My power relation was similar to Nonaka (2015) in that the academic hierarchy between a Ph.D student and university academics naturally formed an unequal relationship between me and my participants. Therefore, my participants had overwhelming power over me. There were two typical cases in which the teacher-student relationship brought about by academic rank continued in my interviews.

When interviewing Helen, I felt like she was supervising my research. She asked me why I chose this research topic because she thought that my research topic could not solve the problem of gender inequality in universities in China. She reminded me that research in China is all about solving practical problems, not just revealing and discussing social issues. She told me:

You choose this topic and analyse the current situation. After that, how do you want to solve this problem, and what kind of result do you want in the end? I think your research should focus on resolution and results. I suggest you think about it.

During the interview, Helen also gave me many suggestions. For example, she advised me to analyse the status of Chinese women in different eras and the measures other countries took to support women academics in my thesis. These interactions made me feel like she was trying to supervise my research. Helen and I are relatives, and our daily interactions are casual and comfortable. However, in our interview, I felt our power relationship changed to student and teacher. After she made the above points, I did not directly explain my thoughts but replied that I would consider her suggestion. I considered that it would be rude to debate with Helen during the interview, and it would affect the length of the interview. At the same time, rather than stressing the power of my position as a researcher, the teacher-student relationship helped my participants to share their perspectives. For example, Helen mentioned a general preference for male candidates in the Chinese academic market, and she suggested I focus on how to solve this problem in my research. Based on her account, I asked if you have any gender-related feelings and experiences in university recruitment.

After the interview, I asked Helen how she was feeling about my interview. She told me that she was satisfied with my interview and that I did not make her feel uncomfortable. She also mentioned that one of the difficulties in conducting research in China is that academics should not only consider their own interests when determining research topics but also whether journals will select the topics. She told me:

You have to consider what kind of research topic is more likely to be accepted by journals and then decide what to write in your paper.

From her words, I realised that she suggested I change the research content because, based on her viewpoint, my research may be difficult to be accepted by Chinese journals.

Another case is Olivia. Olivia not only had experience conducting interviews in China as a researcher, but her interviews also covered topics related to family and motherhood. Our interview did not follow the outline of the interview I designed, but she took the initiative to guide the interview process. For example, my ice-breaking question was, 'Can you talk about yourself and your work', she replied: 'Let me first tell you about my experiences growing up'. In explaining this experience, she covered most of my interview questions and spent nearly an hour. This led me to ask more in-depth questions during her explanation and checked at the end to see if anymore questions needed to be answered. Olivia asked if I wanted her to do a follow-up interview and suggested I use follow-up interviews as a supplement to the first interview. It also made me feel that she guided me in this interview as an experienced interviewer and researcher. The advantage is that her answers reflect her life course as a woman academic and include many vivid examples. The downside is that this interview with Olivia is the longest of all my interviews, reaching 2 hours and 10 minutes. In fact, during my interview with Olivia, I thoroughly enjoyed our teacher-student relationship. This is because she shared a lot of information about researching sociology in China during our interview. She shared what she encountered in her past interviews and her feelings about conducting research in the field of humanities and arts in China. She told me:

Although the research results of the Humanity and Liberal Arts may not have an immediate effect on society but are meaningful to this society in the long term. I think we need to be more confident in our research. No matter how much your research can help society, you should show it bravely.

Olivia's advice gave me more confidence in my research. As the last participant in my research, Olivia made a perfect ending for my field trip.

Data processing and analysis

Due to the impact of the epidemic, my fieldwork in China was much longer than I expected. It took me eight months to complete all the interviews, including two months in self-isolation. At the same time, due to China-UK air traffic restrictions, I could not return to the UK after completing the fieldwork as planned. By the time I completed my fieldwork and returned to the UK in April 2021, I had already transcribed all interview recordings.

All my interviews were conducted in Chinese (Mandarin). To avoid misinterpreting what my participants said, I decided to transcribe all recordings in Chinese. My initial thought was to have all the transcripts translated into English during the analysis and writing-up phases. However, it soon became apparent that this was going to be a very difficult task, especially considering that there were 20 interviews, each lasting around 1.5 hours and six interviews were nearly two hours long. As a result, I had 30 hours of data to transcribe myself, and I decided to translate only selected quotations for analysis and writing up.

I completed all transcription myself instead of hiring a transcriber. As mentioned above, most of my participants inquired about anonymity and confidentiality before their interviews, and I agreed to keep them anonymous. Although transcribers would sign a privacy agreement, completing all transcription myself was a commitment to following the ethics of qualitative research and to the protection of my participants' anonymity. The process of transcribing was time-consuming, but I saw the process as an excellent way for me to become familiar with the data. When transcribing the recording verbatim, I only deleted repetitive words of the speech while preserving non-verbal sounds such as their silences, pauses and laughter. Sprague (2016) suggests that researchers should pay attention to what the interviewees say and how they say it. Oliver et al. (2005) also noted that 'verbal and non-verbal signals can change the tenor of conversations and meaning' (p. 1276). Based on the interview notes, I added information about my feelings and comments and my participants' facial expressions. These details allow me to replicate as many interview interactions as possible in transcript form, which greatly benefits my data analysis and writing. These details were important clues for my interpretation of participants' experiences and perspectives on specific life events, which, too, greatly benefited my data analysis and writing. Completing all the interview transcripts took four months. After I had completed all transcripts, I sent the transcription to my participants and asked them if they would like to view and edit it. They were satisfied with my

transcriptions, they did not edit the transcription but made comments. A few participants thought their answers were verbose and suggested I delete some repeated words or sentences with the same meaning. I replied that I hoped to keep the original transcription because deleting the participants' accounts may change the meaning, which is not conducive to data analysis. At the same time, although my participants were surprised by the facial expressions and body movements I recorded, such as shrugging, because they were unaware of their body movements during the interviews, they did not object to my use of these contents in the analysis. I also asked participants if I could continue to contact them if I had questions during the follow-up analysis. Most of the participants responded positively. One participant also recommended me a book about academic mothers written in Chinese.

After returning to the UK, I analysed my data using thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a practical data analysis method that allows qualitative researchers to identify, analyse, and report repetitive patterns in a data set. It is designed to search for common or shared meanings of experiences, thoughts, and behaviours from a group of people (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Because this study aims to explore the experiences and perspectives of women working as academics in contemporary Chinese universities, thematic analysis is an appropriate and powerful method to gain a detailed understanding of academic women's experiences at work and home and the meanings that these women attached to them.

When engaging in thematic analysis, my initial idea was to use NVivo to generate main themes and subthemes based on the number of occurrences of a particular idea or item in the dataset. However, I soon found that NVivo only considers the frequency of the searched words, not the meanings or synonyms. I used NVivo at the beginning of the analysis to quickly identify some repeated words, which was useful in developing the main themes. Then I identified subthemes and the connections between each of them. Thus, even with the help of NVivo, it is still up to the researcher to choose the themes.

I followed the guidelines of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) to ensure the trustworthiness of my findings and interpretations. Familiarising with the data is a crucial first step in using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). While looking forward to coding the data and searching for themes immediately, I accepted Kiger and

Varpio (2020) that familiarity with the entire dataset could not only provide the researcher with valuable orientation but is a foundation for all subsequent steps. I familiarised myself with the data by repeatedly reading all the transcripts and interview notes. I colour-coded key points and took notes on potential data items during reading. While I paid attention to common opinions in the data, I also highlighted and added to the notes if there were opposing opinions or if an issue was raised only by one participant. I enumerated all the keywords, points, and notes of one transcript and applied this coding template to the entire dataset. These notes and highlighted were initial codes, not themes. Boyatzis (1998) defined a code as 'the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon' (p. 63).

Although generating the initial codes was tedious and time-consuming, it helped me search for emerging themes smoothly. The theme is 'patterned response or meaning' (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 82), which come from the data but does not simply emerge from the data. Varpio et al. (2017) suggest that themes are constructed through analysing, combining, comparing, and graphically mapping the relationships between codes, entirely led by the researcher. At the beginning, to demonstrate the experience of women in academic work in contemporary Chinese universities, I divided the themes into two major aspects: work and life, and I analysed and categorised both aspects of women's work and life based on my coding template. The next step in the thematic analysis was to review the themes. Clarke and Braun (2006) mentioned that each theme has an independent meaning but, at the same time, can work together to form a coherent story. At this point, I re-read the codes, modified the themes, and divided the themes into new or sub-themes. For example, I have broken down women's reproductive issues into several sub-themes, such as age at childbearing, the overlap of childbearing with early career, and work arrangements during pregnancy. Furthermore, the responsibility of academic women in educating their own children was a new theme drawn from the stability and flexibility of academic careers. This is because they not only have to undertake the responsibility of educating children in daily life but also were under expectations to use their own knowledge and resources to guide and educate their children to a high standard. Then, I modified the thematic map accordingly. When naming the themes and subthemes, I reviewed the storylines of the themes and subthemes and thought about the words that could describe the key characteristics of the themes. However, naming subthemes was particularly difficult because some Chinese words do

not have a corresponding English word. I sought advice from my supervisor and decided to use *pinyin* (Romanised Chinese) for untranslatable Chinese terms.

This final phase of thematic analysis is writing up the final analysis and description of findings (Braun and Clarke 2006). I used both narrative descriptions and representative data extracts (e.g. direct quotations from participants). In writing the data analysis, the challenges I faced included choosing what to quote and translating the quotations. Since my questions were almost all designed to be open-ended and encouraged participants to share their stories, the participants' interpretations of one theme may be scattered among the answers to many different questions. This posed a challenge for me when having to extract direct, lengthy quotes from participants. Therefore, when choosing a quotation, I considered whether the quotation could accurately explain the themes and subthemes and whether the content was adequately coherent and complete. I used the most relatively complete quotations when different participants raised similar experiences or had similar meanings to one issue.

In addition, the bilingual nature of this study has led to translation difficulties in describing the findings and writing the final analysis. I thought it was easier to read and understand the data in my native language, so I only translated selected quotations in writing this thesis instead of translating all transcriptions into English. When translating selected quotations, I found some Chinese terms challenging to translate directly into English. For example, my participants described their academic work using the Chinese terms '*wending*', '*linghuo*' and '*danchun*', translated as 'stable' and 'flexible' and 'simple'. However, reading the participants' descriptions carefully, I realised that these translations fail to capture the complex and rich meaning of the terms. After consulting with my supervisor and seeing how other researchers are coping with research in multiple languages, I chose to keep the pronunciation of these untranslatable Chinese terms in quotations and explained the various meanings of these words in the subsequent analysis. As Chin (2016) shared her experience dealing with multiple languages, saying that words that are difficult to translate mean that the word is probably culturally specific. To ensure the translated words maintain accuracy and their culturally specific meaning, they are described, and the context is explained in depth in the next chapter.

Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the methodology and research methods used in this study. This chapter started with epistemological considerations, as epistemology is the basis for researchers to generate knowledge and conduct research. My study takes an interpretivist approach and explains why qualitative face-to-face interviews with semi-structured questions were used as the sole method for data collection. I discussed how feminist research has influenced my choice of method and how I design my study in a feminist way. After the data was obtained, the thematic analysis method was used to convert the raw data into themes. The process of practising thematic analysis was discussed in detail to ensure my findings' accuracy, reliability and correct interpretations.

In addition, this chapter discussed the issues that arose during my fieldwork in China. By reflecting on the whole process of my fieldwork, I first explained the impact of the epidemic throughout my fieldwork, especially the difficulties encountered when conducting face-to-face interviews. I discussed why using intermediaries, and snowball sampling enabled me to reach eligible respondents effectively. I reflected on my experience gained from the interviews. Attention was also paid to ethical issues, especially surveillance risks and power relationships. I described the anonymisation challenges I encountered during the interviews and the solutions used.

Three chapters on data analysis follow this chapter. In Chapter 4, I discuss the participants' definitions and descriptions of academic career characteristics and how these characteristics fit into social expectations of women's domestic roles. Chapter 5 sheds light on the real lives of women in academic careers by analysing similar experiences shared by participants. Chapter 6 discusses coping strategies for academic women when faced with barriers at work and home. Finally, I reflect on my research journey, summarise the findings, and discuss the contribution and limitations.

Chapter 4. Social expectations of academic work for women

Introduction

Choosing a career is one of the most important events in life. As a girl born and raised in China, I often heard growing up that it is good for girls to become teachers. My family advised me to return to my country after graduation and become an academic at a university because they think universities are friendly to women, especially for women in marriage. They wanted me to find a position in a local first-tier university rather than a prestigious university. My family expressed their love and wished me happiness. For them, a happy life includes a harmonious marriage and a decent, stable, and a relatively unstressful job. Thus, prestigious universities are seen as too stressful and would, they feel, impact my happiness and family life negatively.

My research interest stems from this personal experience mentioned above. I wondered whether academic women were influenced by others when choosing an academic career, why they chose it, and their real work and life experiences. Therefore, in my interviews, I started by asking an open-ended question, 'based on your experience, can you talk about why you chose an academic career?'. Then, based on the participants' answers, several related questions were further raised, such as 'Did anyone around you give you advice when choosing an academic career?', 'Does your family support your choice of an academic career?', 'In your experience, have you ever heard the expression that university jobs are suitable for girls?', 'Do you agree with this expression?' and 'Why do you agree or disagree?'. The results of the interviews are not entirely out of expectation. All my participants reported positive comments from families, teachers and acquaintances declaring that being a university teacher is good for girls. Faye and Qiana also reported that their parents directly intervened in their university application after *gaokao* (The National College Entrance Examination). For instance, instead of applying for polytechnic universities which focused more on specialist scientific training, their parents made decisions for them to apply for normal universities to enable their daughters' future careers as teachers. In China, a normal university mainly trains graduates to become teachers. As of 2014, there were 143 normal universities in mainland China. In the analysis of my interview data, I was able to identify three key

traits associated with academic jobs that were regarded as making an academic career appropriate for women: *wending* ([稳定] steady and stable), *linghuo* ([灵活] flexible) and *danchun* ([单纯] simple).

In this chapter, I examine the extent to which the general social expectations for women and women's work. Based on my academic participants' lived experiences, I discuss in more detail the three traits used to describe why and how academic jobs are appropriate for women. However, it was clear from my participants that the social expectations and other people's vague understanding of academic careers are often inconsistent with the actual working life of academic women. This inconsistency made some participants feel that the demands of their work lives and contributions to the family were not adequately understood by their family members, thereby increasing their family-work conflict.

Academic careers are *wending*

The widespread opinion is that working at a university as an academic is good for educated women. One of the main factors contributing to this common opinion is the idea that such jobs are '*wending*' ([稳定] steady and stable). Translation according to Collins Dictionary, this Chinese adjective can be translated as steady and stable. In the accounts of my participants, the Chinese term '*wending*' appeared in the persuasion of parents and acquaintances as one of the main reasons that an academic career is good for women. My participants agreed with their families' suggestions, and they expressed that *wending* was one of the reasons why they are willing to choose academic careers. Alice told me, 'I think Chinese people generally believe that working at a university is a really good job for girls, whether you are in a teaching or administrative position'. Coco told me: 'my parents think girls need a steady job' and Daisy's parents advised her more directly on her career choices and said: 'stability trumps all other conditions for girls'. In these discourses, *wending* is not only regarded as an important condition but as a necessary condition for women's career choices. However, digging deeper into the explanations of my participants, I find that *wending* is strongly associated with permanent employment, called *bianzhi* in Chinese. Most importantly, my research indicates that the requirement for a steady career, such as an academic career, ultimately relates to expectations around women's familial responsibilities.

Bianzhi

The stability of academic careers is largely due to the '*bianzhi*' many universities provide to their staff. The term '*bianzhi*' [编制] is translated as 'personnel quota' by Collins Dictionary. Brodsgaard (2002) translates this term as 'establishment of posts'. This term is commonly understood as a life-long employment guarantee, known as the '*tie fan wan*' ([铁饭碗] iron rice bowl) (Ding, Goodall and Warner, 2000). In this study, sixteen participants belonged to the *bianzhi* system, and only four had fixed-term contracts with universities with no *bianzhi*. Among these four participants, Helen and Emma work at prestigious universities, where *bianzhi* is no longer offered to young academics, instead replaced by a probation–tenure system. The other two participants, Coco and Nora, did not have *bianzhi* because of their academic qualifications. Their universities only offer *bianzhi* to academics with a doctorate.

More than half of the participants cited *bianzhi* as their primary reason for choosing an academic career, taking into account their gender. For example, Faye has worked at a Chinese university since 2001 with an undergraduate degree. She successfully completed her Master's and Ph.D programmes while working. In our interview, Faye mentioned that around the year 2000, graduates of computer disciplines could easily find a well-paid job in tech-related companies in China. However, she explained that, instead of working at a high-paying tech company, she chose an academic career mainly because of *bianzhi*. Faye told me:

To put it bluntly, many women academics I know choose to work in universities because they consider the university can provide *bianzhi*. Because, even today, university remuneration is much lower than that of companies. [...] The academic salary is so low. If the university does not offer *bianzhi* to me, I would rather work in a company and save more money for the future while I am young.

As can be seen from Faye's explanation, she feels many women academics have made similar career choices to her. Although Faye is not satisfied with the income of her academic career, it can be seen from her choice and explanation that, for women, *bianzhi* can be even more important than income. Faye further took her mother as an example to explain the importance of *bianzhi* to women. Her mother used to be a school teacher.

During the mass layoffs in the 1990s, her mother was not affected because she had *bianzhi*, and her family was able to maintain a basic living on a meagre income. The reforms of state-owned enterprises to reduce costs and improve profitability resulted in millions of redundancies (Ding, Dong and Li, 2009; Liu, 2007). The official number of redundancies increased from three million in 1993 to seventeen million in 1998, but the actual number of unemployed in urban China could be much higher (Cai, 2002). Among these redundancies, Zheng (2003) indicated that women accounted for a larger proportion. Faye's mother passed on her knowledge of *bianzhi* to Faye. Faye told me:

When I graduated, I did not know anything about *bianzhi*. Because my mother used to be a school teacher, she told me that being a female teacher is stable. Although her income is not high, she will not go hungry. She doesn't want to have a difficult life and suffer too much. She said it is enough for a girl to lead a stable life in college. She said that university work is a formal job. Looking back now, I think what she calls a formal job actually refers to the *bianzhi*. With the *bianzhi*, you will not be easily fired by employers. You have regular pay cheques from the state, and you won't suffer from starvation. You also have a regular pension for a stable retirement life.

Daisy has been working as an academic since 2007 and is in computer engineering. Daisy also mentioned the impact of massive layoffs on her career choices. She agreed that *bianzhi* was more important to women. In Daisy's case, this massive layoff had a substantial impact on her parents' jobs and standard of living, with her mother laid off first and then her father. Daisy did not provide further details about her parents' job losses and related financial difficulties, but this experience made her prioritise career security when choosing her job. For example, Daisy attributed that her parents lost their jobs because they did not have *bianzhi*. Therefore, she only considered careers with *bianzhi* when choosing a job. She told me:

It had a significant impact on my life. My standard of living suddenly dropped. My parents told me that they were laid off and had no money. I was terrified at that time. I felt my life was very insecure. So, I can understand why my parents wanted me to find a job with *bianzhi*. I also think *bianzhi* is important. Especially for girls, it is the guarantee of survival.

Perhaps because Daisy's mother was laid off first, her emphasis on the importance of *bianzhi* to women reflects how women can be more vulnerable and disadvantaged in employment, especially in the face of tremendous social changes. At the same time, Daisy and Faye's experiences show that the large-scale layoffs in the 1990s left two generations with a sense of insecurity about their jobs. The parents of my participants have experienced career crises caused by massive social change. Their insecurities towards employment could pass on to the next generation and influence their daughters to prioritise jobs with life-long employment guarantees, or *bianzhi*, over other factors, such as income, when choosing a career.

Steady job and family

In my participants' experience, marriage and childbirth were not personal choices but must-haves in a woman's life. Well-educated women, like my participants, have experiences of *cuihun* ([催婚] being urged to get married) and *cuisheng* ([催生] being urged to give birth). In this study, fifteen of the participants are married, and twelve of them have children. Five participants were unmarried at the time of our interviews. They all had similar experiences of being urged to get married by their parents and acquaintances. Three participants who were married but did not have children also had similar experiences of being urged to give birth.

Luna was one of the three participants who were married and had no children. She shared her experience of how her parents intervened in her marriage decisions. According to her description, the parents' intervention took many forms in day-to-day interactions and arranging *xiangqin* ([相亲] blind dates or matchmaking) on her behalf. During her master's and Ph.D studies, Luna was often nagged about her singleness by her parents. Her mother also found some bachelors of the same age as Luna through acquaintances. Her mother tried to help Luna find a husband as soon as possible by asking Luna to meet and date these men during the holidays. Luna told me that her mother's actions made her aware of her parents' concerns about her singlehood, which in turn increased her stress. She met her husband when she graduated and entered marriage soon after starting her academic career, partly because she did not want her parents to worry. Luna explained how this phenomenon of *cuihun* is a cultural and regional product. She told me:

My mother said that there are two main things in a woman's life, having a steady job and having a stable family. If you are in a big city, it may be less stressful. But if you come from a more conservative area, the pressure is not only from your parents, but your parents themselves are also under a lot of pressure. Like when I was doing my Ph.D, my uncle said to my dad, 'Why is your daughter studying when she is so old? Why aren't you urging your daughter to get married? What will she do when she is elderly?' These kinds of remarks are also forcing my parents to urge me to get married.

Betty went to work at a university on the east coast in China after graduating with a Ph.D and has *bianzhi*. In our interview, she mentioned her experience of being introduced to young and promising bachelors by acquaintances, such as her colleagues, heads of department and university administration staff when she had just started her academic career. Betty told me: 'It is very unusual for a girl not to be urged to marry after she finds a job. There are too many voices around'. Betty considered that the phenomenon of *cuihun* is the product of the influence of traditional Chinese culture. She told me:

Today, girls are independent, good enough, and their status is much higher than in the past. However, in the traditional concept, as a girl, no matter how high her education is, how excellent she is, one day she must always return to the family and '*xiang fu Jiao zi*' ([相夫教子] to assist her husband and educate their children).

In our interview, I could feel Betty's passion for her academic work and satisfaction with her current unmarried lifestyle in her tone. When she mentioned the phrase 'one day she must always return to the family', I noticed that her tone changed with a shrug of resignation. Betty has experience studying and travelling overseas. She labelled herself as a modern independent woman influenced by Western education and expressed her opposition to the stigmatisation of single women as 'leftover women'. She refused these offers of 'help' because she wanted to advance her academic career. In addition, at the time of our interview, she was in a long-distance relationship with her boyfriend. She expressed satisfaction with her life in a long-distance relationship because her boyfriend does not interfere with her work and daily life. Thereby, she preferred to maintain this

relationship pattern rather than getting married. She was nonetheless the only participant in this study who expressed resistance to marriage.

From the experiences of the two participants, it seems that for young and unmarried women who have completed their studies and have a steady job, marriage is a social necessity for them. In a hegemonic heterosexual family culture, women are especially obliged to fulfil the norms of marriage and reproduction. For instance, the emphasis on women's age reflects that women's youthfulness is seen as attractive to men and an advantage in the marriage market. This connection between women's attractiveness and their youth was also found in Xie's (2019) research. My participants largely agreed that a culture urging marriage and childbirth that stigmatises unmarried women is distressing. My study reveals that these women often face intense pressure from parents before fulfilling their obligation of marriage, echoing the findings of Gui (2020) and Ji (2015). The stigmatisation of well-educated and high-achieving single women is not news in China (Hong Fincher, 2016). To (2013) argues that the Chinese patriarchal structure is the main reason for the phenomenon of Chinese women's marriage dilemma. I found that, in this patriarchal society, parents can be both perpetrators and victims of social expectations around marriage. Although arranged marriages may no longer be practised in China, the practices of parents interfering with daughters' marriages, such as arranging blind dates, reflect that patriarchal attitudes still exist in family relationships. The parents are also under pressure from public opinion and social criticism, accusing them of failing to urge their daughters to fulfil their marriage obligation.

Furthermore, based on the interpretation of *wending* by twelve participants who were married and had children, I found that *wending* is connected to the gendered division of labour and women's responsibility to ensure a stable family life. During our interviews, my participants referred to an old-fashioned Confucian concept of family, which is '*nan zhu wai, nv zhu nei*' [男主外, 女主内], meaning that men are in charge of outside business while women are in charge of the indoor. Chin (2016) suggests that the boundary that distinguishes indoors from outdoors is typically the household. Thus, a more accurate interpretation of this phrase is that men, as breadwinners, should pursue their careers in the public sphere, while women, as housewives, should stay at home. My participants disagreed that this gender division of labour applies to contemporary Chinese heterosexual families, as women go out to work and support their families financially. Nonetheless, this traditional concept seems to have influenced women's

career choices. Under the influence of this concept, women are more likely than men to choose a stable job that enables them to better adapt to family roles. For example, Vera told me: 'In general, women's work needs to be more stable so that a family can be stable.'. Helen told me: 'if both of us go outside every day, the family will soon disband'.

Based on my participants' accounts, *wending* includes a requirement for women to choose jobs and workplaces that are geographically close to their households, such as a fixed workplace close to households with less travel needs that separate women from their families. For example, in explaining what *wending* is, Daisy mentioned that her daily routine is travelling between three places: home, workplace and children's kindergarten. This routine is common to many academic women with children because it is either mothers or grandparents who pick up children from kindergarten, rarely fathers. To reduce the commuting time, Daisy chose a kindergarten closer to her home and workplace for her children. Alice also paraphrased her parents' description of the stability of academic work and said: 'because university teachers do not need to travel a lot, it has a great benefit on a woman's family'. That is to say, if the work requires frequent business travel or is too far from home, it will be difficult for women to achieve a stable routine and fulfil their family responsibilities daily.

Olivia is an associate professor in the field of social sciences. In our interview, she referred to the term 'helicopter parent' [直升机父母] to describe the phenomenon that women often arrange their daily schedule based on their children's schedule. She mocked the concept of 'helicopter mother'. To be more precise. She told me:

Olivia: I think the profession of female university teachers is very stable in people's impressions. It has a stable income, a stable work unit and stable daily content. My female colleagues are either in class, at home, or picking up their children at the kindergarten door every day. Helicopter mother is hovering over your child's head all the time. If you are often away from home and you do not accompany your husband and child, like a helicopter flying away, your husband will definitely not be happy with you. Then there will be family conflicts.

Researcher: What is the difference with men? Why are men not helicopters?

Olivia: It is very different. Men are expected to go outside. Everyone thinks it is normal for men to travel frequently, and they should, because people will regard leaving home as a man who is working hard in his career and is a necessary part of their career development. Although women also go out for work, there is still *nan zhu wai* ([男主外] men are in charge of outside business).

In the case of Helen, she and her husband are both working at elite universities. In our interview, Helen mentioned her experience of having a baby and confinement, which had a completely different impact on her career compared to her husband's career. Before she gave birth to a child, she disagreed with the division of labour in the family. She thought that she and her husband were both in charge of the outside because they are both academics at prestigious universities. During her pregnancy, her husband left her for a one-year academic visit abroad, while she had to give up such opportunities. After giving birth, she still had to care for her child at home. Since they are both academics in prestigious universities, her situation compared to her husband's made her very depressed and frustrated. With the comfort and advice of a retired female academic, she gradually accepted the family division of labour. Helen paraphrased this retired female academic's words, saying:

In a family, even if two of you are both academics, it is still a family. Therefore, one must focus on work to make more money for the family, and another must always focus on family. Otherwise, the family will have big conflicts sooner or later and eventually disband. You think that if both of you are facing similar pressures from academic work, and bringing bad emotions home, then this family quarrels every day. Also, who cares for the kids? If we are both not at home, the children will not feel safe and cannot feel the warmth of home. So, I think it is impossible for a family with children if both parents focus on working outside. If both of us go outside every day, the family will soon disband. Men need to be the primary breadwinner and go out to make more money. And then it is better for women to focus on the family. You (women) must have a job, but your attention is still on the family.

Olivia and Helen's accounts reflect that the stability of academic careers is related to the division of labour between men and women. Women are expected to choose stable careers because they often need to be family centred, such as choosing a workplace geographically close to home and a role with fewer travel needs. An academic career is perceived as suitable for women partly because it allows women to fulfil day-to-day parenting and family responsibilities. In the case of Helen, before she gave birth to a child, she did not agree with the division of labour in the family. She thought that she and her husband were both in charge of the outside because they are both academics at prestigious universities. However, as a woman, childbirth and parenting have forced her to shift from career-centred to family-centred while husbands can always be career-centred, such as Helen's academic husband visiting abroad. She expressed that she tried to accept the family division in which the male dominates the outside and the female dominates the inside after her family tried to persuade her. Her account reflects that although women academics do not fully agree with the traditional family division of labour, they may be prompted to accept the traditional division of labour after giving birth. Additionally, her account also reflects that this division of labour persists in families even when both husband and wife are engaged in academic careers.

Academic careers are *linghuo*

Academic careers have flexible working hours on weekdays, two-day weekends and long summer/winter holidays, in which there is no teaching. These all make university teaching careers attractive to women, allowing them to balance work and family responsibilities (Zhang and Cai, 2000). By comparing it to the old-fashioned eight-hour fixed office time (9 am to 5 pm typical work week) in many public-sector organisations, and '996' (meaning: work 9 am to 9 pm, six days a week) or '007' (meaning online 24 hours a day, working seven days a week, resting only on rotations) in some highly competitive industries in China, my participants recognised *linghuo* ([灵活] flexible) as one of the main reasons they chose academic careers. My participants used the term '*bu zuo ban*' [不坐班] to describe this flexible schedule, meaning they had no fixed office hours. For example, their weekly course time varies from a maximum of fourteen to a minimum of eight hours during the semester, depending on department requirements and academic ranks (the higher the academic rank, the fewer courses taught). Outside the course hours, they have the flexibility to schedule working hours on course preparation and research, and they can choose to work from home. My participants enjoyed this flexibility and freedom to decide where, when and how to work. When my

unmarried participants explained flexible working hours, they mentioned that they help them in their daily life and work, allowing them to work according to their own lifestyle.

For the participants who were married and had children, I noticed that they often mentioned flexible time for family. The married participants agreed that university flexible work arrangements enabled them to meet family responsibilities to some extent. They reported that it is common for departments to arrange curriculum schedules based on individual needs, especially for pregnant academics, breastfeeding and caring for children. For example, all of Daisy's classes avoid eight to ten am and three to five pm periods to facilitate her children's pick-up and drop-off; Olivia and Ulla asked their classes to be concentrated on two working days so they could work from home for the rest of their working days. In the years following childbirth, flexible arrangements allow women academics to complete most of the work at home while caring for their children.

However, according to the participants' retelling of acquaintances' comments regarding women academics and their family responsibilities, my research suggests that the flexibility of academic career deepens the social expectations and demands for women academics to take on family responsibilities. Daisy told me: 'when I got married, people around me would say, 'it is good for you to become a teacher so that you can take care of the family conveniently'. Another participant Olivia also told me: 'others think that we have no fixed office hours, which is good for the family'. Their accounts illustrate that, for women in academics, flexible work arrangements are there to serve their families rather than career advancement. Daisy explained afterwards why men prefer to have female teachers as wives and said: 'they consciously or unconsciously want their teaching wives to be able to spend more time taking care of the family. Other participants also mentioned words such as 'convenient', 'good for the family' and 'more time' to explain what men expect from their academic wives or what society generally expects from married and unmarried women academic. There is some updated evidence online that the teaching professions, including university academics, have become one of the ideal careers for wives. WhatYouNeed and Hupu jointly surveyed the 'Professional list of ideal girlfriends on the internet' in 2020. The results show that the teaching profession is regarded as the most ideal girlfriend career in the minds of men. Daisy's words are from the perspective of women who has a teaching profession at university to explain why that career is the most ideal girlfriend career in the eyes of men. This is partly due to men's belief and expectations that women academics do not have fixed working hours, so those women

can and should spend more time on family matters and adjust their working hours to meet family needs. In other words, having such a wife seems to free a man from most of the housework and responsibilities.

According to my participants' experiences of being asked to deal with family emergencies and being accused of not taking enough family responsibilities in their daily life, flexibility is a double-edged sword. Flexibility can help them combine work and family, but it also reinforces the expectation that domestic work is primarily the responsibility of women. Compared with working women in fixed-time occupations, women academics are expected to take temporary/personal leave to handle family emergencies, not their spouses. Flexible working hours in academic careers give husbands working outside academia an excuse to leave family contingencies to academic wives. For example, Vera complained that her husband, working for a company on a '996' schedule, shirking all family matters to her and taking her for granted. Even when she was swamped applying for research projects, her husband would ask her to take time off work to deal with family matters, such as taking the children to the doctor and attending parent-teacher meetings. A female academic friend of Olivia had a similar experience with Vera. Olivia described the marriage maintained with this division of labour as a 'widowed marriage'. She explained this term and told me:

Not to mention she does not have time to do research. She basically has no time of her own. Her husband often leaves home for a few weeks and then leaves again[...] She takes care of the child by herself, so she can only stay at home after class. During the month when her mother-in-law was sick and hospitalised, she was with her all day.

Leaving family emergencies to be taken care of by academic wives also occurs when the husbands are also academics in higher education. Both Stella and her husband are academics at universities, and they both have flexible working hours. Under normal circumstances, dealing with urgent family situations usually depends on the person with more time. However, in the event of a time conflict, Stella will often be the one to take time off because 'compared with men, women ask for leave from their leaders more easily'. Stella did not provide further explanations of why women academics are more easily able to request leave than their male counterparts. But according to Olivia's description of her friend's widowed marriage, women are often seen as putting family

first. Because of this bias, it is considered normal and acceptable for women to request time off from management. As Olivia said: 'she puts all her energy into her family, which is normal, and no one will criticise her'.

In addition, the experiences of my married participants indicated that they have work-family conflict in their daily lives and that the conflict was partly due to the growing family's expectations and a lack of sympathy from them. In the accounts of my participants' parents, in-laws, and husbands, academic work was often described as 'easy-peasy', 'effortless' and 'trouble-free'. These words appeared in the daily lives of my participants, such as when parents persuaded academic careers to be good for women; and when husbands and parents-in-law criticised them for not fulfilling their family responsibilities as expected. My married participants recalled what their spouses and in-laws told them while they were working from home. For example, Daisy's husband told her: 'Don't you just sit there? What did you do? You did nothing.'; Vera's husband accused her of not spending the night with the kids but working instead and said: 'You waste time sitting in front of the computer every night, but not cook or accompany the children' and Ulla paraphrased her in-laws' reproach and said: 'you are a university teacher and you do not have fixed working hours. Should you not pick up the children and do more housework?'. There are countless examples in this regard.

Daisy reported intensive conflicts with her husband over sharing housework during the pandemic lockdown. Daisy and her academic husband have lived in two separate cities for a long time. She works and takes care of a primary school-aged daughter in her daily life. Her parents occasionally come to help. During the lockdown, her husband returned to live with her and their daughter. However, even without helping with household chores or their daughter's homework, Daisy's husband was still picky about Daisy's efforts on house chores. Daisy told me:

I woke up at about six o'clock every morning. I made breakfast and helped my child to wash and clean. He would ask me to cook, clean the kitchen and wash the dishes at noon. It was not convenient to go out and buy vegetables at that time. He was always dissatisfied with the food I cooked, I just cooked whatever was left in the fridge. He said I was half-hearted in my cooking and half-hearted towards the family. He thought other women

do better for their families than me. He was lying on the bed and playing on his phone, doing nothing all day. He even censured me for not cleaning up the house[...] He thought my work was nothing, that I was just doing some online teaching. My research was nothing more than sitting in a daze at the computer[...] He never thought about my dedication and sacrifice for this family.

Daisy explained that her husband works in the discipline of sports and exercise science, which has no research requirements. Thus, it is difficult for him to understand and empathise with the research pressures Daisy faced in computer engineering. Daisy's experience shows that even if their husbands are also academics, women are more likely to carry a larger proportion of household chores in the family. Women academics seem to be placed under unrealistic expectations by family members that they should be doing more than housework and childcare, but by family standards.

Once women disappoint such expectations because of their academic work, they are often accused of being selfish. For example, in our interview, Ulla recalled the accusations she faced from in-laws in her early career. She told me:

When I first started working, I was really under a lot of pressure. Besides, I had just given birth at that time. In the beginning, everyone, including me, did not expect university work to be so busy. We thought it was just teaching some classes. [...] They complained that I did not stay home and did not spend enough time with the children. They subjectively believe that you just do a lot of time-wasting things in university and not caring about your family [...] Basically, I can only hear them complaining about not putting all my energy on my children because of work [...] When I got home from work, I would do more housework. I try not to do my research until my child goes to bed. I did what I could with my housework. It is really not easy being a woman. She has to give birth, and she has to take care of the children. She even has to do more housework in order to reduce family conflicts.

In general, this study found that flexible working hours in universities have certain advantages for women academics. These include the flexibility to work at night based on their research habits and the flexibility to arrange time to pick up and drop off their children, which all help them balance work and family. However, for women academic who are married and have children, the flexible time did not significantly help their research but instead allowed them to spend more time on family responsibilities. In Daisy's case, she was asked to do chores up to the family's standards. This kind of request will naturally increase the time she devotes to the family, even though Daisy has already taken on all the housework and childcare. In the case of Vera, Stella, and Olivia's friends, flexible working hours lead to women academics being asked to prioritise family and deal with family emergencies as housekeepers and caregivers. For unmarried women academics, the choice to take work home and work at night is partly based on personal research habits. But for women academics who are married and have children, working at night often lead to family conflicts, because women's evening time is usually required by family to take care of children or help children with homework. Ulla's account also reflects that women academics face criticism if they do not devote more time to their family life as expected by their families or society. As a result, according to my participants' experiences and perspectives about flexible working hours in their daily lives, my study concludes that flexible working hours reinforce society's expectations for women academics to fulfill family responsibilities.

Academic careers are *danchun*

Universities are sometimes described as an 'ivory tower', where people are happily cut off from the rest of the world. Many participants agreed with this metaphor and pointed out a third Chinese term, '*danchun*' ([单纯] simple), to explain their understanding of the ivory tower. They highlighted that academic careers are seen as *danchun* and, consequently, good for women. While a direct dictionary translation of *danchun* is simple, the meaning of *danchun* contains multiple concepts which do not have a direct English equivalent. It also contains elements of safe and purity. In this study, *danchun* was one of the reasons why my participants considered and chose an academic career. Firstly, my participants largely agreed that their academic career is simple as there is a lower level of office politics than in other careers. This is a result of fair research competition and independent research work. Their research and teaching achievements are based on individual efforts, and their criteria for promotion are primarily based on the quantity and quality of research publications. Betty told me: 'academic outcomes rely on individual

efforts in teaching and writing, rather than dealing with all kinds of people in society'. Secondly, my participants described their academic career as *danchun* because women in this career often have fewer close networks with men. Women can also exclude themselves from social activities in the presence of men, even for work-related activities.

Small social circles

Another reason why my participants perceived academic careers as simple was that women academics generally have a small social circle. The phrase 'socialising in university is *danchun*' was mentioned by many participants. They preferred the small social circle at universities instead of interacting with people from different social backgrounds required by many other careers. This small social circle is also part of why they agreed that university is seen as a better workplace for women where women are not pressured to participate in social activities or have an extensive and diverse network of work colleagues.

Because of the independent trait of academic work, twelve participants agreed that their independent research work often did not depend upon developing close working relationships with their colleagues, let alone those outside academia. Unlike many other careers, especially corporate ones, which may require frequent and close interactions with colleagues and people from diverse backgrounds, my participants reported that their day-to-day interactions at universities were primarily with their students. Because academics are allowed to work from home, my participants also reported that women academics who do not have any administrative and departmental roles go home after class and rarely interact with their colleagues. Coco was one of the twelve participants. Her experience shows that the daughters and parents may take the stereotype of 'socialising in university is *danchun*' into account when choosing an academic career. Coco used to work at a state-owned enterprise. When she decided to switch careers, her parents suggested she choose an academic career because 'socialising in university is *danchun*', explaining that 'because you mainly interact with students'. Coco drew on her experience to compare her relationships at the university and in the state-owned enterprise. She pointed out that interpersonal communication in the university is simpler, there is less participation in *yingchou* (business networking and drinking events), and the relationship between colleagues and management is more harmonious than in the enterprise. She explained that the internal hierarchy of the enterprise is strict, and junior employees often need to deliberately establish and maintain good relationships with their

superiors and colleagues to ensure work goes smoothly. Therefore, she felt that personal interactions at university are more casual. She said, 'I cherish the time I talk with my colleagues' (Coco).

All my participants agreed they felt comfortable talking to colleagues and did not experience overt discrimination when interacting with others in their day-to-day work at the university. According to Faye, this is partly because the social reach of women academics is small, almost limited to those within academia. It gives women a sense of equality, friendliness and safety as they mainly interact with people with similar backgrounds of higher education. Faye told me:

Generally speaking, people in universities are highly educated and have *suzhi* (personal quality). In the university, we rarely meet people who openly disrespect us because of our gender. [...] Everyone in the university is highly educated. They are shrewd with their words and do not say things that make you feel discriminated against. However, discrimination and prejudice against women are indeed social. It also exists in universities, but it is more veiled.

The explanations mentioned above suggest that socialising in university is *danchun* because women in academia typically have a small social circle, mainly with people who are also highly educated. Compared to women in other occupations who need to socialise with people with different levels of education, women academics can feel less openly discriminated against because of their gender. Therefore, this study found that women are expected to have a simple, narrow, and small social circle, or in Chinese, *danchun*, and universities fulfil this expectation, providing women academics with a relatively friendly but limited social reach to engage in social interactions.

Less *yingchou*

The term *danchun* is not used to describe a man's social circle. In this study, my married participants expressed their understanding towards their husbands establishing and expanding their social circle and participating in various social activities to increase network opportunities for work. This included husbands who are also academics, such as Stella, who said: 'It is normal for men to expand their social circle'. A major way to

expand one's social circle in China is to attend *yingchou*. The Chinese term '*yingchou*' [应酬] refers to work or career-related social events, including banquets, drinking, karaoke, and occasional commercial sex. While there may be no special favours involved in attending *yingchou*, it is enough to maintain a good relationship with colleagues, clients or superiors. *Yingchou* is considered an essential part of most jobs in China.

Coco's account reflects that *yingchou* is male-centred, and there are even cases of unfriendliness and discrimination against women. Coco shared her previous working experience in a non-academic enterprise. She mentioned that women have no choice but to participate in *yingchou* and drinking with men with people of different backgrounds and social statuses because social relationships can directly affect their career development. A recent study by Tang (2020) also indicated that *yingchou* is a male-centred activity, and women may be used as subordinate 'erotic gifts'. My study found a similar phenomenon. According to Coco, participating in *yingchou* is sometimes required by the leadership. In such activities, drinking with clients is often needed, and unfriendly behaviours, dirty jokes and sexist language might happen. Whether women like it or not, participating in *yingchou* is one of their work obligations.

When my participants explained how pure socialising within an academic career is, they often tended to compare that other occupations often require participation in *yingchou*, but an academic career does not. They largely agreed that their academic career does not require them to attend *yingchou*. Even when there is *yingchou*, they can choose to be self-excluded according to their own will. My participants, except Stella, reported self-exclusion from participating in *yingchou*, especially when drinking is required. Unmarried Emma is one of the nineteen participants who refused to participate in *yingchou*. Compared with married participants, she did not need to return home after getting off work to care for family members and children. She explained that she does not participate in *yingchou* because she prefers to have a good rest after working all day and safety concerns. Faye and Helen also expressed their concerns about safety. For example, Faye mentioned that she once saw news about male professors molesting female students and female colleagues. These kinds of news increased her safety concerns about participating in after-work activities in the presence of men. Helen also indicated that the post-work culture of business drinking was very unfriendly to women. This culture has attracted media attention in recent years, especially after the sexual

assault scandal at business giant Alibaba, which led many Chinese women across occupations to spontaneously share their unpleasant stories of participating in *yingchou* on Weibo, China's version of Twitter (Financial times, 2021). Women's experiences include being judged by leaders on their appearance, such as good-looking women being called 'beauties', and even being offered as 'gifts' to clients, and women's career promotion is directly tied to their willingness to entertain and drink with clients (Fortune, 2021). Although this toxic business culture has been gradually exposed in recent years through the victims' voices on social media, the culture of women being objectified and entertained in their employment has existed for a long time, and everyone knows it well. In my interviews, my interviewees did not outright condemn this drinking culture, but their accounts reflected their awareness of how unfriendly the culture is to women. As a result, this broadly male-centred and unfriendly drinking culture can reduce women's willingness to participate in *yingchou*, such as my participants self-excluding to protect themselves.

Furthermore, this study found that women's self-excluded from *yingchou* was also related to the constraints of traditional culture. The term *danchun* is only used to describe women's social interaction and relationships, not to men. My participants largely agreed that women have more apprehension and restriction than men when it comes to participating in social activities, especially in the presence of men. If women in corporates frequently participate in *yingchou* or go on business trips with male colleagues or leaders, it is more likely to damage their family harmony and reputation. For example, Alice told me: 'Socialising at universities is *danchun*. Everyone thinks it is good for women'. Coco paraphrased what her parents said when they suggested she switch from an enterprise job to a university job and said: 'It is good to work at university. Otherwise, you are a girl who goes out to *yingchou* every night. What would you look like'. Wendy is engaged in computer science and has reached the level of professor. She mentioned that she had opportunities to work at large tech companies with higher incomes than at the university. She explained why she insisted on working at the university as a woman academic, and said:

Universities have different cultures than companies. We do not have many *yingchou*. We do not need to accompany drinking. [...] You are a woman. If you go out with them at night frequently, maybe someone will say behind

your back that this woman is not a woman, that you are not a good woman, or other bad comments.

Men's participation in *yingchou* and activities is often rationalised as sacrificing time to earn more money to support their families. Thus, my participants indicated that families and society tolerated men's participation in after-work social activities more than women's. Stella was the only participant who expressed her willingness to participate in *yingchou* for her academic career development, mainly because she had the trust and approval of her family. She mentioned that without the understanding and approval of her family, she probably would not have participated in *yingchou*. Stella told me:

In my opinion, work is necessary for women. However, the kind of occupations that requires *yingchou* and complicated socialising are unacceptable to many families. You are a girl. If you accompany the leader to participate in *yingchou* and often drink and go on business frequently, your husband will definitely not be happy with you.

Other academic participants expressed similar sentiments to Stella. If women academics participate in social activities, such as *yingchou* with people from different backgrounds, it is not only based on their own wishes and sufficient time and energy off work, but also requires the consent of their families. As Helen, Stella and Luna shared, to be considered 'trustworthy', women need 'consent' and 'support'. Otherwise, it may cause disharmony, family troubles and conflicts. Notably, none of the academic participants in my interviews mentioned that their families were concerned about their socialising with other women. This suggests that social restrictions on women refer more to socialising with men or participating in social activities in the presence of men. Luna said: 'Due to family reasons, the number of women who are able to expand their work-related social relations in an all-round way will be minimal'.

Educational capital

In the analysis above, I discussed the three important Chinese terms that describe the three perceived traits of academic careers compatible with women's social expectations. *Wending*, *linghuo* and *danchun*. These three terms suggest that women are expected to choose a respectable career amenable to women so that they can prioritise family and

fulfil family roles. Compared to other respectable careers which also have stability, flexibility and simple networks, such as school teachers, my study found that women academics were also seen as bringing educational capital to their families. Women academics in higher education are expected by their family members to use their knowledge and resources to tutor and educate their own children to a high standard, as evidenced by their children's school reputation and test scores. This expectation of women academics can be seen in my participants' daily scenarios, from their family members to acquaintances.

One element of educational capital for women academics in higher education is the affiliated kindergarten and schools provided by universities. In order to attract outstanding academics, many prestigious universities not only provide financial support but also solve academics' children's schooling problems, especially by arranging for their children to go to reputable affiliated primary schools and middle schools (Sohu, 2021). Some affiliated schools are outstanding in the province and even the whole country, and it is fiercely competitive for children to obtain admission qualifications. These staff benefits can be found in some universities' online official recruitment information. In this study, not all of my participants' universities offered this supportive benefit to their academic staff. Three participants (Gina, Faye and Olivia) mentioned that their universities have affiliated kindergartens and primary schools where their children attend. Gina mentioned that when she was choosing a university for employment, she considered whether the university offered this staff benefit. Furthermore, her consideration was influenced by a male acquaintance who works in academia. Gina told me:

I was married before looking for an appropriate university to work. My undergraduate degree is not from a 211/985 university, so my chances of working in a prestigious university were very low. In China, many 211/985 universities have affiliated schools for faculty, but other lower-ranked first-tier universities may not. Nevertheless, I know that the normal universities have affiliated kindergartens, elementary schools, and junior high schools. At that time, other relatively higher-ranked universities also wanted me, but they did not have this benefit. I have to consider these things. So I chose this university.

Gina then paraphrased an older male Ph.D alumni's advice about which university she should choose as a woman.

He told me that when a girl is looking for a job, do not think that because you have a doctorate, so you can make achievements in research. Once you have kids, you will know the importance of affiliated schools. Your university will be close to your child's kindergartens and school, which will be enough. You do not need to consider other things.

Both Gina and her husband are working at universities. When selecting a university, Gina had comprehensively considered her work and family in many aspects, such as her educational background, career plan, work location and child education staff benefits. She chose her university because this normal university can guarantee her child's enrolment, which might relieve her pressure of tutoring her child's daily studies. With this choice, Gina gave up an opportunity to work at a better university. Contrary to Gina, her husband chose a university with relatively better rankings but without similar benefits. With these benefits, Gina's husband left all the time-consuming and laborious tasks regarding the children's schooling to Gina. Gina felt that her husband did not care much about their child's daily parenting and education issues because 'men only need to consider themselves and their career'. In Gina's case, her multiple considerations and her final choice of university were based on her family role as a mother and her responsibility to her child. Gina's male acquaintance narrative reflected that women academics' career choices are under a broad social expectation that women should prioritise family, even if they have a full-time academic career. This expectation requires female Ph.D holders to consider carefully and comprehensively before choosing an 'appropriate' career and an 'appropriate' university. In other words, women must choose roles that benefit the entire family. The requirement of 'close to kindergartens and schools' once again emphasises the stability and flexibility of academic career, which implies that women academics are responsible for picking up and dropping off children. The way the male academic mocked the female Ph.D holders' ambition of pursuing research and better university, is androcentrism. His account reveals the common dilemma of female academics' career development, that is, women academics' aspirations for research and the demands of their families.

Children's education

In this study, my participants indicated that a common belief in society is that it is natural for mothers to be responsible for childcare. Furthermore, mothers who are highly educated and have careers in education should naturally be responsible for their children's study performance and tutor their children in daily life. I did not design questions about children's education in my interview outline. However, in my interviews, I noticed that participants who are married and have children would mention similar experiences in educating their own children, such as tutoring their children's homework and accompanying them to training institutions. My participants' husbands occasionally participate in their children's educational activities, even when their husbands are also academics. Thus, all my academic mothers agreed that their attention to children's education in daily life far surpassed their husbands.

Tutoring children's homework demands constant attention, forcing women academics to sacrifice their own time, sometimes even working time. Just as Olivia described academic mothers as hovering around their children like a 'helicopter', assisting their children's education requires time and commitment. In my interviews, many other participants also described how they were responsible for their children's education in daily life as 'helicopter' mothers. I have found that mothers' educational responsibilities for their children span a long period of time, starting as early as before kindergarten. For example, Kate's child is about two years old and has not yet attended kindergarten. She mentioned her experience accompanying her children to early education classes to learn painting and music every Thursday. She put her child in the early childhood education class because she could accompany the child to learn. She thought it would help her child better adapt to kindergarten and help her child learn new things quicker. She told me:

I have no classes every Thursday. I will accompany him all this day to learn painting. Thus, I will look at what he draws, ask him why he draws like this, and whether he understands what the teacher taught. [...] I also have to control the time he watches cartoons for no more than half an hour in the evening. Before going to bed, I also need to take some letters, picture books, and cards to teach him to read the words.

It is worth noting that Kate is a lecturer at a prestigious university and has a fixed-term contract with the university. If she does not complete the university's research requirements within the contract period, her contract will likely not be renewed. Kate's parenting time has a great influence on her research work. Kate mentioned that her research publications were produced at a much slower pace than her male counterparts. In order to meet the research requirements of the contract, which were also the assessment requirements of the associate professor, she only did the work required by the assessment. She avoided other tasks as much as possible. She commented on her approach and said: 'This approach is very utilitarian and self-interested, but I can only do this' (Kate).

Stella has a ten-year-old son in primary school. Stella's detailed account reflected that academic mothers carry most of the parenting stress. She told me:

As a mother, you have to urge your children to go to bed and get up early to foster good living habits; you have to supervise your child's homework every night and check the quality of his homework. You must explain to them promptly if they do not understand any questions. I usually stay not far away from my child and hardly leave him at home alone. If I leave him alone, I will feel uneasy. My child is too young to be self-disciplined. If I need to go to the office to work overtime, I will take him with me and arrange a picture book for him to read by my side[...] However, if you think about it, as long as you are not far away, you will still check on him from time to time. You will not be able to concentrate on your research fully, and your energy will be used up. [...] Every morning, I have to arrange my child's schedule first and then mine. For example, when to pick him up from school and send him to English class. I also make plans for him on weekends, drawing class at 11 am and piano class at 7 pm. After arranging his activities, it takes time to escort and feed him. The remaining time is spent preparing lessons, reading articles, and dealing with students. I also have to research if I still have energy.

In fact, during our interview, Stella took a fifteen-minute break because she needed to go to the next office to check on her child's homework. What she said, 'if I still have the energy,' reflected that her parenting also affected her research.

In this study, Tessa's academic career not only functionally supports her mothering roles by utilising flexible working to arrange care time but also enables her to align her role as mother and teacher, such as she was able to utilise her expertise as an academic to support her own child. She reported that she was responsible for helping her child to do homework almost every night, often shared research-related knowledge with her child and taught her child to design software. She told me:

I think a good thing in universities is that you will constantly be exposed to new technologies and theories. Then you will talk about these new things with your child and let your child be exposed to these advanced things. It is very good for children's cultivation. When my child was young, big data was popular. I would tell him what big data is. Artificial intelligence is now popular. I would tell him how to use it. He is only eleven years old. He can discuss some of his software ideas with me and ask me if it is possible to create them. I think university teachers can tell their children about their research so that their children can think and learn from an early age.

According to the experience of Kate, Stella, and Tessa, they all assumed the main responsibility of educating their children, which is manifested in daily life as accompanying children to learn painting, tutoring children's homework, and imparting their knowledge to their children. It seems that from their responses, they appear to be willing to undertake these duties. However, for Olivia and Faye, it seems that if they don't undertake these duties, they will not meet social expectations and will be criticised by family members and feel guilty. Olivia shared her experience of feeling guilty as a mother. She told me:

I feel very guilty for my child. I would compare myself with other women academics who give up research. They can help their child to do homework at night. But because I have to do research at night, I can't always pay attention to my child. If my child has any problems with his studies, such as forgetting to do his homework or failing exams, I will blame myself, and at the same time, I often become impatient and irritable with him. In the class WeChat group, you can see other mothers communicate with

teachers about their child's study performance every day and help their children arrange activities. I definitely can't do it.

Olivia's father also accused her of failing to fulfil her educational responsibilities as an academic mother because of her child's poor test scores. Olivia relayed her father's accusations and said: 'you are a university teacher, and you can't even teach your own children well'. What her father meant was that women academics in universities should raise their children to achieve good grades. Olivia further explained that their child's progress is the main responsibility of academic mothers and has become an important symbol of success for academic mothers. Olivia compared herself with another female colleague who gave up research. Even though Olivia has more academic achievements in her career, she feels she has failed in the social evaluation of successful women. She told me:

I have a friend, her tone is that the most important thing is children. She is approaching retirement age but has not done any national scientific research projects. However, everyone said she was good enough because she sent her child to a good university. Many people in academia also said, so what if you publish a lot of articles? You are a woman and a mother, and your children's good grades are your greatest success. Chatting in private, no one praises you for publishing many papers. However, people will say that you can't even manage your child to have good grades and may not pass the university entrance examination in the future. [...] When you see a group of female teachers together, they must be talking about their children. What do the children love to study? Which child has been admitted into which school? So, you can see that people evaluate women's values based on their children, but the father's values are not linked.

Olivia's account reflected that the demanding nature of educating children contains the value that a child's development is more important than his/her mother's. In today's China, the competition for children's education, especially primary, middle, high school, and university, is fierce. Their children's study progress is constantly being compared in the value system where educated mothers are showing off how good their children are, using the school their children attend as proof. Since this evaluation is linked to the mother's

values, they are likely to face condemnation from family members and belittlement from people around them if they do not meet social expectations.

Conclusion

An academic job is regarded as suitable for women because it has three main traits, it is regarded as steady, flexible and simple (safe). Moreover, female academics are seen as good mothering material as they are also perceived to have the skills to be good educators of their children. The women academics interviewed in this study acknowledge these factors when choosing careers. Those who are already mothers are able to use the stability and flexibility of the job to balance work and family commitments. However, this also places tremendous pressure and expectation on women academics. In the next chapter, I explore further how the everyday pressures of academic work do not fit neatly with the perceptions of the job.

Chapter 5. Work Experiences of Women Academics

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I focused on the perceptions of academic work in China and how academic work is regarded as a suitable job for women, not least because it is seen as a field of work that allows women to fulfil their family responsibilities. Due to the characteristics of academic careers, including job security, flexible hours, fewer social activities, and the knowledge for educating their children, my research found that women working in higher education as academics are expected to prioritise their family over their academic work. Under such social expectations, my thesis also explores the actual working experience of women academics. While my academic participants generally perceived that an academic career is friendly to women, their actual working lives have mixed moments. This chapter focuses on women academics' daily experiences of work. My interviews showed that their gender impacted their daily work in three main contexts: recruitment, workload, and promotion.

Academic recruitment

Research on women's experiences of academic recruitment and selection in China is limited (Zhao, 2008; Wang, 2022). Wang (2022) explores equality in academic recruitment from the perspective of preference for new graduates and experienced faculty at top universities in China. Zhao (2008) discusses academic recruitment from the perspective of universities' recruitment policies. Their work ignores the possible influence of gender on recruitment.

To explore women academics' experiences of gender equality in the academic recruiting process, I probed with questions such as 'What was your recruitment experience?' and 'Do you think that academic recruitment takes into account the gender of candidates?' and further inquired about the corresponding reasons. My participants generally believed academic recruitment is fairer than other careers, even though eighteen out of twenty participants had no direct recruitment experience outside academia. They explained that academic recruitment is fair because of strict criteria based on metrics, including

candidates' Ph.D qualifications and their research publications. However, even though the recruitment criteria are often perceived to be fair to candidates, this study found that gender is a subtle factor in the competition and can unfairly impact recruitment decisions for women.

Recruitment criteria

My participants reported that academic recruitment is merit-based, mainly comparing candidates' qualifications and research publications. According to my participants, most domestic first-tier universities only recruit doctoral graduates. Only a few first-tier universities still recruit master's graduates, but they often require excellent grades and graduates from top-ranked domestic or well-known international universities. Prestigious universities have higher requirements for recruitment, such as doctoral graduates that graduated from top-ranked universities and have published articles in prestigious journals.

In this study, prestigious universities refer to the universities included in the 'Double first-class university plan', which are the most elite institutions in Chinese higher education. I separated the prestigious universities from first-tier universities because there were clear differences in my participants' experiences between the prestigious universities and the first-tier universities. Nine participants work in prestigious universities, and eleven in first-tier universities, all in mainland China. In terms of their qualifications when looking for academic careers, nine participants started their academic careers with an undergraduate or postgraduate degree and completed their Ph.D programme while working, and eight participants completed their Ph.D and then started their academic careers after 2010. The remaining three participants graduated with a master's degree with good grades. At the time of my interviews, one of them was in her final year of Ph.D study at a prestigious university, and the other two plan to apply for a part-time doctorate in the next few years.

Zhao (2008) points out that the requirement for a doctorate did not exist in academic recruitment in the 1990s in China. My research has similar findings. My participants indicated that, since 2000, many first-tier universities, including their own universities, had required academic staff to hold Ph.D. As more and more universities only consider Ph.D holders, my participants indicated that academics without a doctorate degree would

choose to study a doctoral program while working because they felt insecure about their academic careers. For example, Alice started her academic career with an overseas Master's degree in 2012. At the time of our interview, she was in her fourth year of Ph.D. She mentioned that her recruitment process included written examinations and university interviews, which were extremely competitive. Furthermore, she described the competition as 'tens of thousands of candidates vying for a position'. Although she successfully entered a first-tier university as an academic, she worried that her master's degree would not be enough for her to maintain her academic position in the future. Therefore, she chose to pursue her doctorate while working.

Faye, who already has a doctorate, raised a similar concern when explaining her decision. She used herself as an example to explain that the overall pressure of the university environment forced many academics to improve their qualifications. Faye told me: 'Eventually, academics only holding a master's degree will be eliminated by the university.' As mentioned in the previous chapter, having *bianzhi* means that academics have lifelong employment. In this case, lifelong employment in the university. Women academics with *bianzhi* normally have a low risk of being dismissed by the university for not having a doctoral degree. However, Faye explained that if she did not have a Ph.D. she might still be at risk of being transferred to an administrative position.

In addition to academic qualifications, the quality and quantity of research papers published by candidates are also important factors in academic recruitment. Half of my participants noted that Ph.D graduates need at least one published research article to apply to their universities. When there are several qualified candidates, universities usually select the candidate with the highest number and quality of papers. For example, Daisy mentioned her recruitment process with two other candidates (a man and a woman). She was admitted because she published two papers in core journals during her studies, more than the other candidates.

Judging from the above participants' descriptions of university recruitment, university recruitment in China mainly focuses on candidates' academic qualifications and published research papers. There is no explicit restriction on the gender of candidates. Nevertheless, my research has found that gender is a potential factor in recruitment outcomes.

Gender inequality in academic recruitment

Although merit-based admission seems like fair competition among candidates, my participants had different views and experiences of equal opportunity for men and women in academic recruitment. Only four participants stated that academic recruitment provided equal opportunities for men and women. For example, Wendy described universities as a place to compete on an equal footing with men and explained that universities do not reject female talents because of their sex. However, the other sixteen participants expressed different opinions on equal opportunities in academic recruitment. Based on their personal experiences and those of their female colleagues, they reported instances of gender inequality in academic recruitment.

In this study, three participants cautioned against ignoring the overall disadvantageous situation of Chinese women in employment when discussing equality in academia. Faye told me: 'academia has its particularities, but it cannot be separated from the general environment of society as a whole.' Kate and Tessa discussed women's overall disadvantage in the job market in China. They noticed that some heavy industries and tech companies used overtly discriminatory language in their job advertisements, such as 'not hiring women' and 'men-only'. This open discrimination against women was part of why Kate chose an academic career rather than one in commerce. Before entering her academic career, Coco worked for a year in a state-owned enterprise. She cited widespread gender discrimination in society, for example, that women would be asked in detail about their fertility status and pregnancy plans before the company would consider their employment. She also heard of working women in some private companies being dismissed or demoted simply for being pregnant. These gender discrimination and inequality in hiring in Chinese society have also been reported elsewhere, such as in the New York Times (2019) and Human Right Watch (2021). Based on the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests, The Labour Law, the Employment Promotion Law, and the Provisions on Employment Services and Employment Management, the use of discriminatory advertisement and the practice of refusing to hire women on the grounds of gender are illegal. Although these gender discrimination practices were not discussed further in my interviews, from the descriptions above, it appears that the force of law has not substantially improved gender inequality in hiring in all employment sectors.

In comparing academia and other sectors, Betty, Coco and Emma all reported that there was no such blatantly discriminatory rhetoric in academic job postings, nor are women's reproductive plans asked in interviews. This contrasts with the findings of Xie (2019), who found that women academics were asked for personal information such as age, marital status, and children during interviews. Faye's account reflects that women's reproductive and domestic roles put women at a disadvantage in academic recruitment. Faye told me:

I am also interested in female employment and promotion issues. Universities are not charities. They indeed consider what academics can bring to the university and the possible impact of women's fertility on work. Women academics are well-educated, and their gender consciousness will be stronger. They, more or less, pursue equality and know how to effectively strive for equality at work. In academia, as long as you work hard and produce results, others will naturally value you more. Therefore, this group is overall better in terms of employment inequality than other women in society. But I also want to say that most people, including women academics, all agree women should also pay close attention to their families. This kind of consciousness is universal. Even if women work hard in universities, this kind of consciousness still exists more or less.

Faye's words seemed contradictory on the surface, saying there is no open discrimination and that working women academics are still expected to 'pay close attention to their family'. Her words show that she is aware of the social expectations of women. Even women with a higher education background and a demanding full-time job, such as academic women, are expected to fulfil family responsibilities and be the primary caregivers of the family. Faye emphasised academic qualifications and publication thresholds for academic recruitment, implying that the requirements are not gender-based. She was also aware that women were generally disadvantaged in the job market due to the social expectation of women's family roles and that women in the academic market are no exception. Therefore, she suggested that an effective way for female individuals to change this disadvantageous in recruitment or promotion was by increasing their ability. In academia, ability is shown through academic qualifications and publications. She is alluding to women need to show they have more ability than their male counterparts to have equal opportunities at work. This assumption was shared by

most of my participants. For example, Ulla told me: 'if a man and a woman are equally as qualified, universities will definitely recruit the man' (Ulla). Tessa also suggested that women academics could only be promoted if they outperform men in terms of research production. Thus, many of my participants, when probed about the fairness of academic recruitment, did feel there were some elements of gendered discrimination in recruitment.

In addition, Olivia, Tessa, and Ulla, each with over fifteen years of work experience in higher educational institutions all pointed to a preference for male candidates in the academic market, which results in unequal opportunities in academic recruitment for men and women. Their comments were based on their experience as internal recruiters and their knowledge of supervised male and female Ph.D students' employment practices. Tessa and Ulla have reached professorships and become doctoral supervisors at their respective universities. They both have experience in providing career guidance and support to the doctoral students they supervised. Olivia and Tessa hold administrative positions, serving as heads of their departments and associate dean, respectively. At the same time, they also serve on the recruitment panels and interview new academic faculty for their departments. In my interview, Ulla mentioned the recruitment experience of two Ph.D students she supervised in the same year, one female and one male. By comparing the hiring experiences of her two students, she pointed to instances of gender discrimination. As their supervisor, Ulla considered that the female student was better than the male student in terms of research ability and other skills. However, the reality was that the employment situation of this female student was more difficult than that of the male student. She told me:

Last year I had two Ph.D students apply for academic jobs at second-tier universities. The female student was outstanding and fully met the admissions requirements of that university but was rejected anyway. We thought it was because the university thought as she was a woman, she would have children, so they rejected her on the pretext of other reasons. The man was far inferior to the woman in research ability and other skills. But several universities he applied to all expressed their willingness to hire him. At that time, he did not meet the graduation requirements, he still hadn't received his Ph.D certificate. Even so, he was still popular and could pick the university he wanted to go to. That university also offered to wait half a year for him to complete his doctoral program before entering the job.

Come to think of it, very few universities will wait for a person. That woman obviously is more capable and has a Ph.D certificate, but universities don't want her.

In this case, the female doctoral student had already obtained her graduation certificate, and her research ability had been recognised by her supervisor, but she still had no advantage in the academic market. On the contrary, the male Ph.D student had obvious advantages in the market even if he did not meet the same standards. It should be noticed that universities may use other unconvincing reasons to reject female candidates in hiring, but the root cause is discrimination against women's reproductive and parenting needs, as Ulla explained and told me that: 'because universities consider that men do not give birth or even parenting' (Ulla). Similar cases were also mentioned by Olivia and Tessa regarding their own universities. This suggests that there may still be a male-first preference in academic hiring, even in cases where women are much better than men. According to Olivia, Tessa, and Ulla, this study found that unmarried or women without children appear to be at the bottom of the hiring queue. Olivia told me:

Although each discipline is different, I think most disciplines prefer to recruit male Ph.D holders. For example, last year, we said we wanted a male teacher in our internal meeting. Mine is sociology. There are more female Ph.D holders than male Ph.D holders in sociology. But we still want a male teacher. Recruiting male teachers is actually a realistic consideration. Some of the female teachers we hired before had children or started families as soon as they came in. Or, because of family or personal reasons, they really had no research output. But current universities want you to have results. So we must find a male teacher with strong working ability to continue to have research outputs. Female teachers will have children, or have family matters they need to take care of, so then they ask for days off. This is the actual situation. There are very few male doctors in our social studies. We originally gave an offer to a male Ph.D candidate, but he didn't come because he was very popular. Finally, we recruited a female doctor who was studying in Japan. She gave birth while studying in Japan, and her maternity leave ended.

Olivia's words once again proved the popularity of male Ph.D holders in the academic market. Male candidates are at an advantage in academic recruiting because they are generally seen as employees who can devote their time to work and consistently produce research articles without the need for maternity leave or any other types of leave. Women candidates are assumed to be more family-oriented rather than work-oriented. It is assumed that they are potential caregivers for their families and that this caregiving is in conflict with their work abilities. As a result, women as a whole are at a disadvantage in academic recruitment. When male candidates are absent from academic recruitment, female candidates who already gave birth and finished their maternity leave seem to be the next choice. At the bottom are women of childbearing age who have not yet given birth. This disadvantage is reflected in the employment anxiety and childbearing arrangements of female Ph.D students. Ulla and Tessa mentioned that most of the female Ph.D students they supervise have employment anxiety, such as fear of being rejected by the university because of their reproductive needs. Therefore, some of Ulla's female students choose to get pregnant and take care of infants during their studies. This echoes the findings of Li and Shen (2022) that some women academics choose to complete their childbearing before employment because of foreseeable work pressures. Ulla also mentioned that her female students often emphasise their marital status on their CV when applying for jobs, including universities' academic jobs, indicating that they are 'married and have children'. The main purpose of this is to hope that academic recruiters will not reject them because of their fertility. A similar finding was found in Xie's (2019) study that academic women self-declared their personal information to increase their chances of being hired.

In general, my interviews indicated that although academic recruitment in universities seems to give equal opportunities to everyone who meets the recruitment requirements and hires based on merit, gender is often an underlying factor that disadvantages women, especially unmarried and women without children. Some young women academics seek to improve their status in employment not just through hard work but also by planning their pregnancy during their studies. As the one-child policy was changed to a two-child policy in 2011 and a three-child policy in 2021, their strategy in recruiting has become less effective. Faye explained that even if women academics had their first child before employment, employers might still suspect them of having a second and third child post-recruitment. Faye did not give further explanations or examples, but her account reflects that the recent three-child policy may further put women at a disadvantage in the job market.

Prestigious universities or first-tier universities

In addition to unequal opportunities for men and women in academic recruitment, my research has found that women and men may have different choices when faced with job opportunities at prestigious universities. This is because my participants reported that some female Ph.D. holders who graduated from prestigious universities might give up on job opportunities in prestigious universities and choose first-tier universities instead. The reasons for their choice are often related to their (future) reproductive and family responsibilities.

In this study, there are nine participants working in prestigious universities, and seven of them entered their academic careers before their universities adopted a probationary tenure system, so they had *bianzhi*. Only Emma and Helen were on fixed-term contracts with their prestigious universities at the time of our interviews. According to my participants, prestigious universities only offer fixed-term contracts to new academic faculty and do not offer *bianzhi* until academics have secured an associate professorship. Prestigious universities have changed from the traditional 'permanent employment', so-called '*bianzhi*' or 'iron rice bowl', to a probation–tenure system, and the requirements for fixed-term contracts can lead to predictably high research pressure. This new employment system is also known as 'promotion or out' or 'publish or perish', which has attracted the attention of society and academia in recent years (Ngok and Guo, 2008; Qiu, 2010; Tian, Su and Ru, 2016; Ha, 2018; Wang, 2018; Li and Shen, 2022; Tie and Wang, 2022).

It is clear that prestigious universities have better reputations, research capabilities, experimental conditions, state funding, academic networks and higher-qualified students than first-tier universities, all of which support researchers in their research lives. Betty told me: 'If you go to a prestigious university, your research and career development are definitely better'. However, even though Betty knew that working at prestigious universities would be beneficial to her research and career development, she did not choose a prestigious university but chose to work at a first-tier university. This is because she perceived that working in a first-tier university is more secure and has less research pressure, which could be easier to balance work and life than in prestigious universities. Luna also reported that many female Ph.D who graduated from prestigious universities chose first-tier universities despite having the opportunity to work in prestigious universities, including Luna herself, who also made a similar choice. When explaining

this decision, she first mentioned how competitive the prestigious universities are. She told me:

Those universities basically sign a three-year contract with you. If you do not meet the requirements, you must leave. The most ridiculous thing was that I said if I desperately meet your requirements within three years, can you guarantee that I can stay in this university, even without *Bianzhi*? But they refused. This is because these universities will rank dozens of people who have passed the requirements in the past three years and only retain the top three among them. These universities have better reputations, infrastructure, and resources. Even if the requirements are so demanding, many people still want to enter. Besides, these three winners may still not get *bianzhi*. In other words, the university still does not give you a tenure position after three years but just signs a longer-term and more formal contract with you.

Luna's description reflects that the benefits of choosing a prestigious university are often accompanied by highly competitive pressure and career insecurity. Young academics who meet the requirements within a specified period may be granted a relatively more secure long-term tenure. For those who fail, they will not renew the contract after the expiration of the three to six years employment period. This standard, coupled with the practice of recruiting multiple candidates for a few positions and competing against each other, creates a highly competitive academic atmosphere. These factors lead to little room for young academics to pay attention to personal matters, resulting in a lower sense of security in academic work.

In addition, Luna's account appears to reflect a situation where there is a surfeit of Ph.D. graduates and only a small number of academic faculty positions at prestigious universities. According to statistics from the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, the number of doctoral graduates in 2022 was 66,176, compared to only 48,987 in 2010 (MOE, 2010; 2022). These do not include the number of Chinese students who have obtained degrees abroad. A recent news article by Liu (2021) also mentioned a similar situation to that discussed by Luna. This article exposed that the Sun Yat-sen University, one of the prestigious universities in China, offered 8,000 people

probationary employment in the past six years, but they were very aware that only a fraction would become long-term academic faculty (Liu, 2021).

However, for those who do not gain tenure at a prestigious university, it may be difficult for them to find another academic job at another prestigious university. This is because academic recruitment has age restrictions on candidates. Luna reported that academic recruitment at prestigious universities and many first-tier universities have a clear age requirement. The restriction is Ph.D. holders must be under 35 years old. Candidates over the age of 35 need to reach a professorship or a nationally renowned talent. Luna told me:

If you have been in a university for several years and are over 35 years old. If you want to apply to other universities, and if those universities have this age requirement, you may not get in.

In China, typically, an undergraduate degree takes four years to complete, a Master's degree takes three years, and a doctorate usually takes four to six years. Most Ph.D holders start their academic careers around the age of 30. After a three to six years probationary period at prestigious universities, academics are then over the age limit of 35 years old for recruitment. Therefore, Luna and Vera indicated that many young academics, especially women, do not have many opportunities to change universities to work, so it is often important to choose which university to start an academic career in.

Vera mentioned that three young female academics in her department did not receive contract renewals after four years of working. Taking these three women as examples, she reported that the culture of 'promotion or out' has a great impact on women's personal life, such as life satisfaction. During the four years, one female academic got married soon after coming into work and then divorced soon after, one got married and became pregnant but had to undergo an abortion due to work pressure, and one was single but under tremendous pressure of being urged to get married and at the same time, she had no time to find a partner and dare not get married because of work pressure. Four years later, the university did not renew their contracts. They had to try and continue their academic careers at other universities. Vera pointed out the unreasonable point of 'promotion or out'. That is, the university does not consider the long review period for the

publication of papers. Thus, Vera was very sympathetic to the experiences of these three young women because of this unreasonable policy at her prestigious university. She told me:

In the past four years, we can see their hard work. But it takes a long time to have research results. The review period for the submitted papers now basically takes half a year to a year. This research period is inherently long, but the university's policy does not take this realistic research situation into account. The policy is to ask you to leave if you fail to meet the research requirements in four years, which is very straightforward.

Vera also mentioned that all three young academics felt panic and insecurity because they were women and had suffered considerable setbacks in their careers and family lives in their mid-30s. Although they may find other universities to restart their academic careers, Vera said they would have more research pressure because: 'they are all over 35 years old, and they have to compete with other Ph.D graduates who are younger and more energetic than them'. The same predicament of pursuing academic careers at prestigious universities but not getting a renewed contract also happened to some of Helen's female academic friends.

Although this 'promotion or out' or 'publish or perish' challenge is not aimed just at women academics, women still have to consider marriage and childbearing. My research finds that young women academics are disadvantaged in this competition, which put women off from entering prestigious universities. Based on a comparison of different experiences and perceptions between female academics and male academics in a prestigious university, Vera further proposed that men have more courage to compete at prestigious universities because marriage and childbearing have less impact on their research performance than women. Vera told me:

Although men also face the pressure of 'promotion or out', their family pressure is much less than that of women, especially the impact of marriage and childbirth on the research output. You could see men dare to go and compete in prestigious universities. But women are different. It is

difficult for you to guarantee that your work will not be affected by family factors in the next few years.

Luna and Coco also share similar viewpoints. They mentioned that women must consider the impact of having children. Luna emphasised that she finished her Ph.D. at 30 years old, which is also the age around which she must consider marriage and childbearing. She told me: 'It's not that we do not want to go to work at prestigious universities, but most women need to consider childbirth, so they do not dare to go.' Coco also told me that if she was unsure that she could work in a university for a long time, then she might still marry, but she would definitely not have children. Thus, my research found that a proportion of academic women forego employment opportunities at prestigious universities. This is either due to two reasons. First, they feel that their university's work demands (the 'publish or perish' culture) are incompatible with their (future) lives as mothers. Second, they feel that the process of recruitment itself is harder for them as they are seen as less productive, less attractive academics than their male counterparts because of the gendered division of labour around care.

Academic workload

As mentioned in Chapter 4, there was an expectation amongst families that women who worked in academia would have ample time to prioritise their family roles. Some of my participants' mothers, in-laws, and husbands blamed them for spending less time at home, describing their academic work as 'easy-peasy', 'effortless' and 'trouble-free'. Although recent research mentions that the heavy workload of academic work, especially research, causes a lot of pressure on academic workers, it does not specifically show in detail what an academic workload is composed of (Flowerdew and Li, 2009; Lai et al., 2016; Tao et al., 2019; Gao and Zheng, 2020; Lai and Li, 2020). This made me realise the importance of showing what the teaching and research tasks of academics are and how much time these tasks consume.

In order to explore women academic's experiences of their daily work, especially their gendered experiences, I raised several questions. For example, I first asked my participants what their jobs consists of and how much time they would spend each week on these different tasks. Then I asked them what they think about research and teaching, whether they prefer research or teaching, and how they manage their time for teaching

and research. Afterwards, I asked whether there are any differences in teaching or research between male and female academics.

In this study, all participants belonged to the category of research-teaching faculty. Regardless of whether they had a fixed-term contract or permanent contract, they all agreed that teaching is their basic work and research is the key to their career development. They all complained of a heavy teaching load and high research pressure, which led to a difficult balance between the time they devoted to teaching and research in their daily work. They all have experiences of bringing work home and working overtime in the evenings and weekends. My research indicates that bringing work home leads to an imbalance between work and family and even causes family conflicts.

Heavy teaching load

Teaching seems to be considered a full-time job on its own. All my participants complained that their heavy teaching load requires a significant time investment. Their weekly teaching time is usually eight to sixteen hours, with extra hours for lesson preparation, marking and experimentation. My academic participants largely agreed that they spend about forty hours per week on their teaching, which includes preparation and marking time. Gina and Paula discussed in detail the pressure of teaching, especially assessing and grading a large number of assignments and exam papers. These tasks are not complicated, but due to the large number of students, their assessment workload is enormous. Gina only took two courses related to advanced mathematics but had about 150 assignments per week. She explained that each course is divided into three classes, with about 50 students in each class. As a result, she normally dedicates three days solely to marking and the rest of the week to teaching preparation and other tasks. For Paula, the courses she has are related to philosophy and do not require weekly corrections and marking. However, after exam week, she must spend a lot of time dealing with final exam marking and feedback. She told me:

At the end of the semester, the students go home after the exam, and we have to assess the papers. For a class with more than 100 test papers, if there are three papers for each test paper, how many papers would we have? Moreover, the school also requires that you have to write a comment on the test paper, and you must write enough words. It is also necessary

to calculate the student's grades, calculate the scores for each item, and finally upload it to the grading system. In order to prevent miscalculations, you may have to check again. So you can calculate how much time this will take me. There is also a practical course. We have to modify the practical records written by the students so that my workload will be doubled. Basically, one and a half months will be spent on this.

Gina and Paula's experiences illustrate the pressures of teaching for academics at universities in China. From their perspectives, it seems that the current teacher-to-student ratio in Chinese higher education is not entirely reasonable. Not only does an academic take on two to five different courses, but each course contains two to three classes of students.

In terms of gender equality in course assignments, according to my participants, their courses were often assigned by departments without regard to gender. For example, Emma told me that: 'the department will not assign you more courses because you are a woman.' Other participants also agreed with this. Additionally, they pointed out that experienced academics are usually more autonomous than newcomers in choosing courses. Half of my participants reported pressures to prepare for a new course. Sometimes, they take on new courses that do not exactly match their research and educational backgrounds. Lecturer Luna gave an example of a course she started to take this year, which required a deep understanding of Chinese history and bureaucratic politics. Although she had the basic knowledge, she had to self-study the entire course beforehand to teach her students. Associate professor, Paula, reported similar pressure in preparing new courses. She told me:

I have five courses this year: three in the first semester and two in another. For example, my research is about modern politics, but I have to undertake courses such as modern western philosophy and others. So, I have to spend time learning these courses first. I cannot only have basic knowledge, but I must also read carefully and understand some modern philosophers' works deeply because it is a graduate course. The original philosophy books are particularly difficult to read and require logical understanding, and it takes a long time to read and think. I need at least

three whole days every week just to prepare three new lessons, not to mention other teaching tasks.

Experienced academics may have greater autonomy in course selection and may even choose not to undertake new courses. In this study, four professors mentioned that they did not undertake new courses, but they needed at least one working day per week to prepare for teaching, and they needed to supervise master and doctoral students, which took up a lot of personal time. At the same time, the reform of teaching curriculums every few years requires them to revise the syllabus. For example, Wendy and Ulla mentioned that they must update teaching materials with the development of technology. Vera also mentioned she must adapt to new online teaching methods according to university teaching requirements, such as PowerPoint, live broadcast and online recording courses. Vera complained that sometimes, instead of reducing the stress of teaching, these teaching tools increase the time required for teaching preparation. Therefore, this study found that although teaching is one of the basic tasks for academics, it takes up a great amount of working time, regardless of whether they are lecturers or professors.

The paramount importance of research work

Although teaching consumes the majority of my participants' work time, they indicated that teaching was far less important than research in advancing their academic careers because research publications are directly related to performance appraisals and influence their promotions. They all agreed that the unprecedented emphasis on academic research in Chinese universities today has put enormous pressure on academics to improve research productivity. Based on my participants' explanations of their research work requirements, my research found that academics face great research pressure in prestigious national universities, not only with higher research requirements but also under the influence of 'publish or perish'.

Helen works at a prestigious national university and has a three-year contract with her university. When we discussed the research requirements and research pressure, Helen mentioned that young academics like her, who have fixed-term contracts in prestigious universities, face much greater research pressure than academics in non-prestige universities. Participants from first-tier universities agreed with Helen's point of view, indicating that they needed to meet annual benchmarks but with relatively lower research requirements. Helen reported that her university has detailed requirements for the

quantity, quality, and even time frame for publications and grants. For example, according to her contract, she is required to publish two articles in top reputable journals indexed by Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) or in national core journals such as the Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI) in the field. At the same time, she is required to choose to publish in the top-ranked journals according to the ranking of journals by the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS). However, she mentioned that whether it is an internationally renowned journal or a local core journal, due to the limited number of journals in her field and the long review period, it is very difficult for her to publish two articles within three years. Helen got an extension because she did most of the research required by the contract. Helen told me: 'If you have completed most of the work, the HR Office may give you another extension contract for three years.' Equivalently, the newcomer must complete all of the contents in the contract within six years. Failure to meet all research performance benchmarks (articles and grants) set for employees within the extension period will directly result in job loss, as the university will not renew contracts.

For academics with *bianzhi*, the pressure of 'publish or perish' is lighter, but it still exists.

Tessa has more than twenty years of work experience in a prestigious national university in China. As a full-time professor, she has explicit credits in teaching and research every year. Her teaching credits refer to total teaching hours and are less than associate professors and lectures, but her research requirements are higher than those of other ranks. Tessa must have high-quality research publications and research grants to maintain her academic rank. As she told me, she had to 'publish at least one article in prestigious journals and receive a national- or provincial-level research grant' to maintain her position. Otherwise, even if her *bianzhi* can protect her from being fired, she would be demoted on the professional ladder, resulting in a corresponding reduction in income. According to Helen and Tessa's description, this study shows the research pressure of academics in prestigious national universities. Few recent studies have also discovered that double first-class universities have high demands for research and have adopted a 'publish or perish' management method for young academics (Gonzalez et al., 2012; Ha, 2018; Lai and Li, 2020). Tessa and Helen's accounts reflected that young academics at prestigious universities often have greater research pressure than professors. Those young academics are widely known in China as *qingjiao* ([青椒] green pepper). Helen, Kate and Gina used green pepper to describe themselves. Lai and Li (2020) argued that green peppers are exploited by research-intensive universities as cheap research labour.

My participants reported similar perceptions. Tessa compared the different attitudes of her university towards old-timers and young academics, and she told me: 'university recruits them (young academics) just in the hope that they can produce more research results.' Helen mentioned her feelings as a young academic working in a prestigious university, and she felt that today's universities are 'taking advantage of the youth of the green peppers to squeeze out maximum research energy,' Helen said. Their accounts reflect that the research requirements set by prestigious universities are unreasonable for young academics.

My participants reported that the increased demand for academic research at universities was linked to competition for university rankings in a national context. Unlike prestigious universities that have already been ranked at the top, first-tier universities often need to pursue rankings for development. This situation has caused academics in first-tier universities to face research pressure, even if their research requirements are slightly lower than those of prestigious universities. For example, Faye reported that the research outcomes of a university could often directly affect the evaluation of the university's domestic and global ranking and ultimately affect the recruitment of students and the university's finances. Oliva and Paula concurred and added that the survival and development of a discipline are also directly affected by research outcomes. For example, Oliva's discipline wants to become a discipline that is authorised to offer a doctoral degree program. Thus, the research outcomes are the evidence to prove its academic ability. In addition, a discipline with quality research outcomes can attract the attention of universities and thus obtain more funding for development. Paula added that she needed to secure research funding. Otherwise, her discipline may face bankruptcy. Therefore, research publications appear to be a tool for competition among non-prestige universities and an important factor in the survival and development of a discipline. Under this competitive environment, Faye told me that even in local first-tier universities, the research requirements for academics would only increase.

Amid this national trend, my participants indicated that many first-tier universities have been trying to motivate academics to pursue research activities and increase publications. Due to differences in the participants' academic backgrounds, such as disciplines and university ranks, the incentives they mentioned have similarities but are not identical. According to their explanations, many non-prestige universities introduced positive incentive measures for motivating academics' research work. Gina reported

monetary rewards from universities, ranging from 5,000 to 100,000 RMB (around 597 to 11,944 GBP) for publication in different levels of journals. Luna reported that an approved national research topic could get 200,000 RMB (around 23,888 GBP) in funding from the government, and her university will award another 200,000 RMB. These findings were consistent with previous studies reporting that many universities provide monetary incentives for publishing in SSCI and CSSCI journals (Peng, 2020). At the same time, at the universities of Gina, Kate and Rabia, the credits for research results can replace a small number of teaching credits in the annual appraisal, and there are corresponding course fees. Luna also indicated that some universities even give more generous financial rewards than higher-ranked universities to encourage research. From the above generous monetary and credit rewards, one can see the importance placed on research by Chinese higher education institutions today. It suggests that if today's universities and disciplines are expected to develop, they need to follow the national trend of research competition. From the above description, universities seem to be trying to improve publication with two methods. The first is to implement a performance appraisal model, which clearly stipulates one's annual research credit in the contract. The second is to motivate academics through generous monetary rewards, to further improve their publication rate after obtaining the performance credits. My participants' words presented contradictory attitudes to academic research, as they felt delighted and anxious at the same time. They are delighted that the publication can directly increase their income, but the publication has become the main criterion for evaluating one's work performance and directly affects academic promotion. My participants felt that such assessments overlooked the academic staff's commitment to teaching and other tasks. Olivia suggested that academics should be respected for their efforts in different tasks and not just in research.

Gender differences in teaching and research

My research shows gender differences in the time devoted to teaching and research. In terms of time devoted to teaching, eleven participants reported from their own experiences that they felt women were more likely to devote more time to teaching than men. The remaining nine participants reported the teaching preparation time between men and women was similar or unclear. In terms of time devoted to research, my participants largely agreed that men are more likely to devote more energy and time to research activities than women. For example, Faye concluded that 'men do pay attention to teaching, but they pay more attention to research.' My research argues that women

academics devote more time to teaching than male academics, which in part leads to the fact that women have less time than men to spend on research in the limited time.

Paula, one of eleven participants, agreed that women generally spend more time on teaching than men, explaining that women pay more attention to the details of teaching. For example, she often spends a lot of time preparing topics for discussion in class to help deepen students' understanding. Alice agreed that women generally spend more time teaching than men, explaining that this is because women prefer teaching and men prefer to research. She did not explain why women prefer to teach but mentioned that fewer men give up research than women. She explained that this is because some women academics research in order to be promoted to associate professor and give up their research after reaching the rank of associate professor. However, this gender preference difference mentioned by Alice is contrary to the feedback from most of my participants. Of my participants, sixteen explicitly stated that they preferred research. The rest of the participants, including Alice, stated that research is important to academics because research publications directly contribute to their career advancement.

As mentioned above, academic research is given unprecedented importance by universities in China today, which directly affects the promotion and income of academics. My study shows that this overall environment may lead academics to reduce their time investment in teaching, such as lesson preparation time, in order to increase research publications. Of the eleven participants who agreed with the difference in teaching time between men and women, four explained that some male academics are not committed to their teaching work. For example, Kate and Luna mentioned that some male academics devote almost all their energy and time to research, even though they were also assigned courses to teach. Affected by the epidemic, Luna's first-tier university adopted online teaching. Luna reported that because the benefits of doing research far outweigh teaching, many male academics broadcast videos of lectures found online in their own courses to their students. Luna chose to record online lectures herself because the quality of these online courses varies. Based on this experience, Luna suggested that the greater the gap between the interests of research and teaching, the more irresponsible male academics will be when teaching. Kate also reported some male academics at her prestigious university have a low commitment to teaching. Kate told me:

Some male teachers only devote themselves to research. Female teachers are generally conscientious about their teaching and spend a lot of time on preparation. Female teachers are more responsible when teaching students. I know some male teachers who are very irresponsible to students and spend little time preparing lessons. They are either busy with research or participating in *yingchou* every day. When students rate the teachers, they also report that the teaching quality of these male teachers is poor. Whether the teacher is responsible or not, the students can tell.

Tessa explained that the gender difference in the time devoted to teaching and research is related to the gender division of labour. In addition to the fact that men devote less time to teaching than women, she also noticed a stark difference in how she and male professors treat their students doing research. Tessa said:

I basically don't impose harsh research requirements on students. I think it has to do with my gender. For example, as a woman, I have no pressure to make money and no goal of making more money for my family. I supervise students to do research mainly to help them improve. I think I am more emotionally invested than male teachers. I pay more attention to students' feelings. I don't want to be so tough, forcing students to produce a bunch of research outputs. However, the male professors around me are different from me. They put pressure on students to increase their research outputs because men are required to be financially responsible both by society and family. Therefore, I feel that men and women are different in supervising students.

The male professor mentioned by Tessa puts a lot of pressure on students in order to increase their research publications because their students' research publications could increase the income of doctoral supervisors. According to Olivia, the student's research publications are also considered the work of the supervisor. For example, the supervisor can be the author of the correspondence. Kate mentioned that only papers published as the first author or the second corresponding author are counted when evaluating for promotion to associate professor. However, the first author is more useful in the evaluation than the second corresponding author. Generally, the first author is the person

who contributed the most to the research, including the writing of the manuscript (Bhattacharya, 2010). However, there seems to be a grey zone when it comes to the sequence of authorship. Kate reflected that some supervisors would ask their students to be the second author and themselves to be the first author, even if the paper was written mainly by the student. This situation is not unique to Chinese academia.

Work-life conflict

Although the above heavy teaching load and research pressure reported by my participants are not specific to women academics, this study shows that family responsibilities further exacerbate women's conflict over balancing teaching and research time. In this study, five unmarried participants could devote themselves to their teaching and research activities. Although they were frequently working overtime for research, they reported that they did not have a strong sense of work-family conflict. In contrast, participants who were married and had children reported stronger work-family conflict, and many of them used the words 'endurance' and 'difficulty' to describe how they felt about their daily lives.

My participants reported their daily dilemma of balancing research with teaching. This dilemma not only occurred to participants who were in the first five years of their careers, such as Betty who complained of 'not enough time for doing research', but also occurred in experienced academics who were already familiar with their research fields and teaching content, such as Ulla who told me: 'it is difficult to balance research and teaching time, let alone family' and Paula concurred, stated that 'I am under great pressure of teaching. This seriously affects my time to do research and my private life'. Their accounts reflect that woman academics are more likely to complete teaching work first when time and energy are limited. This is partly because research often requires a high degree of concentration compared to teaching, and its associated work, such as preparation and assignment marking. All my participants' perspectives of research were consistent with Leberman et al. (2016, p. 652), that research often requires 'longer, more intensive periods that are free from interruption'. Putting research last may reduce the interruption from teaching and family work.

Although all my participants shared a similar experience of taking work home and working overtime, unmarried women academics could devote their private time to

research to cope with the double burden of research and teaching in their everyday work. Married women with children also have a second shift at home because they have to spend a huge amount of time on household chores and children's education. As discussed in the previous chapter, women academics are under strong social expectations to put family first and utilise flexible working hours to accommodate family needs. It was evident from my interviews that time precedence for married women academics with children was accorded to family first, followed by teaching, and lastly, research. Married women with children often have to complete a series of family obligations such as picking up children from school, cooking for the family, taking care of the children, helping the children with their homework, and putting the children to bed. Then, they can have their own time to do research. This research time is at the expense of their own rest time. Their shared timetables at home reflect that women academics who are married and have children do not benefit from flexible hours, which is less helpful for them to organise their research time to improve publications. This partly explains why they described their life as 'difficult'.

Academic career development

The existing research on women's academic careers in China suggests that women's overall status of women in academic work has improved due to the expansion of higher education but that Chinese academic women are still at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts (Zhao, 2008; Gonzalez et al., 2012; Tian and Lu, 2017; Li and Shen, 2022). This disadvantage includes the low proportion of women in full professorships and working as doctoral supervisors and the low proportion of women in prestigious universities (Ji, 2014; Zhang and Gan, 2016; Shuang, 2017).

Based on my participants' experience, my research shows that family responsibilities constrained academic women's career development. Firstly, women's reproduction (i.e. the time they will have a baby) often overlaps with their early 'fledgling' careers. Secondly, women's career progression from associate professor to professor often overlaps with the years of their children in middle school. As a result, my research identified two key areas in which gender inequality informed the academic career development of women: gender differences in promotion speed and fewer women leading research projects.

Overlapping early career and women's reproduction

Western studies noted that women in the early stages of their academic careers often experience biological and tenured clocks ticking simultaneously and that women are likely to delay childbearing in favour of tenure (Townsend and Broadfoot, 2008; Manchester, Leslie and Kramer, 2010). Recent research in China also suggests that some academic women may advance childbirth (having a child before getting a job) or delay childbirth (having a child after tenured) to allow themselves to focus on publication demands and reach performance targets required for the fixed-term contract (Ding, 2016; Li and Shen, 2022). However, my findings are not consistent with the results of the above studies. For example, all twelve of my participants that were married with children, whether employed permanently or on fixed-term contracts, had their first child within five years of starting their career but before tenure. My participants reported that women academics who choose to have children early or late are a minority at universities in China. In other words, most women have their first child within the first five years of their academic careers, and their 'fledgling' career overlaps with their pregnancy or parenthood. My research argues that Chinese female academics are more likely to prioritise fertility over tenure, which is related to the norm of women's reproductive age.

My participants reported a typical timeline of women academics. Most unmarried female Ph.D holders start their academic careers around thirty, and then a large proportion of women marry within the first two to three years of their careers and have their first child in their mid-thirties. My participants explained that women delay childbearing for two to three years after starting their academic careers in order to better cope with high work pressure and demonstrate their ability. However, women are less likely to delay having children beyond the age of thirty-five. Li and Shen (2022) point out that academics in China can usually gain tenure between the age of thirty-five and thirty-seven. In other words, my data shows that only a small number of women have their first child after receiving tenure. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2020), the average age of first marriage for men and women in China is 28.67 years old in 2020, of which the average age of first marriage is 29.38 years for men and 27.95 years for women. In 2022, the average age of first marriage of women of childbearing age in China rised to 28 years old in 2022 (China News, 2022; Liu and Zu, 2022). The average age of women in Shanghai at first marriage was 29.09 years old, and the average age of first childbirth was 30.29 years old in 2019, both of which are above the country's average (Eastday, 2021). These data suggest that women's education significantly delayed their age of marriage and childbearing.

My research shows that a large proportion of women academics have their first child before their tenure because the common perception is that delivering a healthy baby requires the woman to be under thirty-five. In China, it is considered risky for pregnant women over the age of thirty-five to give birth (People, 2020; Sina, 2022). For example, three participants (Alice, Luna, Rabia) who were married but without children mentioned their plans to have children as soon as possible, emphasising their age for childbirth. They all reported their anxiety and dilemma of giving birth after the age of thirty-five. On the one hand, they worried that pregnancy and childbirth would have a negative impact on their research and promotion, and on the other hand, they were concerned that delaying childbirth due to work would affect their health and give birth to a healthy baby. Alice and Luna expressed their sense of urgency as they are turning thirty-five in less than two years. Both made it clear that they would prioritise having children over promotions. Luna used herself as an example to analyse the reasons for doing so. She pointed out that the pressure of research and promotion competition can lead to infertility in women. She told me: 'it is not whether you want to have a child, but whether you can conceive a child'. What she was alluding to is that the high work pressure of female academics could perhaps lead to infertility, especially as the risk of such infertility increases with age. She told me:

Because of the age factor, I can't fully devote myself to my career. Because I have to think, I am so old now. I have to think about having children. I'm not without academic pursuits, but I also need to be healthy. If you say that I am only in my twenties and young, I feel that my body can still withstand the pressure, but when I am thirty-three years old, I can't accept the impact of this kind of competition on my health. I must consider having children. You know you might not get your period if you are too stressed. And if I am unhealthy, will it affect my children? So putting all my energy into work and competing for a few promotion positions, I think it is very bad for the physical and mental health of women like me who have to consider having children.

Similar viewpoints emerged in interviews with Alice, Faye, Gina and Helen, that high work pressure of female academics may lead to infertility as they grow older. For example, Faye is the only participant who has two children. She mentioned that her

second child was born after the age of thirty-five, and the second child had a greater impact on her health than the first child. Alice also mentioned her fertility anxieties in the interview, she told me:

I am not young anymore, I am thirty-three, and I really dare not procrastinate (to have children) any longer. I think it has something to do with age and stress. My health situation is not very good. I went to the hospital for an examination because of my problems, and I can not get pregnant. So I just want to take care of my body first. For women, the later you give birth, the more dangerous it is. Having a child after the age of thirty-five is even riskier.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, women academics are under social expectations to fulfil certain gendered family roles, and as a result, marriage and childbearing are not just personal choices but also social expectations to be met. Xie (2019) suggests that women's reproductive age is influenced by the eugenic concepts long rooted in China's population planning policies; thirty years old is the end of the ideal time for pregnancy, and thirty-five years old is an alarming deadline for a safe pregnancy. In the cases of Alice and Luna, they were only thirty-three years old, still in the early stages of their academic careers, but described themselves as 'so old' and 'not young'. My findings echo Xie (2019) in that the women in my study saw later pregnancies (even those in the mid-thirties) as risky and equated healthy reproduction with younger female bodies.

Gender differences in promotion speed

Because of the aforementioned early career overlap with childbearing, it was generally agreed by my participants that women might take longer than men to advance to associate professorship. Emma and Paula, who were single and reached associate professorships before the age of thirty-five, also agreed that the family and childbearing of married women affect the speed of producing research publications and consequently affect women's promotion speed. A recent study by Li and Shen (2022) extrapolates that if everything goes as planned with research performance, academics usually can get tenure roughly between 35 and 37. Elsewhere, the average age for academics to be promoted to associate professor and professor is 34.2 and 40.8 years old, respectively (TouTiao, 2021). In my interviews, I did not ask my participants at what age they had

their first child or were promoted to associate and professor, but many mentioned their age when they shared their experiences. From their narratives, it was clear that my married participants with children were promoted to associate professors and professors at an older age than 34.2 and 40.8 years.

According to my participants' explanations based on their own their own experience, or the observation of their female colleagues, the most important reason for women's slow promotion is that women's early career overlaps with their marriage and childbearing. Married women academics, like Alice, Luna and Rabia, would choose to gradually reduce their time and energy investment in their careers out of consideration for their childbearing age and health. Unmarried women academics, such as Coco, Nora, Paula, Betty and Emma, have all experienced different degrees of *cuihun* (pressure to get married), such as parents nagging and introducing blind dates. As for the participants who had children, my participants reported experiencing low research productivity and research pauses during childbearing, even though they had planned ahead of time. For example, Gina, Kate, and Helen reported that having children slowed down research paper output because their time was taken up by childcare. Both Helen and Kate come from prestigious universities with high research performance requirements. Helen mentioned that she planned to return to research as soon as possible after giving birth. Because her academic husband went abroad to study, even though she had the help of elder relatives, she still felt exhausted in taking care of the children. Thus, she planned not to return to her research work until her husband returned to China a year later. In fact, compared with other participants, Helen's suspension of research is relatively short. Daisy reported that she suspended her research for three years. She told me:

After giving birth, I took care of the child by myself, so the research was interrupted for three years. At that time, I almost gave up research, and I basically would not pursue research tasks. What I did in the research team were very low-level tasks.

Gina expressed in our interview that she intends to fight for the opportunity to be promoted to associate professor. After she stopped research for three years, she mentioned that the process of restarting research was very difficult because she had to balance the three tasks of taking care of her children, teaching, and reviewing and

learning new knowledge. Stella expressed similar perspectives. Stella perceived that 30 to 35 years old is the 'golden period of a person's academic career, and she told me:

Because the foundation of research ability and network is laid during this period, if you miss this period, it will be very difficult later. It's not that women are incapable of increasing their research. It's that most women academics are spending this period of time at home. You can see that most male academics have accumulated certain professional achievements when they are around thirty-five years old. They have professional titles and research projects. Women have just returned to normal research performance at the age of thirty-five. I feel that women produce research outcomes either before they get married and have children or five years after giving birth. It's obvious.

The experiences of Stella and Gina show the dilemma of women overlapping with childbearing in their early careers. Half of my participants mentioned that the National Natural Science Foundation of China is a necessary condition for promotion to associate professor, and the age limit for men is thirty-five, and forty for women. They shared a common agreement that the differential age requirement acknowledged women's and men's different trajectories and was supportive of women. This reflects the fact that the overall fertility of women will cause them to be promoted to associate professors more slowly. Stella and Gina's experiences also reflect that men often enjoy a 'cumulative advantage' in their later careers by building social networks and committing to research in their early careers (Lie and Malik, 1994). Zhao (2008) also indicated that male academics in China enjoy an accumulation of academic capital, primarily research productivity. However, for women, family and childbirth not only lead to the reduction of their time devoted to work but also lead to the stagnation of women's research.

In addition, my participants reported other factors that affected the speed at which women were promoted to associate professorships, such as networking and academic qualifications. Betty mentioned that prestigious universities have more opportunities to cooperate with well-known professors or to participate in national scientific research projects, which is helpful for promotion. In terms of academic qualification, Olivia and Faye completed their doctoral studies after working because a doctoral degree is a basic requirement for promotion to associate professor. It is worth noting that it took Olivia six

years to get her Ph.D, because she was still independently caring for her children during her Ph.D. Faye and her academic husband both plan to pursue Ph.D after work. She started her Ph.D after her husband finished his Ph.D program so she could take care of her kid. These experiences show that the influence of gender on women's promotion lasts for a long time.

Gender inequality in professorships

Aside from the slow speed of women being promoted to associate professorship, my participants largely agreed that the number of male associate professors or professors is greater for men compared to women, regardless of the disciplines and the universities. They noted that a significant portion of female associate professors would give up promotions to professorships. In this study, four participants obtained professorships in their forties, and another four participants were associate professors who expressed interest in full professorships. Among them, Qiana and Olivia are forty-three and forty-four years old, respectively. Both of them are associate professors, and they are aiming to pursue professorships. However, they all noticed that a significant proportion of academic women their age would choose not to pursue professorship.

The main factor for women to give up pursuing professors and doctoral supervisors is that women academics often face the dilemma of choosing to focus on their children, especially their children's academic performance, or their own academic career progression. Lecturer Faye, who started her academic career in 2000, reported that most women academics are stuck in associate professorships while most men clearly strive for the title of full professor. She explained that the main reason is women need more time to accompany and tutor their children, especially when children are at the age of preparing for the highly competitive high school and university entrance examinations. With limited time, this time investment in children will lead to women's reduced time investment in their research, therefore reducing research publications. She told me:

You can calculate that, after getting the title of associate professor, it takes at least five to ten years to prepare for the evaluation of professorship. This time coincides with the child's secondary schools and college. As a mother, you must spend a lot of time in managing your child's study and logistics.

[...] It seems that women can compete fairly with men. But invisibly, society will assign the heavy responsibility of the family to women.

Qiana is an associate professor at a prestigious university. She expressed her expectation in pursuing a professorship, but she also pointed out that obtaining a professorship is not only about meeting research requirements but competing with others. The number of full university professorships is limited and fierce competition is fierce. Qiana told me: 'there is no limit to this competition'. She must ensure that the quantity and quality of her research papers surpass those of other competitors in order to obtain a professorship. Judging from this competition, even if academics invest a lot of time and energy in research and exceed the research requirements, there is no guarantee of getting a professorship. The competitive mechanism for promotion at prestigious universities could make some women academics less confident in pursuing professors and thus give up promotion. For example, Qiana mentioned the experience of a female colleague in another discipline.

My friend had to give up pursuing the professor. Her husband doesn't care about the family and child, and her son is about to take the national university entrance examination, so she must put the child first. Our university requires that candidates must have published articles in authoritative journals. This is already difficult to achieve. She felt that she was incomparable with those who could concentrate on research every day. She felt that she must be incomparable with someone who could concentrate on scientific research every day. So, she just gave up participating in the competition for a professorship. If the university's research requirements are too high, it will reduce your desire to work hard.

According to the above content, female lecturers are promoted to associate professors slower than men because of the interruption of research caused by their childbirth, and female associate professors give up promotions to professors because they need to give priority to their children's education. This reflects that the trajectory of their children often influences the careers of academic women.

In addition, Ullah reported that there was unfairness in promotions to professors, where '*guanxi*' (relationship) was a factor in promotions. She told me:

You must meet the research requirements before you can be considered for promotion. However, the number of promotion places is limited. For example, if there are only two places, but five people meet the promotion criteria. At this time, it is not necessarily the person with the most research publications but who has the strongest '*guanxi*'. They might have had private communication with the committee members before the election, built relationships with these committee members in daily work, or left a good impression on committee members. In addition, it also has something to do with your research team. Because each of us is in the research team, when evaluating for promotion, everyone will support the people in their team. If you have several committee members in your team, you will naturally have more votes. If your team has only one committee member, you will naturally get fewer votes.

Ulla did not explicitly mention whether there is gender inequality in the process of running for professors. However, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the social interaction of women is constrained by culture and family, which shows that it may be more difficult for women academics to establish interpersonal relationships than their male counterparts. Women's social restrictions have resulted in women academics being disadvantaged in promotions.

Few women lead research projects

In my interviews, my participants mentioned another type of research-related work, and they called it 'horizontal research projects'. They explained that horizontal research projects are basically projects jointly carried out by some government departments, enterprises and institutions with universities, aiming to solve practical problems and technical difficulties. In horizontal project cooperation, universities generally provide researchers, knowledge and technology, and another party provides research funding and faculty remuneration. Although participating in horizontal projects is not a mandatory task and has no direct impact on the promotion of academic ranks, my participants largely agreed that participating in horizontal cooperation projects has significant monetary benefits for academic faculty. The remuneration is often well above their base

salary and teaching income. Luna told me that the remuneration of horizontal projects is even higher than the monetary rewards of research publications. In this study, all participants expressed a preference for focusing on research rather than participating in horizontal projects, even though horizontal projects are generally well-paid. Twelve participants had experiences with horizontal projects, five of them mentioned that they had participated in horizontal projects as '*zhu yan*' ([主研] lead researchers). Only three participants had experience leading an entire horizontal project as '*zhu chi*' ([主持] project leaders). Explaining their preference for research over projects, my participants reported that performance in horizontal projects did not help them advance their academic titles. For example, Qiana told me:

Some academics do very well in horizontal projects, but their academic ranks cannot be improved because it is difficult to write papers on applied projects.

Betty, Helen, and Luna mentioned preferring to spend their time on publications that help them pursue associate professorships. At the same time, my participants explained that they rarely participate in horizontal research projects for personal reasons, such as research interest, career planning, and limited energy and time. Faye and Gina mentioned that their lives were unbalanced between academic work and family, leaving little time for taking on projects. Paula also mentioned that there are few cooperation opportunities for horizontal projects in her philosophy discipline, thereby she has not participated in horizontal projects. However, as the participants explained in depth, I found that horizontal projects are unfair to women because men are overwhelmingly dominant.

According to the observations of participants who have participated in horizontal projects, it is very common for men to lead projects and women to lead research. Kate explained the difference between project leaders and lead researchers, she told me that the project leader is the 'big boss' of the project, and the lead researcher is the 'small boss' of the project. After the project leader obtains the project from the enterprise, the lead researcher is in charge or leads the team to complete the project. Most of the time, the project leader contacts and liaises with the enterprise. Ulla, Wendy and Tessa, who had experience as project leaders, agreed with this phenomenon of division of labour. Olivia

had no experience in participating in horizontal projects, but according to her observations, she noticed that more male academics lead projects than women and that these male academics also have more projects than their female counterparts. Kate explained this phenomenon with the example of a female chemical engineering academic who is also the associate dean in her department. She told me:

We all think that she has research ability. However, the company does not give her *mianzi* ([面子] face). I don't understand why, I just feel that way. She is also associate dean. Everyone knows that she is a *nv qiang ren* [strong woman] with strong academic ability. So, she always serves as the lead researcher for others. She just doesn't have the ability to get a project. [...] I think that unless a woman is a well-known professor, she can't get the project.

The term '*mianzi*' ([面子] face) is related to an individual's reputation and public image and is considered an important concept that influences an individual's social life (Goffman, 1955; Qi, 2011; Zhang, 2018). In Kate's case, she said that 'the company does not give her *mianzi*', which means that even if a woman academic has strong research ability and administrative ability, the company is not willing to hand over the project to a woman. The concept of *mianzi* is particularly important in social interactions in Chinese culture and society. According to Zhang (2018), *mianzi* is understood as a concept that needs to be maintained and may even be lost during social interactions. Kate's account reflected that *mianzi* could also be bought.

The plight of Kate's colleagues does not appear to be an isolated case but a general situation. Kate told me:

In short, in our industry, it is difficult for women academics to take over horizontal projects, especially company projects. If women academics have research capabilities, they can join and be the lead researchers. But they cannot obtain horizontal projects. Since so many people are capable of doing this project, why should company X give this project to you? The ways to obtain these projects are very complicated.

Other participants explained why women academics are more likely to serve as lead researchers rather than project leaders in horizontal projects. They mentioned that it is difficult for women to participate in *yingchou* to build social relationships and get horizontal projects. Olivia told me: 'Because he can participate in *yingchou*. He has the time and energy, and he can drink'. Ulla and Wendy have experience leading horizontal projects. They are professors of computer science at leading universities. With such academic titles and university backgrounds, they have more opportunities to participate in and lead horizontal projects than others. Both had company representatives coming to their offices to consult them and invite them to cooperate. Tessa mentioned that she only cooperates with the enterprise a few times and does not need to participate in *yingchou* and drinking. Thus, she felt respected in her interactions with the enterprise. Tessa's experience is just like Kate's description. Perhaps only when a female academic is a well-known professor will companies treat her respectfully. Young women academics, such as Kate, may be treated disrespectfully. Kate told me:

Young employees like us are not well-known and have no *guanxi*. [...] when you attend *yingchou* with company X, and sit at the dinner table, company X will not respect you. If you do not show your enthusiasm, such as drinking wine, company X may directly ignore you, let alone give you the project.

In this study, Ulla and Wendy obtained projects for their professorship and ability, but at the same time, they agreed that *guanxi* (relationship) and *yingchou* (business entertainment) are key factors in obtaining projects in Chinese academia. Ulla told me:

I think doing horizontal projects in China is more about *guanxi*. For example, many people get projects through their personal relationships, such as classmates, relatives, teacher-student relationships, and so on. Women can also get projects if they have these personal relationships. But in some relationships, projects can only be obtained through *yingchou* and drinking. I've also heard people say that his project was obtained through drinking. In particular, a project leader from the army told him, I will give you the project after you drink this glass of wine. Women can't drink that much, but a man can.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, women's social interactions are limited by social expectations of appropriate female behaviour (particularly in interactions with men), especially participating in *yingchou* and drinking in the presence of men. Ulla's account reflected the impact of women's social restrictions on their access to horizontal projects. Although women may be able to obtain projects through acquaintances, it is difficult to establish relationships with unfamiliar companies and obtain projects. While women academics may be able to obtain projects through acquaintances, it is difficult for them to establish broader social connections to obtain projects. In fact, Stella was the only participant who mentioned in the interview that she was willing to participate in *yingchou* and drinking because of her family's trust in her. Without the understanding and approval of her family, especially her academic husband, she probably would not have participated in *yingchou*, even if it was just for work. She mentioned that she had the experience of being a lead researcher, but she did not mention whether she had the experience of obtaining a project through *yingchou* and leading the project. The remaining participants reported their experiences of self-exclusion from participating in *yingchou* and drinking.

Vera reported that the income gap between professors with several projects and those with few projects can be large. Vera told me:

Those well-known professors, they have so many projects, how could they do it all by themselves. Most of their research and projects are done by their team. The more Ph.D students he trains, the bigger his team gets. Then he is more capable of taking on larger projects. However, most of professors obtain projects and research by themselves, so they can't form a scale benefit. Therefore, there will be polarisation among professors. Some well-known professors are very famous and wealthy, but most of the professors and doctoral supervisors have average income.

Compared with academic women, men participating in *yingchou* and drinking to obtain horizontal projects seem to be supported and expected by their families. Tessa explained from the perspective of men as breadwinners and mentioned that male academics

eagerly participate in horizontal projects because men have more financial responsibilities in the family than women. She told me:

The male colleagues around me are different from us because they are the pillars of the family. They cannot choose to take projects or not to take projects like me. I can have no project. It doesn't matter if my income is lower. But men can't. They have to be financially responsible for the family. He must complete some projects that he doesn't like to increase his financial income.

Thus, it was clear from my research that compared with male academics, women academics are limited by social expectations, and family responsibilities also constrain them. This is because most women who are married and have children need to take care of their families and children after getting off work, and they often have no time and energy to participate in social activities, including *yingchou*, for obtaining horizontal projects. As a result, the gap in income between female and male professors widens.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored women academics experiences of work, particularly regarding academic recruitment, workload and promotion. The data revealed that women academics are still disadvantaged compared to their male counterparts in Chinese higher education. Through this discussion, I have uncovered that merit-based recruitment for academic work seems to provide equal opportunities for everyone. However, gender puts women at a disadvantage in competition with men, which leads to gender inequality in hiring outcomes.

I have found that some women academics give up the opportunity to join a prestigious university and choose a lower-ranked university instead. On the surface, they chose this way because of the high research pressure in prestigious universities and the risk of their contracts not being renewed. Digging deeper, it is partly related to the age limit for university recruitment and that a failed promotion at a prestigious university may lead to the termination of an entire academic career.

In addition, this study has demonstrated the heavy workload of academics, whose teaching work takes up a lot of daily working time, while research work has become the main criterion for promotion assessment and must be completed by working overtime. While all academics face heavy workloads, women have additional family work to factor in, shaping their opportunities and decisions.

I have explored the different approaches of prestigious universities and first-tier universities in improving scientific research. Prestigious universities eliminate young academics who do not meet the research requirements, while first-tier universities often encourage young academics to devote time to research to accrue monetary rewards. However, this incentive means less to married women than to men because of women's family responsibilities. Male academics can work overtime according to personal arrangements, but married women with children usually sacrifice their personal rest time in exchange for overtime research time after completing a series of family tasks, or undertake less research or take research breaks.

With regard to the career development of female academics, my research explores the overlap between the early career of female academics and childbearing. My data shows that women academics face conflicts between work and childbearing at the beginning of their careers. Childbearing leads to the suspension of research, which leads to the age gap between men and women when they obtain associate professorships. And the period when women academics are pursuing full professors overlaps with the period of children are preparing for the college entrance examination. Because women academics are the main people responsible for their children's education under the expectations of their families and society, they are more likely to choose to devote their time to their children's education and give up promotion.

In addition, my research has explored horizontal research projects and gender differences in participating in or leading projects. Although horizontal projects have no direct effect on promotion, they have substantial financial benefits. However, because of social restrictions and gender discrimination, the number of women leading horizontal projects is low compared to men- women may not have the time to devote to these projects nor the opportunities for social networking that are often needed to foster research connections. It is clear from my research that there is often a mismatch between

the perceptions of academic work as a sufficiently flexible job for women to combine with family responsibilities and the actual demands of the job, especially if one wants to have a successful career and be promoted.

These disadvantages raise the question: What strategies do women have for coping with gender inequality at work? In the next chapter, I will explore women academics strategies of coping with the social expectations of both work and family.

Chapter 6. Women's Coping Strategies

Introduction

In Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, I explored the rationales behind why women academics choose academic careers and the realities of life as a female academic (particularly in relation to recruitment, workloads and promotion), highlighting, in particular, the struggles around combining teaching, research and family demands. In this chapter, I move on to discuss women's resistance and coping strategies in the face of the aforementioned expectations and dilemmas. I will explore women's coping strategies in the family from two perspectives, including their emphasis on the importance of full-time work and financial income to women's decision-making power in their family and the mutual help and understanding of dual-career academic couples in the family. I then explore three similar coping strategies employed by women academics at work. Firstly, under the current situation that it is more difficult for female PhD holders in academic employment than male counterparts, my research found that the help of supervisors is beneficial for women's employment. Secondly, as most women's early career overlaps with their childbearing, my research found that women academics may choose to adopt childbearing planning strategies to reduce the impact of childbearing on their careers. Finally, my research found that women academics increase their research networking opportunities by engaging in women's networking.

Financial independence for increased decision-making power

While I did not ask my participants specifically about financial issues in my interviews, most participants emphasised the importance of full-time employment and financial income for women. For example, when my participants were asked why they chose an academic career, some participants highlighted financial income in their responses. They reported that their career was an indispensable part of their lives because it enabled them to achieve financial independence. By analysing their explanations for financial independence, I found that women academics attempt to improve their bargaining power in education and family life through work and income.

Firstly, my participants mentioned that they decided to pursue a Ph.D. partly because they were financially independent through external funding, meaning they were not

entirely dependent on their family's financial support to pursue their studies. In this study, except for Coco, who self-funded her overseas Master's degree, the rest of the participants received financial support from outside their families during their Master's and doctoral studies. Among them, seven participants mentioned that they could pursue a doctorate after graduation rather than work partly because they did not rely on family to finance their studies. Examples of the financial support these seven participants received include a government minimum stipend, research rewards, living allowances from colleges, and additional salaries for working as teaching assistants. They expressed a sense of pride and accomplishment in lightening their families' financial burdens and investment in education while emphasising that they used their 'own money' to pursue their studies and dream academic careers. They used expressions such as 'my decision', 'my willingness', and 'my business' when referring to decisions about continuing education and careers. For example, Paula and Betty are the only children in their families, and both their parents want them to study and work nearby. However, they opted to study abroad with a full scholarship and then moved to a big city for work, which kept them away from their parents for years. Paula explained her decision and told me: 'I don't need to ask for their [parents] consent. I don't depend on their money.' Their accounts reflected that compared to women who were entirely dependent on parental investment, state financial support increased the likelihood that women would pursue an academic path and their confidence when they disagreed with their parents on educational and work-related decisions. Therefore, my participants' experiences suggest that the separation of 'parents' money' and 'own money' weakens the family's control over daughters and increases women's confidence in deciding to pursue higher education and academic careers.

Notably, my participants valued financial independence and decision-making alongside parental expectations and emotional bonding. They recognised the family as a backup force to support their studies and academic careers in many ways, including verbal encouragement and help with daily house chores. Four participants, including Paula and Betty, mentioned their parents would have invested in them if they did not get a scholarship. This shows that although Paula and Betty had different opinions from their parents, their education and career pursuits did not cause their parents' opposition because teaching in higher education institutions is often seen as a suitable and desirable career for women in China, as discussed in Chapter 4. Compared with those who could not pursue a doctorate due to insufficient scholarship or family investment, Paula and Betty's privileged social and economic status made decisions to pursue an

academic path easier. As the only children in their families, Paula and Betty's experiences show that being an only child may have more opportunities than being daughters with siblings to receive financial support from family members. This echoes Fong's (2004) and Xie's (2021) arguments that many only daughters with no siblings in China today are raised as surrogate sons and often take on their parent's expectations for their educational and professional achievements.

In addition to decisions about education, my participants reported that the income brought by work could increase their bargaining power in marriage, childbearing, and housework division. My research shows that when women gain financial independence from work, they appear to feel more empowered to make decisions about their marriages and fertility. In this study, five participants shared experiences of using their study and promotion as excuses to avoid the nagging of their parents and in-laws about their marriage and reproduction. Based on their interpretation, this study found that financial independence increases women's bargaining power in deciding when to marry and have children and also makes women more confident in remaining unmarried. For example, Luna shared the stories of her parents pushing her to get married and setting her up on blind dates while she was studying for her Ph.D. Luna refused her parents' interference in her marriage decision and postponed her marriage until she graduated. Her strategy was to keep reminding her parents of her study pressures, emphasising that she had to concentrate on her Ph.D. Otherwise, it would be difficult to graduate. Emma also told her parents about work pressure, especially the pressure and difficulty of being promoted to associate professor, to let parents understand and support her delayed marriage. Betty mentioned in the interview that she wanted to stay unmarried, and this idea was based on the financial independence that her work brought her. Daisy also mentioned that she rejected her in-law's pushiness for her to have a second child, so she didn't get along well with her in-laws. She explained her perception in the interview and told me: 'I don't want to have a second child at all. They don't give me money, so why ask me to do this or that.' She further told me:

My salary will increase if I work hard to reach a higher title. They asked me to have a second child, but they didn't even say they would help me take care of the child. I think female teachers will consider many things if they want to have a second child, such as whether there is anyone at home to

help them. Because the reality is that if you don't think clearly in advance, you will be on your own after giving birth. Then what will happen to my job?

In Daisy's case, she successfully resisted the family's pressures despite causing family disharmony. Luna used the experience of an older academic friend who had 'no choice' in marriage and reproduction at home to illustrate the importance of financial income for women. Luna told me:

Her master's and doctoral degrees were all funded by her in-laws, and she had no extra income. She lived with her in-laws, so naturally, there will be some conflicts. She had no financial income, so she had to listen to her in-laws. She had her first child as soon as she got married and a second child later. She did not want to, but she had to listen to her in-laws. Because if you rely on your in-laws to support you and you live together, you will be in an endless cycle of being criticised. This is inevitable. She must endure it.

Luna mentioned that this friend's experience made her reflect on women's financial independence in marriage and realise the importance of work and income to women. It also had an impact on her later decisions about when to marry and have children. As she told me: 'I just told myself that I must have a financial foundation before having children.'

In general, according to my participants' accounts, women value paid work and financial independence because they realise that their personal choices about education, marriage, and childbearing are often influenced by their families. Although daughters in one-child families seem to have more understanding and support from their parents regarding their studies and work, this does not necessarily extend to their decisions about marriage and reproduction. In my study, it was clear that women still felt pressure from their families to marry and, after marriage, to have a baby. However, greater financial independence allows them to resist these pressures more (though often not completely).

Academic husband shares housework

As discussed in Chapter 4, the traditional gender roles, where men are breadwinners and women are primary homemakers and caregivers, persist in dual-earner households where the wives are academics. Societal gender norms made it socially acceptable for husbands in dual-earner families to invest more time in their own careers, while women are blamed for working late nights doing research. In response to the unequal division of housework in dual-earner households, five married participants expressed their objections, not just in the interviews but in their daily lives. They suggested that academic women's contributions to household income could significantly reduce husbands' financial pressures. In return, they expected their husbands to reciprocate by contributing to daily household chores and childcare.

Faye pointed out that the division of labour in a dual-career family is unreasonable. That working wives often need to undertake a large proportion of housework and childcare at home. Faced with this unfair division of labour in the family, Faye tried to make her husband participate in family work. For example, Faye assigns some of the chores to her academic husband and reminds him by sticking daily notes and shopping lists on the wall. Faye also attempts to create a reasonable routine for her husband based on time consumption and housework load. In terms of parenting, Faye is mainly responsible for taking care of their newborn baby, while her husband is responsible for caring for their first child in junior high school. Since her husband also works at the university and has flexible working hours, Faye and her husband are able to cooperate with each other and care for the family. Based on her experience of successfully bringing her husband into family work, Faye suggested that in dual-earner families, the husband should not be privileged, as they should not only support their family financially. She told me: 'If a man only serves his family financially, he is selfish. Women may feel difficult and unhappy in such marriages.' My unmarried participants also agreed that housework should be shared equally in marriage. Betty and Coco both mentioned shared housework when describing their ideal couple relationships. Coco told me: 'Why should I be doing all the housework? I have hands, feet, and a job. I don't want to serve the 'big guy' after getting off work.'

In addition, I found that my participants often emphasised their husband's occupations when explaining how they shared household chores and childcare with their husbands. Among the fifteen married participants, eight of my participants have husbands working

in Chinese universities as academics. The remaining participants have husbands working in other industries. My participants used the term '*shuang zhi gong jia ting*' ([双职工家庭] dual-faculty family) to describe dual-career couples who work in the same workplace. They indicated that dual-career academic couples are a common phenomenon in Chinese universities. In my research, there was a division between the women who had husbands working in academia and those who didn't in terms of the division of labour at home and their levels of satisfaction with this division. This comparison can be seen in Ulla and Vera's degrees of satisfaction with their married life, for example, they are around the same age (mid-forties) and have reached professorships in their respective disciplines.

Vera's husband works outside of higher education. Not only does he often use work as an excuse to avoid housework and childcare in family life, but he also devalues his wife's work and views her work-from-home research as a waste of time. An argument would break out whenever Vera asked her husband to help with housework and their child's homework. Vera reported that her husband's lack of empathy and support for her had a long-term detrimental effect on her pursuit of an academic career and personal well-being. She said,

In my university, there are many dual-faculty families. Their husbands can understand women academics' hardships. The contributions of both parties to their family may be more balanced than mine.

Besides Vera, other married participants whose husbands were outside the higher education field agreed that they did more housework than their husbands but did not explain how they shared the family work with their husbands in detail. In terms of their husbands' support, it is mainly emotional support. For example, Tessa mentioned sharing her unhappiness at work with her husband. Gina also mentioned that her husband encouraged her to pursue an associate professorship. Compared with Vera, Ulla mentioned that, although she takes on most housework and their child's education, her academic husband participates in family work daily. Because Ulla's research requires more overtime work in the laboratory than her husband, her husband often helps with cooking and parenting at home as a way to support Ulla's career development. Ulla mentioned that she is satisfied with her husband. When Ulla's in-laws accused Ulla of

not spending enough time on domestic duties, her husband defends her and explains the research pressures of an academic career.

Ulla used the term '*meng dang hu dui*' ([门当户对] matching doors and windows) to explain why academic couples were more likely than others to gradually develop a tacit agreement of sharing housework and a supportive relationship. This was because similar education, family background, and same academic work were more likely to make academic women's husbands empathise with women's struggles in balancing work and family. Xie (2021), in her study of well-educated urban women in China, explains that 'matching doors and windows' is a common marriage matching practice based on people's social rankings in feudal China. My research suggests that the 'matching doors and windows' that academic women seek in China today are essentially the quest for a mutually understanding and supportive couple relationship in which there is a more equitable division of labour within the home. Ulla stated explicitly:

When looking for a partner, finding a person with equivalent education is better. He is on the same level as you. He can understand your work. He will respect you and your work even if he does not fully understand it. If someone like me is married to a worker (Blue-collar worker) or a person in a corporate, he will definitely not understand my work. When he sees that you don't have time to take care of the family, he will blame you and your work, leading to intense family conflict. This kind of person can't understand you, and maybe he doesn't want to understand you either. Family background is also very important. If the gap between the two families is too large, living together will be very uncomfortable. It will greatly affect your mood if your in-laws cannot understand you.

It seems that with the pressure of research at universities today, it is imperative that academic couples understand and support each other's work. Thus, the housework and childcaring arrangement tends to be more based on the research schedule rather than just gender. For example, when Luna needs to catch up with the projects and thesis, her academic husband must take the initiative to undertake most of the housework during that period. Faye and Ulla mentioned that they had to rely on the help of their husbands and family elders for domestic work while preparing for their promotion evaluation. And

vice versa for their husband's promotion evaluation. Kate also mentioned that academics often work overtime to conduct research, leading to long-term negotiations and bargaining about time with children and research work. Negotiations resulted in Kate taking care of the children after work in the evenings and leaving her husband to work overtime at the workplace. In return, she could hand over all the childcare and household chores to her husband and focus on research over the weekend. Kate's experience reflects that being able to establish a relatively balanced distribution of housework and childcare was partly due to a mutual understanding of academic work but mostly the result of negotiation and bargaining.

Moreover, this study reveals that the gendered division of 'men in charge of the outside, women in charge of the inside' in academic couples seems to become blurred with age. Ulla was the only one of the participants who raised this point. She felt that normally, academic women devote far more time and energy to their families than their academic husbands in their early period of careers, and this was because of the pressure on women to undertake reproductive roles and child-rearing tasks. After she and her husband both reached professorship and their child was older, she felt that gender had less effect on housework sharing. However, the early part of her career, when their children are young, is often vital in shaping future career prospects. She explained,

We are both professors, and we are very busy. My husband is in the humanities and liberal arts field, but he knows that my major (computer science) involves many experiments. Now he does more housework than me at home. I have more time to conduct experiments. Thus, I naturally became in charge of the 'outside'.

My participants generally recognised the positive aspects of dual-career academic couples in Chinese higher education, including a relatively more balanced housework sharing, basic respect and empathy from academic husbands. There is even a gradual shift in the gender division between academic couples (inside and outside), through a constant process of bargaining and negotiation, with many arguments and conflicts. However, my research shows that having an academic husband does not guarantee an equal division of housework and childcare. For example, Daisy reported that her academic husband did not do any housework during the pandemic lockdown and was dissatisfied with Daisy's cooking. When it comes to family emergencies, it is Stella who

takes time off rather than her academic husband. Therefore, my research argues that dual-career academic couples have not completely broken through the traditional family division of labour.

Supports from supervisor in academic recruitment

In Chapter 5, I discussed that university recruitment adopts merit-based admissions, but the experiences of the women I interviewed suggest that there is nonetheless bias in the academic market is biased towards men. In this context, I explored the successful experiences of my participants in academic recruitment. This study found that the support of doctoral supervisors may help female doctoral graduates more easily obtain academic careers, especially the support of influential members of the academic community can be the key to opening the door to employment. In this study, Helen, Kate and Rabia directly benefited from doctoral supervisors' referrals and status in the faculty hiring process. They are currently working at the prestigious universities from where they graduated. Their universities all established probation–tenure systems, with open recruitment programmes and fierce employment competition. They all agreed that one of the most important reasons they were able to stay and work at prestigious universities was because of their supervisors' support and status.

Rabia and Kate are in situations where their male supervisors are the members of their department's recruitment selection committee and have the influence to sway the committee. When they were near the end of Ph.D, their supervisors directly offered them a position. In their cases, their universities not only recruit Ph.D graduates from other institutions but also have the capacity to place their own Ph.Ds in jobs. Van den Brink and Benschop (2014) explored gender networking practices in academic recruitment in the Netherlands and found that female candidates have less chance of succeeding in competition because they are often excluded from informal and formal networks with male gatekeepers. The term 'gatekeeper' refers to academics and others in universities who have the power to evaluate candidates through formal and informal networking and decide which candidates to interview and nominate. In Rabia and Kate's cases, their supervisors were the gatekeepers in their recruitment. Her networking practice may have started as early as her studies. Rabia mentioned that her advantage in the recruitment competition was that she had formed a good teacher-student relationship with her supervisor during her four years of study by participating in her supervisor's research projects and research team during her doctoral program. Rabia perceived this teacher-

student relationship as a capital. While being a woman can be a disadvantage in the academic market, Rabia's relationship with her supervisor put her ahead of her male counterparts who did not have the same support.

Helen also benefited from a university placement after graduation, but her situation differs from Rabia and Kate's. Helen's supervisor was deceased but was well-known and a founder of the department. His reputation and status allowed Helen and another female colleague to be offered positions in her department, even though her current head of department had a clear preference for recruiting male candidates. According to Helen's explanation, her current department is male-dominated. For example, all the leaders and managers of her department are men. And in the past eight years, the doctoral graduates recruited by Helen's department, apart from her and the female colleague appointed at the same time, were all men. Helen heard her head of department complaining privately when he was recruiting another female academic besides her. Helen told me: 'he said that find a female teacher and she will have a baby as soon as she comes in'. This made her realise that she was not whom the leadership wanted to hire. As Helen explained, she has neither outstanding research performance in doctoral education nor meets the leadership preferences of male candidates. The main reason her department accepted her and another female academic was the prestige of their supervisor. Helen's account challenges the fairness of the merit-based faculty-hiring pattern in today's Chinese universities. While all participants agreed on the fairness of merit-based hiring, Helen's experience reflected that hiring outcomes could be influenced by gender and other exogenous factors, such as the prestige of Ph.D.

Determining the childbearing times

As mentioned in Chapter 5, women academics' early careers often overlap with their reproduction. This phenomenon was reflected in the experiences of twelve participants with children, all of whom had their first child within the first five years of their academic careers. They shared similar perceptions and experiences in arranging childbearing. My study found that academic women often 'cleverly' pick times to give birth around the university calendar. Under the double pressure of teaching and research, they took advantage of flexible working hours to organise a reproductive plan to fit in with the university system. Stella described her whole 'planned pregnancy' in detail in our interview. I will mainly use her example to demonstrate the implementation of this strategy.

My participants took their 'working age' (which refers to the years of work in the workplace) into account when deciding when to have children. Stella reported that her childbearing time was planned and occurred in her third year of work. She did not dare or did not intend to have children in her first two years on the job because she thought the behaviour of having a child in the first two years was 'irresponsible for work' and 'your leaders may question your work attitudes'. She put forward the idea of the 'right childbearing time', which refers to the suitable times for women to give birth as responsible employees. From what she explained, academics who are new to research and teaching need to adapt to the new work environment and work content. Both men and women need to make efforts to meet fundamental standards of teaching and research work, including teaching fluently, having research publications and participating in research teams. In Stella's experience, meeting these standards requires at least two years of dedicated work. Therefore, Stella suggested that young academic women should demonstrate their work abilities and a keen 'work attitude' through two years of work commitment to be 'recognised' by leaders. Stella told me: 'you need to give your leader time to accept your pregnancy'. If women do not follow this process and work ethic but get pregnant as soon as they enter work as full-time academics, Stella said, 'your leader will definitely form some bad opinions about you, even if they do not complain in front of you.' Stella's account reflected that academic women might find it harder to receive recognition at work than men counterparts due to their reproduction. Therefore, delaying childbearing is not only a way to negotiate teaching loads and research pressure but also a strategy to demonstrate their work attitude. In other words, academic women need to actively demonstrate their work ethic through their reproductive decisions and gain their leaders' acceptance and appreciation by temporarily delaying childbearing in a way that men do not. Therefore, the right childbearing time seems to conceive a requirement that academic women need to, or at least appear to, put work first and then consider their reproduction needs after. This collides with the family's expectation to put families first and work second.

Considering and determining the right childbearing time combined with working years was only the first step in the planned pregnancy for academic women. To minimise disruption and adverse impact on work and to maximise the time they could spend caring for their newborns during breastfeeding, some academic women used flexible work arrangements to organise and complete a large amount of teaching before giving birth

and aimed to schedule childbirth and maternity leave during winter or summer holidays. In this study, seven participants, including Stella, had similar experiences with scheduling teaching loads to meet their childbirth. For example, from the day Gina realised she was pregnant, she scheduled most of the lessons, preparation, and assessment tasks for one university semester. Stella also communicated with her leader about her plans for post-pregnancy research projects and student competitions to demonstrate her work ethic. After that, she used vacation time for childbirth and postpartum recovery and returned to work in the new semester. Both Gina and Stella described academic women who were able to give birth during the holiday period as 'lucky'. Compared to others who may not have such 'lucky dates' for child delivery, they seemed to have advantages in their breastfeeding period, such as saving teaching time and commuting to take care of infants. A similar phenomenon of planning pregnancy and scheduling delivery dates at the end of a semester or holiday could also be seen among academic women in Canada, which Armenti (2004) described as 'may babies'. Coco, Emma, and Rabia, who are without children, also indicated that they expected to give birth on holiday and would try a similar birth plan. Rabia told me:

We are all thinking about the impact of having a baby on our research, such as how quickly we can transition to academic work after giving birth. So, it is important to plan ahead and schedule. Also, there are a lot of academic women giving birth during the holidays. Their successful experience is also worth learning.

Notably, through these reproductive planning and work arrangements, four participants voluntarily waived all or part of their maternity leave. In the years my participants gave birth, employed women had at least 98 days of maternity leave (including weekends), and a few regions, such as Shanghai, used to have a more extended maternity leave of 128 days. The maternity leave is now increased to 158 days in Shanghai and Beijing, which is in line with family planning of the three-child policy to address declining birth rates and an ageing population (Huang and Huang, 2021). In this study, Gina is the only one who gave up all 98 days of maternity leave for financial reasons. Gina explained the adverse effects of childbirth on academic women, including losing full-attendance bonuses. In today's higher education, research-teaching academics need to meet annual teaching and research benchmarks to receive the full amount of salary. Otherwise, their salary will be deducted accordingly. As evidenced by all participants who clearly

expressed their dissatisfaction with low academic salaries in our interviews, this deduction would undoubtedly make an already unsatisfactory income even worse. For example, the fee for each class at Gina's university is only 50 Chinese Yuan (about 6 GBP). Her teaching salary will be deducted if she fails to complete 260 lessons annually due to childbirth. Furthermore, if she takes maternity leave, she may lose additional year-end bonuses, such as the full-attendance bonus. Thus, Gina's parents have come to live with Gina since she was pregnant, helping her with housework and babysitting. At the time of our interview, Gina still needed domestic support from her family elders so that she would have time to do research.

However, while this planned process may reduce the teaching pressure for academic women during breastfeeding, my participants reported that this planned pregnancy led to work stress and health problems. For example, Gina mentioned that her heavy teaching load resulted in no extra time for research and private life during pregnancy. Ulla, Stella, and Faye noted that they felt that standing for hours in class and sitting sedentary in front of a computer were unhealthy for pregnant women and their fetuses. Gina and Helen shared that they had experienced considerable work-related stress during pregnancy and suffered postnatal depression. They often worried that their pregnancy would cause their colleagues and leaders to have bad impressions of them and be prejudiced against them or that the pregnancy would end their academic careers. They all agreed that their research activities were suspended for giving birth and taking care of infants.

Accessing academic networks

As discussed in Chapter 4, women face social constraints on their socialising, especially in male-dominated networking events, such as *yingchou*. One of the reasons why academic careers are generally considered suitable for women is that the social circle of this profession is small. In Chapter 5, I further analysed that acquiring horizontal projects often requires academics to participate in *yingchou*. Even though the benefits of *yingchou* were recognised by my participants, most of them chose to be self-excluded due to social constraints and family responsibilities. Stella was the only participant willing to participate in *yingchou* and drinking. In our interview, she mentioned the strategies she employed at these gatherings to increase her networking opportunities. Stella suggested that feminine beauty, such as makeup, may help women join men's social

interactions and increase women's chances of acquiring and participating in horizontal projects with enterprises. She told me:

In the workplace, many prominent women are outstanding in their ability and appearance. Maybe in the eyes of men, a woman's ability and a beautiful face or good temperament make men more willing to cooperate with them. Because it is business, why not do business with a beautiful woman? Women are not only attentive but also pleasing to the eye.

According to Zhang (2005), the network opportunities for male and female academics in Chinese universities are different, and that academic women face sociocultural barriers in establishing networks which inhibit them from advancing within the workplace. In Stella's opinion, women can and should use social constructions of feminine beauty to advance themselves in the workplace. However, this approach feeds into the narrative that what a woman looks like is more or as important as what they do, so it perpetuates an uneven playing field between men and women. It also assumes heterosexuality and reinforces heteronormativity in the workplace.

In addition to participating in men's social activities, *yingchou*, which may be inconvenient and culturally unacceptable for many women and potentially cause family conflict, my participants presented another way women can access and expand their social circles and improve their networking possibilities: establishing women-only academic activities. In this study, Tessa, Wendy, and Qiana shared similar experiences of regularly participating in women-only conferences, forums, and associated events. According to them, the women-only academic conferences they attend and their associated activities were formally initiated and supported by industry-funded organisations. For example, Tessa, Wendy, and Qiana are members of a global network organisation that organises annual conferences and regular events to support women engineers. Qiana and Wendy are also members of another computer technology organisation established in China. As part of its annual conference, the organisation held face-to-face forums, inviting female professors from China's prestigious universities or women in research positions in well-known tech companies to share their work experiences and perspectives.

Tessa used to serve as a district president for an organisation and had experience organising and hosting networking events for young women academics in computer science. She mentioned that women in computing fields are small in size, and they often lack the opportunities to meet and interact with each other. It is difficult for women academics, especially young academics, to build their own academic networks or integrate into existing academic networks in their daily work. In fact, the networking dilemmas of women academics reflected by Tessa extend beyond computer science and engineering, where women are underrepresented. Tessa explained that the main purpose of organising such networking events is to increase the opportunities for academic women to build *guanxi* with other women and help each other. In this way, women can better develop their academic careers. Tessa told me that she was very proud of being a district president, thus helping more young women academics in computer science because there were no such opportunities for women to establish networks when she was young. Tessa's experience shows that participating in women's networking events is beneficial for female professors to build their own academic networks and increase their influence in the field. As an event organiser and influential female professor in the field, Tessa's reputation helps to attract more women academics from other universities. Thus, she could know more women with similar research interests and have opportunities to collaborate on research publications with them.

Wendy also mentioned that she seeks to establish research collaborations through women's conferences and events. Her university and many other Chinese universities encourage academic faculty to have cross-field and cross-university collaboration. Vera explained that cross-institutional collaborative research is more likely to be selected and published. At the same time, Tessa's reputation and extensive experience in organising and participating in networking events could increase her opportunity to reach more capable male engineers from enterprises and industries. This way, she could have more opportunities to cooperate with enterprises on horizontal projects. As a result, she could gradually establish more extensive networks with researchers and engineers for her academic career and increase her reputation and influence in the field. In fact, Tessa was one of the three participants who led horizontal projects in this study. In her experience of cooperating with companies, there was no need to participate in *yingchou* and drinking because the companies found and invited her.

While a key function of these organisation-based academic conferences was for intellectual engagement and knowledge sharing, this study found that, in the affiliated women's conferences, an additional and important aspect of the network was the social support it provided to women. Olivia mentioned that she made female academic friends by attending conferences. Not only did they commit to sending articles to the same conference, but they also travelled together during each conference. Qiana mentioned that, although she did not establish personal contact with other women through this form, it was inspiring for her to listen to many successful female professors and academic leaders sharing their experiences. She felt the passion of others for scientific research, which made her feel less lonely on the road of research. She was also comforted and inspired by hearing about other academic women's career dilemmas and dealings. Qiana's words indicate that academic women may lack their peers' emotional support and role models in their day-to-day work at universities. The lack of high-ranking female role models in the academic work of women is also found in Zhang's (2010) research, and she suggests that this issue may put women at a disadvantage. My study suggests that women academics may seek female role models outside the formal university hierarchy as an alternative to high-ranking female role models in the workplace. Like Qiana, although she has reached associate professorship, she also needs female professors as role models as she pursues professorships. In a context where all participants agreed on the scarcity of female professors, it is inspiring for women to connect with a group of female professors within the same discipline and have similar work experiences. At such women-only conferences, academic women have the opportunity to seek female role models in the same research fields and learn about their experiences, which may help them build confidence and overcome obstacles in pursuing an academic career.

Furthermore, this study found that attending women-only academic conferences provides academic women with emotional support, friendship, role models and a sense of belonging, recognition, and appreciation. Olivia joined an organisation related to her research interests in social science. Although the conferences and events run by this organisation are not limited to women, virtually almost all participants are women who are either social workers or academics. Through this informal and interested-based communication with other women and presenting her research, Olivia felt that her research was recognised and appreciated by this group of women and generated a sense of belonging. She did not have the same feelings at university, partly because of the insufficient communication and recognition of research in her everyday work. Not just

Olivia but participants in the arts, humanities, and languages disciplines all agreed that they normally conduct research individually rather than collaboratively and that they rarely have the opportunity to discuss the content of their research in depth with university colleagues. This suggests that while universities focus on improving faculty research performance, they may neglect to establish useful communication channels for academic faculty. In our interview, Olivia noted that her research field was niche and unpopular in China and may receive insufficient recognition and even prejudice from society. She told me: 'someone will ask you, why are you studying this? Their real meaning is what is the use of studying this pointless topic.' Olivia's interpretation of her sense of belonging embraces solidarity among other academics in a similar situation to hers in order to rebel against society's prejudice against her discipline. Macoun and Miller's (2014) explored peer support networks based on Ph.D. students' participation in a feminist reading group in Australia. They suggested that peer support network fosters a community of belonging and resistance, enabling women to resist hostility. In Olivia's case, the prejudice and devaluation of her research, which occurs in her daily life and even on campus, make her pay more attention to making connections externally to the university at conferences. Thus, this group of women may be able to unite and resist the prejudice and environment in which they feel marginalised. As Olivia suggests to young academics in the unpopular field, learn to draw energy from this group of women and maintain your research interests and beliefs to help women through academic means.

However, such organisation-based academic conferences and affiliated women's activities appear to be limited to a few engineering-related disciplines. All other participants said they had not been exposed to any women-only academic activities. This may be because fewer women are in these engineering-related disciplines than others. Tessa explained that women in computer science were more looking forward to helping each other and building connections because they were underrepresented. Olivia provided another perspective that STEM disciplines typically receive more attention and funding, allowing for large conferences and women's events. Tessa organises local events for women in the field with funding from the organisation. However, although women in the arts, humanities, and languages make up a large proportion, they have only a few channels to connect with other academic women.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed common strategies employed by women academics in dealing with heavy domestic workloads and their disadvantaged positions at work. My research found that although women are generally seen as the primary housekeepers and caregivers of the family, women academics attempt to bargain by assuming the part of the breadwinner role in exchange for their husbands' time commitment to demanding domestic work. My research shows that the husband's occupation has an impact on the housework division between dual-career couples. Compared to husbands working outside of higher education, husbands holding academic jobs in universities were more likely to be involved in housework and childcare. When one partner is going through a difficult time at work, academic couples help each other to allow the other partner to focus on their work and career development without having to divert their attention to family work. This suggests that the private and professional lives of both people in a dual-career academic couple are interconnected, which echoes the findings of Vohlídalová (2017).

Furthermore, my research echoes that of Ren and Caudle's (2016) in that female academics tend to use personal-level strategies to deal with work-life imbalance. For example, when women deal with reproduction overlapping their early careers, they like to adopt a childbirth planning strategy. They use their flexible working hours to complete their teaching and arrange their childbirth during university holidays.

In terms of gender inequality in academic careers, my research found that *guanxi* (relationship) is helpful for women to improve their status. For example, in addressing possible discrimination in academic recruiting, women academics could obtain academic positions through their *guanxi* (relationship) with supervisors. At the same time, I argue that participating in women's conferences is conducive to establishing working relationships among women academics, leading to increased academic co-operation. Socialising with other women does not violate the gender norms of society for women.

Chapter 7. Conclusion

Introduction

This thesis explores the gender experiences of women in academic careers in Chinese higher educational institutions. Drawing upon semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 20 academic women from 14 different universities and 11 different disciplines (including management, social science, medicine, and computer science) across China, I focused on three key issues. Firstly, I explored the reasoning behind women's career choices. Secondly, I examined the realities of academic women in their day-to-day work and life. Finally, I explored academic women's coping strategies for addressing various difficulties at work and at home, which can also help them improve their status in the private and public spheres.

In this conclusion, I will start with a self-reflection on my research journey. Then, I will discuss the main findings of my research on Chinese academic women, focusing on their work and family life. Finally, I will discuss the research limitations and recommendations for future studies.

Self-reflection

Looking back on the past four years, my doctorate journey was enjoyable because this research not only helped my development as a researcher but also made me reflect on myself as an individual. During the research process, I constantly reflected on my own life experiences and found that the life stories of my participants chimed with my own life trajectory. When I hear my participants' stories, I recall my own experiences and empathise with some of theirs, especially when I have had similar experiences. Jayaratne (1983) states that semi-structured interviews are widely used in feminist research because they can 'convey a deeper feeling for or more emotional closeness to the persons studied' (p.145). While interviewing Betty, I resonated with her experience studying abroad and her ideas about singleness and marriage. Betty's experiences also strengthened my confidence to live and choose according to my views on marriage and lifestyle. Betty is the only participant who expressed that she wishes to remain unmarried. She mentioned that the experience of living alone overseas made her confident about staying unmarried. Although she faces the pressure of being urged to marry after work

by her family, she is confident in herself and knows that what she wants is a life with her own space and a long-distance relationship, not marriage and children. During our interview, I was very touched by Betty's words because I held similar views to her. I think that during my Ph.D., I dealt with many difficulties in life on my own, and those experiences gave me the confidence to express my expectation to remain unmarried, which is entirely different from my family's view that women need to get married. I was lucky to meet a like-minded woman academic through this research, and I also became friends with Betty.

According to Heikkinen (2002), the production of human knowledge relies on personal interactions and dialogues based on their present and past experiences. This resonates with me with the progression of my research process. The experiences of my academic participants have helped me think about my career options, especially whether I still want to pursue an academic career in China. This research made me reflect on the fact that I once regarded an academic career as ideal, partly due to the influence of parents and social expectations for women. Through this research, I found that a stable and flexible academic career that is perceived as women-friendly may lead to women's heavy family responsibilities and family-work conflict in daily life. The demanding nature and tightening requirements for university academics also made me realise that this career is not necessarily women-friendly. These realities have lowered my confidence in pursuing an academic career in China.

In my shaken state of mind, I am grateful to my participants for sharing their experiences with me, as they all have been down this road before. Especially thanks to them for admonishing me to avoid some foreseeable difficulties women face in their academic careers. Olivia advised me not to give up an academic career for fear of stress. She explained that even though women face more difficulties at academic work than men, they still find ways to overcome them. In my interview with Stella, she used herself as an example to advise young women academics, like me, not to be afraid of the pressures of early careers; young academic women can demonstrate work enthusiasm and research ability to the leaders, participate in more research projects, and make a plan for childbirth and resume research. Tessa also suggested that I communicate and learn from professors early in my career because the information obtained may greatly help my research and career development. I consider them to be my role models for my potential future academic career. Their encouragement and advice made me feel that

they regarded me as a 'potential insider' of academia and made me want to pursue an academic career in the future. Having reflected on my feelings in undertaking this project, I will now conclude with the main findings of my research.

Career 'choices' for women academics

Choosing to become an academic woman may seem like a personal choice, but the factors behind the choice are gendered from the start. One of the contributions of this study is to fully demonstrate the career decision-making experiences of women academics and the rationale behind their career choices. My participants repeatedly mentioned three Chinese words to explain why they chose an academic career: *wending* (job stability and security), *linghuo* (flexible work schedules) and *danchun* (safe, pure, simple work routine and fewer professional relationships with men). My participants conveyed how these terms were used by their family members and acquaintance to persuade them to choose an academic career. These persuasions occur as early as during university entrance application. For example, three participants accepted their family's persuasion to choose teaching-related and Normal universities that train teachers. Another two participants reported that their parents decided on the universities and disciplines for them. Their experiences reflect that women's choices of academic careers are likely to be directly or indirectly influenced by their families.

According to the work-family alignment framework, women working as academics in Chinese universities are functionally and ideologically compatible with society's expectations for women to serve as primary caregivers and housekeepers. Kang, Park and Park (2020) developed the theoretical concept of work-family alignment by investigating the daily work and family experience of South Korean female teachers (from reception to high school). They suggested that teaching jobs could allow women to combine work and family functionally and ideologically. For example, teaching roles are seen as not conflicting with women's role as mothers, and female teachers are expected to disproportionately support their own children's education. Therefore, unlike other professional women, where there are often conflicts between work and family, teaching and motherhood are seen as complementary rather than conflictive (Kang, Park and Park, 2020). My study argues that Chinese women are under similar social pressures and face similar expectations when choosing an academic career because this career is seen as enabling women to fulfil their family responsibilities during their professional lives.

Firstly, stability and flexibility are two reasons my participants stated for why academic careers are popular with women in China. This study argues that stability and flexibility in employment are widely viewed as important to women, as it appears to functionally support female academics in reconciling work and family. Xie (2019) reports that marital intimacy is a major concern for women academics when making decisions about work, and the key to maintaining marital intimacy is to follow the traditional gender division of labour. My study echoes that of Xie's (2019). My data show that female academics are expected to follow traditional gender divisions of labour when choosing a career as they are naturally seen as the primary caregivers and housekeepers of the family, given their job security and flexibility. My study corroborates Zhang's (2000) argument that university academic work provides flexibility and stability for women, which enable them to fulfil women's traditional obligations of 'supporting husband and educating sons'.

Compared to many working women in other occupations who face the risk of being fired for giving birth, women in academic careers have a higher level of job stability and security, especially for those in the *Bianzhi* system (permanent employment). More than half of the participants cited *bianzhi* as their primary reason for choosing an academic career, partly due to the disadvantaged status of women in the Chinese job market. Two participants reported that their parents' experiences in the labour market directly impacted their choice of academic career and *bianzhi*. Chinese workers without *bianzhi* were more likely to be laid off than those with *bianzhi* in the 1990s, and women were more likely to be laid off than men. Liu (2007) discussed mothers' experience of 'returning home' because of redundancy and the impact on daughters, such as daughters' desire to avoid repeating their mothers' lives of being laid off. A similar impact can be seen in 2 of my participants, who emphasised the importance of *bianzhi*. My research shows that part of the reason women choose academic careers and value life-long employment is that women are aware of women's overall disadvantage in the labour market.

Secondly, this study shows that women working as academics in Chinese universities are ideologically compatible with the social expectations of a good woman. These expectations can be seen from another repeated Chinese term, *danchun*, a concoction of simple, pure and safe.

My research has found that women academics describe their academic work and university environment as *danchun* and suitable for women to work in part because less office politics and smaller social circles make women feel less overt and openly discriminated against in their day-to-day work. Based on my interview data, women academics have the most contact with students in their daily work. They have little communication with colleagues because academics can work from home most of the time. Women's social circles tend to be comprised of other women who also work in academia and have less contact with people outside academia. These small circles give women a sense of equality, friendliness and security when interacting with people who are also highly educated.

Additionally, my research shows that women academics feel safe in their daily teaching, research work, and work-related social networks because academic careers often have less *yingchou*. Many women academics also choose to self-exclude from *yingchou*. The term *yingchou*, which means business entertainment, usually includes banquets, where copious amounts of alcohol are consumed in rounds of toasting, and sometimes even sexual entertainment (Yang, 2002; Uretsky, 2008; Osburg, 2013; Mason, 2013; Osburg, 2016). *Yingchou* has become essential to conducting business in China, as men can build trust and cultivate *guanxi* (relationship) in the ritualised process of business entertainment (Yang, 2002; Qi, 2013; Bian and Zhang, 2014; Barbalet, 2018). Women are clearly disadvantaged at such male-dominated banquets, as women are sexualised in the interaction (Liu, 2016). Mason (2013) notes that women may be encouraged to play an active part in toasting and drinking and often need to tolerate sexual jokes at their expense in *yingchou*. My research adds on academic women's perceptions of *yingchou* and their practices. Recognising that corporate work is likely to involve unfriendly *yingchou*, my participants largely agreed that academic careers are safer for women. This safety concern is one of the main reasons why they choose academic careers over other occupations. One participant with work experience in enterprise reported the unfriendly behaviours, dirty jokes and sexist language at the banquets, which led to her choosing to switch from a business work to an academic career. Most of my participants choose to self-exclude from *yingchou* to protect themselves, especially activities involving drinking and the presence of men. Only one participant expressed a willingness to participate in *yingchou* in order to obtain more opportunities for project cooperation. But at the same time, she also mentioned that she can protect herself and had her family's consent. Married participants with children also reported their self-

exclusion because of demanding family work, especially since they are responsible for helping their children with homework at night.

Furthermore, this study finds that women's self-exclusion in *yingchou* and avoidance of interaction with men at work are also due to cultural constraints. According to my interview data, there is still a strong gender belief that it is not appropriate for women to drink, participate in *yingchou* or go on business trips with men. If a woman violates these taboos, it will be harmful to her reputation and likely to negatively impact family harmony, especially causing condemnation from her parents and in-laws and dissatisfaction from her husband. This cultural constraint is consistent with the findings of Cooke (2003) who suggested that, in China, 'where it is almost taboo for a man and a woman to form a close working relationship' (Cooke, 2003, p. 330). The level of intimacy that naturally arises in working relationships, including friendships, is considered inappropriate, and sometimes misrepresented as adultery. Such adultery rumours can ruin one's reputation and career (Yang, 1996). To prevent this risk, academic women often tend to avoid unnecessary contact with men in their day-to-day work, especially the male-dominated *yingchou*. For example, Wendy reported that women's frequent participation in work-related entertainment and business trips with men will affect their personal reputation, and they will be judged as bad women by others.

Notably, this study suggests that the academic profession is in line with culturally constrained and normative gender norms, and ideologically conforms to the image of good women in China. My research has found that women are persuaded by their families to consider whether a career will affect their reputation when choosing a career. In the case of Coco, when her parents persuaded her to switch to an academic career, they mentioned that her previous job in the enterprise required frequent business trips and *yingchou*, which was not good for her reputation. Women themselves consider a small social circle, fewer business trips, and fewer *yingchou* to be more conducive to family harmony when choosing academic careers. According to my interview data, women often need permission from their families to socialise with other men, especially the consent of their husband. For example, Stella emphasised that she participated in *yingchou* because of her husband's trust and family's consent. My participants' experiences of self-exclusion at social events where men were present draw my attention to the women's virtue, and sexual purity, in traditional Chinese culture. Du and Mann (2003) suggest that sexual purity refers to absolute fidelity to the husband. Therefore, I

argue that the less socialisation of women academics at every work is also in line with society's expectations of good wives.

Overall, my research shows that societal expectations influence academic women's career choices and decisions. Baker (2010) mentioned that women's employment 'choices' are influenced by family arrangements and attitudes towards being a 'good mother'. For Chinese academic mother, the social expectation is gendered and rests on the assumption that academic women are expected to better serve their families as good wives and mothers while working full-time. Examining the experiences of academic women reveals a different reality from social expectations.

Demanding family work

According to my interview data, women are expected to choose academic careers because they align with society's expectations for women to fulfil their family responsibilities. Under such social expectations, my research shows that getting married and having children are not purely personal choices and decisions but more social expectations for women. My participants reported similar experiences of being urged to get married or being urged to give birth by their parents and acquaintances. In this study, twelve participants were married and had children, five were unmarried, and three were married but did not have children at the time of our interviews. Recent research has investigated the stigma of unmarried, well-educated career women in Chinese culture as 'leftover women', which leads to increased pressure on working women from both the public and private spheres (To, 2013; Hong Fincher, 2016; Ji, 2015; Gui, 2020). Although this term was banned by the All-China Women's Federation in 2017, it is still widely visible in public discourse (Sina, 2022; Zheng and Xu, 2022). For example, many participants naturally used the term 'leftover women' in our interviews to describe female colleagues who wanted to marry but could not find a match. My research has similar findings that the culture of pressuring single women into marriage is an ever-present problem felt by single academic women in China. Most participants considered marriage and childbirth to be natural steps in the development of their life course, while agreeing that marriage urging culture was unfriendly to women. Only one participant reported her willingness to remain single, explaining that her Western education and overseas experiences influenced her.

My participants' experiences show that women are under social expectation to marry and have children at a young age, even though female academics typically have spent many years in education. You and Nussey (2022, p. 1070) suggest that 'not being 'over' educated parallels not becoming 'leftover' as a source of virtue for women'. They found that women with a master's degree are regarded as 'ideal' women because they are able to be wives and mothers in their early and mid-20s, while their higher education can be used in raising and educating their child. In contrast, women pursuing Ph.D. are generally considered to be at high risk of becoming 'leftover women' as their age increase through years of study (Qian and Qian, 2014). My research also shows that there is a conflict between women's education and social expectations, such as Luna's parents would 'help' arrange blind dates for Luna during her Ph.D. Living in a culture that forces single women to marry, my research shows that women's parents can be both perpetrators and victims. For example, Luna's parents urged their daughter to get married whilst under criticism from their relatives because their daughter chose to study for a doctorate instead of getting married.

In addition, my research suggests that women academics are often expected to take on more family responsibilities after marriage because their stable and flexible academic careers enable them to take care of the family. In this context, my research explores the daily methods women use to meet social expectations of putting family first. According to my interview data, having a workplace geographically close to home contributes to a stable academic career. Academic women have fixed workplaces and have less business travel, leading women to establish a stable family-oriented daily pattern. According to Daisy and Olivia, married women academics with children often follow a triangular movement pattern in their daily lives. They shuttle between university offices, home and kindergarten/school. This is because picking up and dropping off children is usually the mother's responsibility, not the father's. In order to better save commuting time between the three locations, women academics also consider choosing a kindergarten near their workplaces or homes.

Furthermore, women academics with children are also more likely to organise their daily work schedules according to the needs of the children. The short distance between the workplace, home and kindergarten make their arrangements feasible. Some participants proposed the term 'helicopter mothers' to describe mothers with a child-centred daily routine. This term comes from 'helicopter parent', which means overparenting (Segrin et

al., 2012; Zong and Hawk, 2022). Compared with other working women who have no fixed workplace and often travel, my research found that the short distance between the workplace, home and children's school, combined with flexible working hours, may force women academic to become family-oriented and child-centred. For example, my participants mentioned that their contributions, such as picking up and dropping off their children, are taken for granted by their families. Compared to women academics, male academics with children are less involved in daily pick-up and drop-off, and they can also be away from home for an extended period for work. In the case of Helen, she helplessly accepted the traditional division of labour after giving birth because she needed to take care of the children while her academic husband could visit abroad. Based on Helen's experience, it seems that women's careers often require stability, such as being close to the family and arranging their work and rest time around the family, while men's academic careers do not have such requirements. My research shows that it is socially acceptable for academic husbands to prioritise their careers and leave their families for a period of time for work, whereas women academics are expected to put family first by practicing the three-point movement pattern in daily basis. Therefore, this study suggests that the division of labour between the man and the woman has not changed in dual-earner families in today's China, even when couples are both working in universities as academics.

Flexible working hours— a double-edged sword

Universities are known to have flexible working hours, academics are not required to be in the office from 9 am to 5 pm like most occupations, and they have greater freedom in allocating hours for their research. The flexible working hour arrangement is widely considered supportive for working women in balancing their work and family demands (Chen, 2006; Dulk and Van Doorne-Huiskes, 2007; Allen et al., 2013). My research found that unmarried women academics could enjoy this flexible time because they can better devote themselves to research and arrange their work to align with their lifestyles. However, flexible working hours are a double-edged sword for married participants, especially those with children.

As Qi and Dong (2016) reported, most Chinese working women have to schedule their domestic chores immediately before or after work, and overtime working culture shortens their time to perform family work. The situation reported by Qi and Dong (2016) may vary according to the characteristics of the workplace. For example, my study shows that

women academics are able to deal with family matters during traditional fixed working hours of 9 am to 5 pm through flexible work hour arrangements. For married women with children, flexible working hours also meant that their working hours could be better adapted to fit around their children's schooling times, which many other occupations cannot provide. As kindergartens and elementary schools in China usually close earlier, female academics often choose to avoid the 8-10 am and 3-5 pm time slots to schedule classes so that they can pick up and drop off their children. Since only a few other occupations offer such stability and flexibility for women, it is easy to associate university academic work with 'woman-friendly'. More specifically, 'mother-friendly' work.

One of the significant findings of my study is that academic women use their time flexibility to schedule pregnancy and childbirth. In this study, seven participants shared similar experiences of planning pregnancy and scheduling teaching loads to meet their delivery days. Women first need to plan their pregnancies and try to schedule their due date during university holidays (summer and winter holidays). This is because there are no classes during the holidays, and academics can work from home. Then, they need to complete a significant amount of teaching in the semester before giving birth. They do this to minimise the disruption and adverse effects of childbirth on work and to maximise the time they spend caring for their newborn while breastfeeding. With the above arrangement, four participants reported voluntarily giving up all or part of their maternity leave, one of which was for financial reasons. However, this pregnancy arrangement is accompanied by a huge teaching burden and physical and mental pressure, which is not conducive to the fetus's and pregnant women's health. At the same time, women academics are under pressure to reach research requirements. This is incredibly challenging for women in 'publish or perish' system because no matter how long their research is suspended due to childbirth or maternity leave, they must complete the research requirements within the contract period. Otherwise, they will face the risk of not being able to renew their contract. Therefore, I agree with Zhang (2018) that flexible working arrangements in China tend to favour employers instead of employees. In other words, employee-controlled flexible scheduling is designed to increase academic output, not to help women balance work and parenting time or childbearing.

The downside of flexible working hours is that it reinforces social expectations of women fulfilling their roles as housewives and caregivers, and forces academic women to prioritise family time over work. Married female academics tend to spend more time at

home in their daily lives and often have difficulty balancing time devoted to work and family. In Vera's case, her flexible working hours even became an excuse for her husband to defer all household chores to her and take her contributions for granted. This study found that married women academics take more time off to deal with family emergencies than their husbands, even when the husbands also have academic careers. In Stella's case, if there was a time conflict between her and her academic husband, she usually took time off. Some family emergencies last for extended periods and require multiple leaves. In the cases of Olivia's academic friend, she was responsible for providing instant care to her hospitalised in-laws for weeks, while her husband continued to work without interruption. In the Confucian tradition of filial piety, young couples are expected to respect and take care of their parents and in-laws (Strom et al., 1996). Due to the lack of siblings (The '4-2-1' family structure created by the one-child policy), caring responsibilities for four family elders (parents and parents-in-law) are shared between the young working couples (Zhang, 2018; Xian et al., 2022). However, my study suggests that married women academics are the primary caregivers of the family and that they physically engage in activities consistent with filial piety. Women's flexible working hours allow the husband to leave a large proportion of daily housework and care work to academic wives.

Additionally, this study identified some of the main causes of family-to-work conflicts in female academics' daily lives, mainly the growing family expectations and the lack of family's sympathy. My research found that women's academic career is often devalued to simple and easy jobs by their parents, in-laws, and husbands. In Vera's case, working overtime at night to research and read literature is considered a waste of time by her husband. In Ulla's case, her parents-in-law take Ulla picking up the children and doing housework daily for granted. In the absence of understanding and sympathy from their families, some women academics, such as Ulla, has to devote more time to completing extra housework in order to reduce family conflicts. In the case of Daisy, her academic husband not only did not help with any housework at home during the lockdown, but was also picky about Daisy's housework. This study suggests that due to flexible working hours, female academics are more likely to undertake a larger proportion of housework and childcare in their families and to do so according to family standards, and their efforts are often taken for granted by their family members.

Overall, my study found that women academics retain primary responsibilities for

housework, childcare and filial obligation, revealing the gender inequality that persists within today's dual-earner households. This study adds to the existing literature on how women academics take advantage of time flexibility in their daily lives and in special times such as pregnancy. This flexible working hour is a double-edged sword for women academics, especially for those with children. On the one hand, time flexibility is functionally beneficial for academic women to fulfil their family responsibilities.

Flexible working hours include flexible research hours, relative ease of taking leaves, and cancelling or adjusting course times. Women academics are able to use time flexibility to deal with family emergencies and the needs of their children promptly. On the other hand, this time flexibility of academic career deepens social expectations for academic women to fulfil their domestic responsibilities. Married academic women are primarily responsible for caring for parents, in-laws, and children in dual-career households. Sometimes, they are forced to be the sole caregivers in the family while their husbands are free from all household tasks.

Women's responsibility in children's education

This study analysed the social expectations for women academics in the role of mothers in contemporary Chinese higher education and found that women academics face demanding domestic work in their daily lives in educating their children. My research echoes that of Zhang (2021), arguing that the responsibility of Chinese mothers is not only to feed and care for their children, but also to educate them, such as delicately planning, arranging, implementing, and monitoring their children's daily lives and education. My research adds that women academics are seen as bringing educational capital into their families, including their job benefit and knowledge, and they are often regarded as substitute teachers at home, using their knowledge to help children with homework to a high standard and planning their children's future. In this study, thirteen participants reported their daily involvement in children's education and caring, eleven of whom had similar experiences of supervising and tutoring children's homework after finishing work. At the time of the interview, the youngest child of my participants was too young for kindergarten, and the oldest child was in high school. Gina and Helen's children were less than two years old. Although they did not mention their daily participation in children's education, but they reported their child-centred routines. The remaining eight participants did not have children at the time of interviews, so no related experiences were mentioned.

Firstly, my research found that women academics, when choosing to work at a university, are likely to consider whether the university provides affiliated kindergartens and schools for their children. Some universities in China have reputable affiliated kindergartens and schools for children of academic faculty as job benefits. Faculty's children can be admitted to these reputable affiliated kindergartens and schools without needing to participate in the fierce competition for admission. Women academics may choose to work for universities with this benefit over better-ranked universities that do not. In this study, three participants reported that their children attended university-affiliated kindergartens or schools. Although this benefit is not explicitly designed to help women academics balance work and parenting, male academics can also enjoy this benefit. My participants emphasised the importance of this benefit for women, as women academics are often primarily responsible for their children's education.

In Gina's case, her male academic friends persuaded her to choose a university with affiliated schools. In his understanding, women should keep their children at the centre and devote themselves to their children's daily life after marriage and childbirth rather than career development. Gina gave up an opportunity to get into a better university to work because her current university can guarantee her child's school admission, which could reduce her pressure in daily tutoring her child and investment in her child's education consumption. Gina's academic husband, however, could go to a higher ranked university and leave the day-to-day parenting and educational responsibilities to Gina. The attractiveness of reputable affiliated kindergartens and schools to women academics is related to the intensified competition for education in China and the fact that mothers tend to take on more responsibility for educating their children (Zhang, 2021). Based on Gina's case, my study argues that the fierce competition in children's education has a greater impact on women's choice of career and workplace because women are often the ones who consider children's schooling and are responsible for day-to-day education.

Secondly, my research also found that education competition not only affects women's choice of work, but even affects their daily life in educating their children. Recent studies show that competition for educational opportunities in primary and secondary education and even kindergarten education is intense (Luo and Wendel, 1999; Wu, 2013; Lin, 2019), and competition for educational opportunities at elite universities is even fiercer (Kai, 2012; Liu et al., 2018). For example, for most students, their test scores and their

score rankings will directly affect whether they can enter prestigious secondary schools or prestigious universities. At the same time, educational competitions include whether students have 'special abilities' in English, Mathematical Olympiad, Art, Sports, etc., which are also reflected through competition results (Kai, 2012). My study shows that women academics are often child-centred, investing a lot of time and emotion at home while working full-time.

On the one hand, academic career enables women to align their roles as mothers and teachers in positive ways. Married participants with children largely agreed that academic mothers should participate in their children's education, because their knowledge and participation will improve their children's academic performance, thereby improving their children's competitiveness in the competition for admission. Tessa uses her knowledge to help her high-school child improve academic performance, such as monitoring and even tutoring her child's homework on a daily basis. In addition, Tessa's research and knowledge of computer science is also used to develop her child's software design skills and help her child participate in computer-related competitions. Therefore, her participation in the child's education is beneficial to the child's academic performance and cultivates the child's 'special ability', thus helping her child to gain an advantage in the educational competition of prestigious universities. In the case of Kate and Stella, not only did they agree that women should prioritise their children's education over academic work, but they also described their daily routines of arranging and physically participating in their children's educational activities. Their involvement in their child's education begins even before the child enters kindergarten. Kate attached great importance to her interactive learning experience with young child, such as teaching her child literacy every night and accompanying her child to participate in special-interest classes. Stella is responsible for supervising her primary school child's homework every night, checking for mistakes, and helping her child correct mistakes. She is also responsible for making plans for her child's weekends and holidays, such as taking her child to participate in out-of-school education every weekend, including mathematics, English and piano classes, and monitoring and implementing the schedules according to her plans. My participants' experiences reflect that the roles of academic mothers as teachers and guardians in the family sphere, which echo to the findings of Tao (2016) and Zhang (2021). This study suggests that a mother's functions increase from caring for children to educating children, including devoting a lot of time to the careful planning, arrangement, execution and supervision of children's education.

On the other hand, my study found that women's academic work leads them to be expected to raise children with high academic performance. Women academics are under social expectations to be devoted in children's daily life and education activities and play the roles of teachers and guardians, otherwise they are more likely to be blamed by their families for not helping their children with homework or for their children's test scores dropping. In the case of Kate and Stella, they often accompany their children for a long time, help with their education, and conduct their academic research after their children are asleep. In contrast, their academic husbands are usually able to take work home and devote their time and energy to academic research in the evenings and weekends in order to make more money. Their academic husbands are less likely to be blamed for their children's academic performance. Western literature on academic motherhood refers to the concept of 'working mothers' guilt', describing that academic mothers often feel guilty because they feel that they spend too little time with their children or spend too little time on their research (Fothergill and Feltey, 2003; Ward and Wolf-Wendel, 2004). Similar findings were noted in my research on academic mothers in China. In the case of Olivia, if she was not involved in supervising her children's homework at night because of her academic research, if her children were not performing well in school, then she would be criticised by her family as an irresponsible mother. At the same time, she would have a strong sense of guilt for spending too little time with her child.

According to Olivia and Faye, their children's academic performance correlates to the value of an academic mother. An academic mother is considered a successful woman if her children achieve good grades and are admitted to prestigious universities. At the same time, the father's value is unlikely to be linked to their children. According to Chao (2000), Chinese parenting is largely rooted in Confucian ideas of training and '*guan*' ([管] discipline), that Chinese parents require continuous guidance and monitor their children's development. Even till today, Chinese parents attach importance to parent-child teaching interactions in daily activities (Luo, Tamis-LeMonda and Song, 2013). However, my study shows a different standard of motherhood and fatherhood of academics in children's education. Sun and Moreno (2021) suggest that Chinese mothers provide more learning-focused support to their children and devote more time and energy to engage in children's everyday maths learning activities. My research also shows that women devote much more time to children's education than men do, even if their husbands are also academics. Zhang (2021) argues that mothers become the

decision-makers of their children's lives, reflecting the equality of men and women in the family. My research disproves this notion. I think that academic women are expected and required by society to fulfil their educational responsibilities for their children, which shows that there is still a gender division of labour in the family, and there is gender inequality in sharing child care and educational responsibilities.

Demanding teaching and research work

In the contemporary Chinese labour market, excessive working hours are prevalent, known as the '996' work schedule. The ideal worker is often regarded as those who demonstrate 'commitment' to long working hours (Zhang, 2018). Recent studies criticise such work intensification associated with overtime culture and heavy work demands as a source of work-life conflict for Chinese workers (Cooke and Jing, 2009; Xiao and Cooke, 2012; He and Wu, 2021). In the case of academic women, this study shows that work intensification associated with long working hours and multiple job responsibilities is a major barrier for women trying to balance work and family. All my participants need to complete teaching and meet annual research benchmarks simultaneously. The time allocation between different work contents is limited, but teaching and teaching-related tasks severely squeeze the time available for research.

All participants reported that teaching is burdensome, time-consuming, stressful, and that it affects the time they spend conducting research. Their teaching hours vary from eight to fourteen hours per week but require much extra time to prepare, mark assignments and guide students through experiments. Due to the imbalance of academics to student ratio in Chinese universities, one academic is responsible for several classes and a large number of students in each course. One participant reported that she covered two courses, but these courses involved 150 assignments per week, all marked by herself. During some busy periods, such as after mid-term and final exams, her marking tasks can take more than 40 hours to complete. Thus, this study argues that teaching alone could be considered a full-time job for academics.

This study explored whether there are gender differences in the process of assigning courses, course preparation and while teaching students. The results of the interview data indicated that there are no gender differences in course assignments. Normally, classes are distributed evenly to each academic faculty member. Experienced

academics tend to have more autonomy in choosing their preferred courses, regardless of gender. Newcomers have no choice but to take on new or unfamiliar courses. Half of the participants had similar experiences, taking courses that did not exactly match their academic specialty, increasing the preparation time needed. For experienced academics, such as professors, they agreed that teaching is less stressful for them, but other teaching-related tasks, such as supervising students' dissertations, tend to take up a lot of work and personal time. Recent research primarily focuses on Chinese academic faculty research demands (Tian and Lu, 2017; Li and Shen, 2020; Peng, 2020). My study adds to this literature by highlighting the demands of teaching. My participants, especially those in their earlier careers (although not exclusively), spoke of heavy teaching loads, which create major challenges leading to them struggling to meet research requirements.

A recent study by Peng (2020) included a comparison of teaching and research time between male and female academics. Based on an online questionnaire survey, Peng (2020) found that academic women spend less time on research than their male counterparts, but there is no significant difference between academic women and men in the time they spend teaching. My findings challenge those of Peng (2020). Conducted through semi-structured interviews with twenty academic women, I found that academic women generally perceive themselves spending more time teaching than their male colleagues. They believed women are more patient with students and pay more attention to detail during course preparation, while men pursue higher social and economic status, which could be achieved by focusing on and increasing research publication. Also, as women have additional family responsibilities, being the primary housekeeper and caregiver, after completing their teaching demands, they are unable to dedicate as much time to research as men.

Academic motherhood penalty

Academic motherhood provides a lens to examine academia as an inequality regime (Acker, 2006). A growing body of study has explored women's experiences of motherhood penalty in academia, including academic mothers' difficulties in work–life balance (Gilbert, 2008; Baker, 2010; Ward and Wolf-Wendel, 2012; Dickson, 2018; Thun, 2020) and academic mothers' difficulties in obtaining promotions and/or tenure (Acker and Armenti, 2004; Hirakata and Daniluk, 2009; Klocker and Drozdowski, 2012; Ward and Wolf-Wendel, 2016; Lutter and Schröder, 2020). Recent studies in China also

suggest that having a child exacerbates gender inequality in the Chinese labour market, including motherhood wage penalty (Zhang and Hannum, 2015; Mu and Xie, 2016; Zhao, 2018; Yu and Xie, 2018; Shen, 2022), career development penalty (Zhang, Hou and Wang, 2022), motherhood health penalty and work-life balance (Bao et al., 2021; Jiang and Yang, 2022). However, research on academic women's experience of the motherhood penalty in the Chinese context is rare. This study explored the combination of academic career and motherhood in the Chinese context, providing new empirical data for gender and organisation by gaining insight into how gender affects individual women's academic careers.

Career development penalty

This study explores the experiences of academic women and finds that being a mother is the most prominent factor influencing women's career development. Overlap of early career and childbearing further exacerbates career development penalty for academic mothers.

Firstly, my interviews reinforce previous research, suggesting that discrimination against women in university recruitment increases female Ph.D holders' difficulty in finding academic jobs in universities in China (Zhao, 2008; Ji, 2014; Zhang and Gan, 2016). Existing literature offers two explanations for understanding gender discrimination in recruitment: taste-based and statistical discrimination. Statistical discrimination is generally caused by employers making predictions about individuals' productivity based on the individual's characteristic and rationally favouring and recruiting candidates with higher expected productivity (Arrow, 1972; Phelps, 1972; Aigner and Cain, 1977). In contrast, taste-based discrimination is where employers' make no assumptions about an individual's productivity and simply distaste for hiring because of an individual's characteristics, such as gender and race (Becker, 1971). My research shows that both forms of discrimination are present in academic recruiting in China, with pregnancy and childbirth being factors that drive our results on gender discrimination in academic recruitment. My participants report that men are more likely to be hired when men and women have the same competitive conditions (e.g. academic qualification and research publications). Ulla reported that even when women have better academic performance than men, men still have an advantage over women in the academic market.

In addition, this study argues that statistical discrimination varies with women's age. A study by Zhang et al. (2021) explored gender discrimination in the recruitment of college graduates in China, suggesting that recruiters generally do not take into account the maternity status of female college graduates when recruiting because women who just graduated from colleges are approximately 21–22 years old. They will often work for a few years before getting married. It has been reported that the average age for the first marriage in China is 28 years old in 2022 (China News, 2022; Liu and Zu, 2022). My research found that unmarried female Ph.D holders faced more prominent discrimination in recruitment than married women with children. This is because unmarried female Ph.D holder are assumed to marry and have children soon after starting their academic careers, as most Ph.D holders start their academic careers around the age of 30. Recruiters predict that women's life events lead to lower research productivity and research suspension, and stereotype women as family-oriented, rationally favouring male candidates with a higher expected productivity, resulting in gender discrimination. According to two participants' experiences of interviewing candidates for their department, my research found that academic recruiters who practice statistical discrimination can be both men and women, such as Olivia and Helen's male department head. Olivia explained that the total amount of research publications of a discipline directly determines whether the discipline can obtain more funding from the university to develop, thereby favouring men who can constantly devote themselves to work. Olivia's account reflects the existence of structural gender bias in Chinese universities, as gender stereotypes affect the assessment of women's productivity. Female Ph.D holders may use strategies such as early childbearing and self-declaration as married with children to increase their chances of being hired, according to Ulla's observation of her supervised female doctoral students, which echoes to Xie (2019). However, none of my participants used the strategy of advancing childbirth. Therefore, this research fills in the missing gaps of gender discrimination in academic recruitment in the Chinese context, arguing that the merit-based admissions approach taken by universities does not guarantee fair chances due to gender discrimination in the recruitment process.

Secondly, this study found that women who married and had children within the first five years of their careers generally took longer to be promoted to associate professors compared to men and unmarried women. Li and Shen (2020) suggest that Chinese academics usually obtain tenure at the ages of 35-37 if they achieve research performance. None of my married participants with children got tenure before the age of 35, but two unmarried participants got associate professorships before the age of 35.

Bayer and Dutton (1977) distinguished four career stage groups based on years of work, including fledgling academics (those who had worked less than five years), maturing academics (those who have worked five to ten years), established academics (those who have worked eleven to twenty-five years) and 'patriarchs' (those who have worked over twenty-five years in an institution). My study adopts their division of career stages and found that women academics in China tended to complete childbearing and maternity leave in their early in their fledgling period careers.

This study argues that the overlap of motherhood and early career is the most prominent factor affecting women academics' research and thereby their career advancement to associate professorship. According to human capital theory developed by Becker (1964) and Mincer (1974), human capital is a physical means of production that can be accumulated through education and work experience. Academics accumulate work experience and continuously improve their knowledge, skills and abilities in teaching and research, which contributes to their academic career development. However, my study shows that compared to nonmothers and male academics, academic mothers accumulate less research experience through two mechanisms, which slows down their promotion speed to associate professorship. These two mechanisms are that academic mothers spend less time on research than nonmothers and may temporarily drop out of academic publishing to produce a healthy babe and care for young child, thereby stopping the accumulation of their research experience. In the face of a demanding teaching workload, academics often work on teaching preparation and assignment marking during the day and have to take their research work home and work overtime at night. Especially for young academics that are often required to take on new courses that they are not familiar with and have to invest more time in teaching. In the case of Alice, the long hours resulting from the heavy teaching workload and the pressure of research took a toll on her physical health, making it difficult for her to conceive. In this predicament, she temporarily put aside her research work to reduce work pressure so that she could have a better pregnancy and give birth to a healthy child.

In addition to Alice, all of my participants who were married and had children reported that having young children reduced their research productivity and resulted in slower paper publishing. Among them, six participants dropped out of paper publishing for one to three years to care for their babies after giving birth. Helen was only suspended for one year because she must meet the research requirements within three years based

on her contract with the university. Otherwise, she would face the dilemma that her contract would not be renewed. During the suspension of research, my participants reported they had less interaction with other academics, were less likely to attend academic conferences in other cities and did not have the time and energy to focus on writing papers. As a result, they generally have no published papers for one to five years after giving birth, which overlaps with their early careers. According to my data, the research knowledge and skills academic mothers have accumulated prior to the birth of a child may depreciate because they suspended research for a few years. Although my participants chose to update their knowledge by reading the latest literature during the research suspension, they indicated that it often takes more time and energy to return to the paper writing skills they had before having children. For example, Stella reported that she took a year to re-learn how to conduct research and academic writing after her research suspension. My participants report that the Young Scientist Fund is a requirement for young academics applying for promotion to Associate Professor. According to Gu (2021), the National Natural Science Foundation of China has extended the age limit for female applicants: for Young Scientists Fund, the upper age limit is 35 for men and 40 for women; for the Excellent Young Scientists Fund, it's 38 for men and 40 for women. My participants reported extending the age limit for applying Young Scientists Fund helped women. For example, my participants who were married with children prepared and applied for this fund after giving birth. However, this policy does not help women solve the tenure-clock problem, nor help women who have a second child. For example, Helen must reach the position of associate professor within the six-year contract period, which means that she must obtain the Young Scientists Fund within six years, even if her childbirth caused her to pause her scientific research work for one year. As the only participant with a second child, Faye has not yet received the Young Scientist Fund.

Motherhood wage penalty

Although this study did not intend to collect information on women's income nor to explore the gender pay gap, my data indicate there are gender earnings inequality in academic careers. My study argues that being a mother is the most prominent factor influencing female academic earnings. Academic salaries are mainly composed of basic salary and annual performance salary, in which performance salary includes teaching income and research outputs income. Specifically, an academic's income is proportional to the number of courses she takes and the number of articles she publishes. In addition to academic salaries from universities, my study shows that academics can earn

additional income by participating in horizontal projects. Through my participants explaining their day-to-day work, my research uncovers three mechanisms of wage penalties for mothers in academic careers.

Firstly, my participants expressed dissatisfaction with their academic career earnings. This is partly because of the low course fees at universities. In the case of Gina, she needs to complete the teaching of 260 classes a year, only earns 50 RMB (about six GBP) per class. If Gina fails to complete 260 lessons annually, her teaching salary will be also deducted accordingly, and her year-end bonus will also be reduced. And if she chooses to take maternity leave, she could receive maternity pay, but meanwhile, she will lose her full attendance award and some bonus for a year. Although not all Chinese universities have cut attendance awards and year-end awards due to maternity leave, Gina's experience suggests that women taking maternity leave may cause them lose part of their university's bonuses.

Secondly, my study shows that women academics' early career overlap with childbearing and their family responsibilities interfere with their work effort or productivity, resulting in lower income for academic mothers and a larger gender pay gap. Lai et al (2016) suggest that research output, accounts for 60% of an academic's salary in the first-tier universities. Academic mother's suspension of research can directly cause them to lose their research performance salary, which accounts for a large proportion of their annual salary. Incentives for research further expand the income gap between men and women. In the case of Gina, research rewards in her university range from 5,000 to 100,000 RMB (around 597 to 11,944 GBP), depending on the levels of journals. Compared to the low teaching income, having more research outputs mean that academics cannot get full research performance salary as well as generous monetary rewards from universities.

Thirdly, according to my data, academics can also increase their income by participating in horizontal projects with businesses. My participants reported that horizontal projects do not directly help academics advance to associate and professorships, but these projects are often well paid. To get such a project, it often takes a lot of time and energy to participate in *yingchou*. However, women academics are underrepresented as project leaders compared to men due to gender discrimination, women's social constraints, and family constraints. Academic mothers are often faced with demanding housework and

childcare needs, which consume a lot of energy, especially when they often take on the responsibility of educating their children at night. Family responsibilities already shorten their time for research. They are less willing to lead or participate in projects where it is difficult to balance teaching and research. As mentioned above, women are under social expectations to get marry and have children. Most female academics marry and have children early in their careers. Therefore, the income gap between female academics and male academics can be larger through these three mechanisms.

Vertical gender segregation

Academic title is an important factor reflecting the status of women academics in universities. A common situation raised by all participants is the low proportion of female professors and doctoral supervisors in universities. Recent statistics show that female doctoral supervisors account for 16% of the total number of doctoral supervisors in higher educational institutions in China (MOE, 2021). Zhao (2007) and Wang (2016) reported a low proportion of female professors in prestigious Chinese universities. In Wang's department, female professors only make up 10% of the total number of professors. My research explores gender segregation based on the accounts of women academics and argues that the status quo of vertical gender segregation in academia observed in the above studies persists. For example, in my study, Helen, from the religious studies department of a prestigious university, reported that there was only one female professor in her department, but was close to retirement age. Ulla and Tessa are both Ph.D supervisors, but they noted a low number of female Ph.D supervisors in computer science discipline. According to my data, there are three main factors that contribute to this gender gap among professors and Ph.D supervisors: the different research productivity of male and female academics, women's low confidence to apply for promotions, and women's social capital disadvantage.

Gender differences in productivity have been investigated widely (Stack, 2004; Leahey 2006; Mairesse and Pezzoni 2015; Nielsen 2016). Recent studies in China have shown that female academics have lagged than male counterparts in terms of publication output, partly because of women's double burden of parenthood and career (Zhang, 2010; Rhoads and Gu, 2012; Aiston and Jung, 2015; Peng, 2020). Women's household responsibilities, such as housework and care for child and family elders, can affect their work effort or productivity, resulting in fewer publications than men. My data are consistent with the research above, showing that academic women experience conflicts

between demanding academic work and demanding domestic work from the early stage of their careers. My research complements the dual roles of women in the above-mentioned studies, arguing that many women academics stop at the position of associate professor because the promotion stage from associate professor to full professor often overlaps with their child's middle school period. As discussed in the previous section, academic mothers are expected by society to use their knowledge to raise a high academic performance child. Among my participants, the child of two associate professors and four professors are all in middle school, and they need to be responsible for tutoring their child's homework every night. This has led to the fact that the evening hours of academic mothers are often spent on helping their children with homework, while male associate professors can devote themselves to research to increase their research publications. Thus, women academics have a more challenging time balancing research and tutoring their children, which makes them less confident applying for promotions.

My participants reported that due to the limited number of professors, the promotion of professors must not only meet the scientific research standards required by the university, but also surpass other candidates in terms of the number of papers. Under the brutal promotion competition mechanism for professors, usually those with the most scientific research achievements have the opportunity to be promoted. Therefore, promotion is too challenging for academic women who are responsible for children's academic performance. Western research has shown that academics can advance their academic promotion by finding a job at another university rather than waiting for promotion at the current institution (Jencks and Riesman, 1977; Baker, 2010). The reported situation in Chinese academia seems different: academics in China, especially women academics, often look forward to 'permanent employment' with *bianzhi* to have job security, as expressed in the previous section.

In addition to research productivity and confidence, this study finds that another important reason for vertical gender segregation is that women are disadvantaged in terms of social capital compared with their male counterparts. The concept of social capital was proposed by Bourdieu (1986), which believed that social networks or relationships have value. Putnam (2000) further proposed that the benefits such as information, trust, and reciprocity generated by these networks help people solve individual and collective problems more easily. In China, the social relationship is

addressed as *guanxi*. Bian (2006, p. 312) defines *guanxi* as ‘a dyadic, particular and sentimental tie that has potential of facilitating favour exchanges between the parties connected by the tie’. Research by DiTomaso and Bian (2018) suggests that both the United States and China value and practice social networks, or *guanxi*, to gain access to job assignments or promotions. However, research in China shows that working women, including women academics, are constrained in participating in social networks in their career development (Zhang, 2010; Huang and Aaltio, 2014; Zhao and Jones, 2017; O'Sullivan, 2019; Peng, 2020). My research has found that women's social networks are constrained by both culture and family. Firstly, because the early career of women overlaps with childbearing, many women academics have to avoid participating in long-distance academic conferences and reduce the frequency of cooperation and communication with other academics, which makes it difficult for them to accumulate social capital in their early career. This finding echo that of Leberman et al. (2016, p.648), women academics face the dilemma of ‘geographically restricted collaborative networks’ because of their family responsibilities. Secondly, Zhang’s (2010) study particularly reported difficulties in getting into male networks. My research builds on women's experiences of self-exclusion from male networks. As mentioned above, women, bound by cultural expectations and family responsibilities, would choose to self-exclude participation in *yingchou*, which is a common way for Chinese men to build social networks and relationships. As a result, my research found that there is also a gender gap in participating in horizontal projects. For example, there are generally fewer female academics than men participating in collaborative projects, and the proportion of female project leaders is deficient.

Common strategies of women academics

In the face of demanding family and academic work, this research investigates common strategies women academics use to improve their status. In terms of women’s disadvantage in academic careers, my research identified three strategies that women academics use. Firstly, my research shows that while university recruitment is said to be based on merit and through the process of evaluating candidate's CVs and interviews, there are also cases of entry into academic careers through ‘shoulder-tap’. For example, three participants did not go through competition and interviews, but directly stayed and worked in the prestigious universities they graduated from with the help and fame of their doctoral supervisors.

Secondly, recent studies suggest that academic women give birth early to their doctorate or delay childbearing until tenure (Li and Shen, 2020). However, none of the participants in my study had children during their Ph.D. My research proposes another strategy for women, that is, women often choose to plan their children in advance and make corresponding arrangements for teaching when faced with the overlap between the early stage of academic career and childbearing.

Thirdly, to mitigate the limitations faced in social networking in universities, my research found that women may opt to participate in formally organised women's networks. Three participants from the computer science discipline reported expanding their social networks by attending women-only conferences organised by computer technology organisations. A participant in the social sciences reported a similar experience of participating in formal academic conferences of her research interest. Although the conferences she attended were not limited to women, but almost all the participants were women. Papafilippou, Durbin, and Conley (2022) explore formal networks of women engineers in the UK: including participation in internal (organisation-based) and external (industry-based) networks of women engineers. My findings in line with Papafilippou, Durbin, and Conley (2022) and found that participating in external networking (e.g., formal academic conferences and industry-wide conferences organised by organisations or professional bodies) enable women academics to connect with other women academics outside of their own universities, increase women's opportunities to develop both instrumental and expressive networks. The expressive network refers to the social support and friendship that can be obtained in the social interaction, while the instrumental network focuses on employment gains, including knowledge, information and resources that facilitate career progression (Ng and Chow, 2009). For example, according to my interview data, the main purposes of attending women-only conferences are intellectual engagement, knowledge sharing, and increased opportunities for collaboration, but it is also a platform for female professors to increase their reputation and influence in the field. In addition, in the process of participation, my participants also mentioned forming friendships with other women, receiving social and psychological support, and learning through each other's experiences and strategies. Due to the social constraints of women's social networks, especially women's social constraints with men, and women's self-exclusion in unfriendly male social interactions, such as *yingchou*, my research shows that participating in external networking is a female-friendly way for women academics to expand their social networks. However, women in other disciplines reported that they did not have similar external networking channels or women-only

conferences. My research demonstrates the value of external women's networks, as well as the absence of women's networks within universities. Therefore, this study suggests that universities and scientific research institutions should pay more attention to the establishment of academic women's network.

In addition, my research found that academic women adopt two strategies to improve their decision-making power at home in response to demanding family working hours: women's income and women's academic husband. Firstly, my research found that women academics generally believed that women's education and paid work are effective ways to help women improve their family status. Some studies in China suggest that contemporary urban Chinese couples are characterised by women having more decision-making power in married life, and at the same time, experiencing an unequal division of housework (Pimentel, 2006; Shu, Zhu and Zhang, 2013). Based on my interview data, women regard education and income as a resource that can improve their family status. Resource theory refers to each spouse's decision-making power is related to the resources at his or her disposal (Blood and Wolfe, 1960). In dual-earner households, resources manifest themselves as higher income, more prestigious job, and more available resources. The spouse who is relatively less dependent on the partner for resources are more likely to have greater decision-making power in family life (Shu, Zhu and Zhang, 2013).

Previous research in China also indicates that women with higher education (Cheng, 2019; Li and Cheng, 2019; Hu and Yeung, 2019) or income (Qian and Jin, 2018; Shu, Zhu and Zhang, 2013) than their partners enjoy more decision-making power in their fertility and childrearing. My research found a similar notion by surveying women academics in China. In this study, my participants emphasised that scholarships helped them pursue higher education, especially doctoral studies, while enhancing their confidence and bargaining in the face of family members urging them to marry and have children. One participant, Luna, used the example of a female academic friend as a counter-example and suggested that women lose control over their own fertility in family life if they do not have financial income in the family life. Another participant, Daisy, reported that she and her husband's parents had conflicted about her reproductive decisions. Other married participants did not mention their experiences of bargaining exchanges based on their relative resources in marriage. A recent study by Cheng (2019) also suggests that women's education can help increase women's voice in family

decision-making, but only in nuclear households. In multigenerational households, my study suggests that power is guided more by financial income than by a woman's education, according to the experience of a woman reported by Luna. And Daisy's experience shows that women may face family conflicts in making decisions about their own reproduction, especially with their husband's parents, even if they are already highly educated and have a stable income. Thus, my research disagrees with Pimentel (2006) that egalitarian decision-making is common among Chinese urban couples. My research shows that highly educated women with paid jobs in urban China may have more bargaining power, but they have not full control their own reproduction, because they are influenced by their husbands' parents.

Secondly, my research echoes the findings of (Peng, 2020) and (Ke, 2011), that for women academics whose husbands are not in the field of higher education, the family microsystem is an obstacle to women's career development. For example, my participants reported that their family members lack of empathy and devalue women's academic work. What is more prominent is that academic mothers are also required by families to take on more parenting roles because of their educational capital in educating their children with good academic performance. In my study, the concept of traditional gender division of labour, coupled with social expectations for women with flexible working hours and educational capitals, have intensified two married participants' burden of 'doing it all' at home.

Under demanding family work, choosing a husband who can understand the pressure of women academics is a common strategy many women employ. Among my fifteen married participants, eight of my participants have husbands working in Chinese universities. Academic women's satisfaction with their husbands differs significantly between those with academic husbands and those with other occupational husbands. In particular, my participants reported that academic husbands are more likely to understand the work pressure of women academics than husbands in other occupations. Therefore, academic husbands are more likely to support women's work emotionally and physically, such as by providing care for women and participating in housework and childcare. One participant also reported that the traditional family division of labour is weakened in a dual-career academic family. This is because when the academic woman and her husband reach the same professor level, and her child is older, the family pressure of the academic woman will be reduced significantly, and the division of

housework is also more equal between husband and wife. My participants' experiences reflect that the private and professional lives of women academic are interconnected with their husbands. My research is consistent with Western research showing that dual-career (academic) partnerships can help create more equal attitudes towards household chores and parenting in young couples, based on mutual understanding (Duxbury et al., 2007; Vohlídalová, 2017). However, my research found that dual-career academic couples did not break traditional gender divisions of labour, for example, my participants with academic husbands remained be the primary family caregivers and take on a significant amount of housework.

Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research

Reflecting on my research, this study has two limitations related to my sampling: the small number of participants and the similarity of participants' backgrounds. Due to the limited time and the epidemic's impact, the number of participants was reduced from thirty to twenty, increasing the difficulty for my research to present a more comprehensive picture of Chinese women academics. Diversity amongst my participants was maximised by recruiting participants across different disciplines and from fourteen universities in China. However, there are many similar experiences among my participants, as most of them have similar family and educational backgrounds.

I only recruited women academics engaged in both teaching and research when recruiting participants. This study does not include the experiences of women academics who only undertake teaching or research. This is because, through consultation with gatekeepers who are engaged in academic careers, I learned that the career path followed by most university academics is research-teaching. Many universities in China are gradually cancelling teaching-only career development for academics. If the recruited participants include teaching- or research-only academics, their different career paths may lead to significant differences in the daily work experiences of the participants, which is not conducive to my in-depth analysis of the common experiences of women academics.

The second limitation is that my sampling strategy uses gatekeepers' personal networks and snowball sampling causing the class, university tiers and ethnic backgrounds of the participants to be similar. Understanding the importance of *guanxi* network in China and

for my convenience to reach the target population for this study as an outsider of academia, I chose to use gatekeepers. Although the women academics I reached through gatekeepers and snowball sampling come from fourteen universities, these universities are all first-tier universities in China. This led to my research excluding women academics from second and third-tier universities that also have undergraduate programs and are part of Chinese higher education. Since second and third-tier universities have lower requirements for research than first-tier universities, women academics working in these universities may have different mentalities and experiences and employ different strategies than those in first-tier universities. Additionally, eighteen of my participants come from urban families. The intersectionality between gender and these factors shapes academic women's experiences and perceptions. If my research includes participants from second and third-tier universities, various classes and ethnic backgrounds, I may discover different experiences of Chinese women academics than those in this study.

These two limitations pushed this thesis to pay more attention to the similarities in work and life experiences of women academics while ignoring the comparison of their differences in my analyses. Recognising the limitations of my study, I suggest that future research expand the data population to include women academics from more diverse backgrounds, such as women from second and third-tier universities and women from rural backgrounds. Since gender discrimination is more severe in rural areas than in cities, it would be interesting to compare the differences in experience and investigate the extent of how the increased gender discrimination impacts academic women's motivation, experiences and strategies. However, my study provides a basis for future research. Some themes emerged from my research that can be avenues for further investigation. For example, the theme of academic couples is one of the key findings in my research. As the interviews were only conducted with women, my study analysed the impact of academic husbands on work-family balance from the perspective of academic women. Academic husbands play an important role in influencing academic wives' family experiences, but their voices are not heard. This limitation provides some insights into topics and possible directions for future research. These themes also include women's experiences in participating in *yingchou*, women's roles and experiences in participating in corporate research projects and women's research collaborations with other academics.

Appendices

Appendix I Interview Outline

Basic Information

Could you please tell me a little bit about yourself and your work?

How many years have you worked in your university?

What is your educational background?

What is your discipline?

What is your marital status?

What is your academic title?

What is your employment status? permanent hiring, or contract-based hiring?

Career Choice

Based on your experience, could you please tell me a little bit about why you chose an academic career?

Did you receive any advice or help from those close to you when choosing an academic career?

Does your family support your choice of academic career?

Have you ever heard the saying that university jobs are suitable for women? Do you agree with this? Why do you think there is a general perception that university jobs are suitable for women? Do you agree with these views.

Do you think gender has an impact on women's and men's choice of careers and disciplines and why?

Academic Recruitment

Based on your experience, could you please talk a little bit about your recruitment experience?

Does your university implement a tenure-track system? Has this 'up-or-leave' system affected your current day-to-day work and family life?

Based on your experience or observation, do you think that academic recruitment takes a candidate's gender into consideration?

Everyday Work

What is included in your day-to-day work?

Does your work take up evenings and holiday time?

Do you prefer conducting research or teaching and why?

Is your research stressful? Where does your research pressures come from? Will there be penalties if the research requirements are not met?

Does your university have any measures in place to support academic research?

Does your teaching work affect your research work and family life?

How do you manage your time for teaching and research?

Do you think there are differences in teaching between male and female academics?

Do you think there are differences in research between male and female academics?

Have you participated in or lead research projects?

During projects, do you feel or experience gender differences between men and women?

Do you usually socialise with other male or female colleagues?

In your experience, has socialising with colleagues, leaders, or academics from other universities benefitted your career?

Promotion

What is the ratio of male to female teachers in your department? What about at professor and associate professor level?

Are there any requirements for promoting to professor/associate professor?

Do you plan to pursue associate professor or professor?

In addition to research requirements, are there any factors that affect academics' promotion? Have you noticed any gendered differences in promotion?

Do you think there are differences between men and women pursuing full professorships?

What factors benefitted your career development?

What factors have hindered your career development?

Did getting married and having children affect your research and promotion? and what were your thoughts and feelings?

How did you increase research productivity after childbirth?

Overall, do you think academic promotion is fair for men and women?

Work-Family Balance

Are you satisfied with your work-life balance? Why?

Has your academic career affected your family life? For unmarried participants: Has it affected you finding a partner, getting married and having children? For married participants: Has your academic career affected the time you spend on children and chores?

How do you balance work and family? Has flexible working hour helped you balance family and work? Can you give me an example?

Family life

For unmarried participants:

Do you feel pressured to get married and have children?

Have you ever been urged to get married? and how?

For married participants:

Can you explain the distribution of chores and childcare in your family? Are you satisfied with the division of labour in your family?

Do you feel that your family understands the pressure of your academic work and supports you? How are they supporting you?

Do you have elders in your family to help you take care of your children?

End questions

Do you have any additional observations on gender inequalities at work?

In general, do you consider your academic career to be female-friendly? Why?

Appendix || Consent Form for Participants

Full title of Project:

An analysis of women's experiences working as academics in contemporary Chinese universities

Researcher: Yulin Pan

Consent form for participants

This form is for you to state whether or not you agree to take part in the study. Please read and answer every question. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you require more information, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher.

- Have you read the information sheet and understood the information about the study?

Yes No

- Have you had the opportunity to ask questions about the study?

Yes No

- Do you understand that your participation will be anonymized?

Yes No

- Do you understand that the information you provide will be held in confidence by the researcher?

Yes No

- Do you understand that you may withdraw from the study without giving any reason, before the cut-off date supplied by the researcher?

Yes No

- Do you understand that the information you provide may be used in future research?

Yes No

- Do you agree to take part in this study?

Yes No

- If yes, do you agree to your interviews being audio-recorded?

Yes No

Your name:

Your signature:

Researcher signature:

Date:

Appendix III Consent Form for Participants (Chinese version)

知情同意书

研究题目：当代中国高校女老师的工作经历分析

研究者：潘禹霖 博士候选人 约克大学女性研究中心

研究参与者知情同意书：

此表格供您说明您是否同意参加研究。请阅读并回答每个问题。如果您有任何不明白的地方，或者您需要更多信息，请随时与研究人员联系。

- 您是否阅读了信息表并理解了有关研究的信息？
是 否
- 您是否有机会就研究提出问题？
是 否
- 您是否了解您的参与将是匿名的吗？
是 否
- 您是否了解您提供的信息将由研究人员保密？
是 否
- 您是否了解您可以在研究人员提供的截止日期之前退出研究，且无需给出任何理由？
是 否
- 您是否知道您提供的信息可能被用于今后的研究？
是 否
- 您是否愿意参与此项研究？
是 否
- 如果愿意，您是否同意采访过程被录音？
是 否

您的姓名：

您的签名：

采访者姓名：

日期：

Appendix IV Information sheet for participants

My name is Yulin Pan, and I am a Ph.D student at the Centre for Women's Studies at the University of York. I am conducting research on academic women in higher education in China and I am interested in your work and family experiences as an academic woman. You are being invited to take part in this research project. Before agreeing to take part, please read this form carefully and let me know if anything is unclear or you would like further information.

What is the purpose of the study?

This research is intended to find out more about Chinese academic women's gender experiences at work and at home. The interviews will contribute to my research, which may lead to a more open discussion of the lives of academic women in Chinese universities today. I hope this research will contribute to understanding how to better promote gender equality in academic careers and improve work-family balance for academic women. This study has been approved by the relevant Ethics Committee (ELMPS) at the University.

What will involve for participants?

The respondents will be involved in a conversational individual interview with the researcher. The interview will last around an hour and will take place at a time and on-campus location convenient to you, or another public place, if you would prefer. The interviews will be recorded using an audio-recorder unless you prefer for me just to take notes. You can stop the interview at any time or choose not to answer any question you do not feel comfortable with without giving a reason. Please only discuss what you feel comfortable sharing. You will be asked to sign a consent form on the day of the interview to show your agreement to take part in this research. The participation is on voluntary basis and no payment will be made.

What about participants' confidentiality?

Your identity will be kept strictly confidential. No real names will be used in any presentations or publications. All personal details will be anonymised, include your name, workplace and instead use of pseudonyms. All the records of your interview will be stored on the university's secure server, password protected university computer and Google drive. Only I will have access to the raw data.

What will happen to your interview data?

I will process your personal data under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The interview, if audio-recorded, will be transcribed by me. No other personnel will have access to either the recordings or the transcripts. The full transcript will not be published or shared with other people. A thesis, conference papers or journal articles are expected to emerge from this research, so please be aware that anonymized quotes will appear in these public formats. Your personal information and consent form will be securely stored and only kept for as long as required for this project. In the end, I will provide the final thesis to all participants.

What if participants wish to withdraw?

The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You have the right not to answer any question, you may withdraw before, during or after the interview, should you choose to. If you wish to withdraw after the interview, I ask that you do so within 3 months of the interview. Withdrawal consent means no interview information will be included in the research.

Where can participants get more information?

If you have any questions or would like more information about the project, please contact me. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant that has not been answered by the investigators, you may contact my supervisors Dr Rachel Alsop (rachel.alsop@york.ac.uk). If you are unhappy with the way in which the university has handled your personal data, you have a right to report to the Information Commissioner's Office. For information on reporting any concerns to the Information Commissioner's Office, see www.ico.org.uk/concerns.

The Head of Department is Professor Victoria Robinson (vicki.robinson@york.ac.uk).

If you have any queries about the ethics of this project, please contact the Chair of the Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology Ethics Committee: Professor William McGuire (william.mcguire@hyms.ac.uk)

Website: <https://www.york.ac.uk/about/organisation/governance/sub-committees/ethics/elmps/>

Thank you for participating in this project

Appendix V Information sheet for participants (Chinese version)

项目信息表

我叫潘禹霖，是约克大学女性研究中心的博士生。我正在对中国高等教育中的学术女性进行研究，并对您作为学术女性的工作和家庭经历感兴趣。你被邀请参加这个研究项目。在同意参加之前，请仔细阅读此表格，如果有任何不清楚的地方或您想了解更多信息，请告诉我。

项目的研究目的是什么？

本研究旨在更多地了解中国学术女性在工作和家庭中的性别经历。这些采访将有助于我的研究，这可能会促进对当今中国大学学术女性的现状进行更开放的讨论。我希望这项研究将有助于了解如何更好地促进学术生涯中的性别平等并改善学术女性的工作与家庭平衡。本研究已获得大学相关伦理委员会 (ELMPS) 的批准。

参与者将如何参加此项研究？

受访者将参与与研究人员的对话式一对一采访。采访将持续大约一个小时，并将在您方便的时间和校园地点进行。如果您愿意，可以在其他公共场所进行。采访将使用录音机录制，除非您更喜欢我只是做笔记。您可以随时停止采访，或者选择不回答任何您觉得不舒服的问题而无需说明理由。请只讨论您觉得方便分享的内容。您将被要求在采访当天签署一份同意书，以表明您同意参加这项研究。参与是自愿的，不会支付任何费用。

参与者在此项研究是否会被保密？

您的身份将被严格保密。任何演讲或出版物中都不会使用您的真实姓名。所有个人详细信息都将匿名，包括您的姓名、工作地点，并使用化名。您的所有采访记录都将存储在大学的安全服务器、大学计算机和谷歌驱动器上，并受密码保护。只有我可以访问原始数据。

采访数据将会怎样处理？

我将根据通用数据保护条例处理您的个人数据。采访，如果有录音，将由我转录。没有其他人可以访问录音或转录。完整的转录将不会发布或与其他人共享。这项研究预计会出现论文、会议论文或期刊文章，因此请注意匿名引用将出现在这些公开文本中。您的

个人信息和同意书将被安全存储，并且仅在本项目要求的时间内保存。最后，我将向所有参与者提供最终论文。

如果参与者想退出怎么办？

参与这项研究的决定完全取决于您。您有权不回答任何问题，您可以选择采访之前，采访期间，和采访之后退出。如果您选择在采访之后退出，那么我会要求您在面试后 3 个月内提出，以便我后续的分析 and 写数据。撤回同意意味着您的任何采访信息都不会包含在项目中。

参与者可以从哪里获得更多信息？

如果您有任何问题或想了解有关该项目的更多信息，请与我联系。如果您对您作为研究参与者的权利有任何其他问题，但调查人员尚未回答，您可以联系我的导师 Rachel Alsop 博士 (rachel.alsop@york.ac.uk)。如果您对大学处理您的个人数据的方式不满意，您有权向信息专员办公室投诉。有关向信息专员办公室报告问题的信息，请参阅 www.ico.org.uk/concerns。

我的系主任是 Victoria Robinson 教授 (vicki.robinson@york.ac.uk)。

如果您对本项目的伦理有任何疑问，请联系经济、法律、管理、政治和社会学伦理委员会主席：威廉·麦奎尔教授 (william.mcguire@hyms.ac.uk)

网站：<https://www.york.ac.uk/about/organisation/governance/sub-committees/ethics/elmps/>

非常感谢您阅读此项目信息表

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