



The effect of Chinese culture on equal opportunities in the Chinese labour market

A case study about gender equality in Chinese State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs)

Yi Liang

Supervised by Thomas Jordan

Examined by Jing Wu

Master's thesis in Strategic HRM and Labour relations, 30 hp
Spring 2020
University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to my thesis supervisor, Thomas Jordan, who has given me selfless help in my study of development. For his careful guidance of my graduation thesis in recent times, which greatly improved my understanding of academic writing and taught me a lot of specific research skills. I appreciate his professional guidance and patience during his supervision.

Abstract

Gender stereotypes still exist in the current society, Chinese career women suffer from gender discrimination in their career life in various walks of life. Therefore, this thesis aims to use gender and organizational culture theories to show the deep roots of gender discrimination in Chinese women's career life, especially in a few Chinese SOEs. The thesis applied qualitative research to collect research data, and after analysis, found there are four main reasons which can influence Chinese women's career life. As career women, they suffer from at least three different pressures: Chinese traditional gendered opinion, organizational discrimination and social pressure.

Key words

Confucianism, culture, gender discrimination, organizational culture, gender equality

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1. Introduction

During the past decades, China has attained some extraordinary achievements, in terms of economy (GDP Annual Growth Rate was -27.3% in 1963 to +6.9% in 2017), educational level, health and so on. Especially regarding the economic aspect, China was ranked second in the world in terms of GDP in 2017 (12.238 trillion US dollars), and in 2018 (14.172 trillion US dollars).

In 2017, China's total population was around 1.3 billion and women are 48.6% of China's population (Catalyst, 2017)¹. However, when talking about gender equality, the employment rate in present China, data from the International Labour Organization show that the percentage of the labor force participation of females in China has declined year by year.

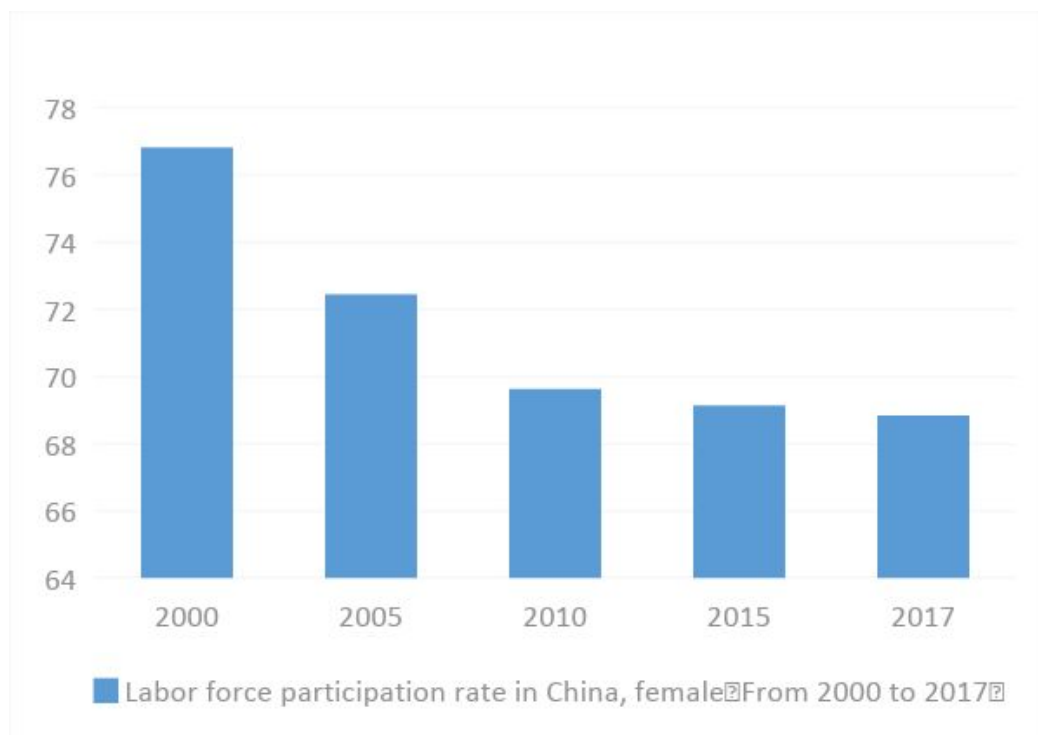


Figure 1: Female labor force participation in China 2000-2017.

Data source: International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT database. Data retrieved in March 2017.

Another research from Catalyst², *Quick Take: Women in the Workforce—China*, from the organization Workplace that work for women shows that even though in Asia, China has the highest labor force participation rate for women, the fact is that Chinese women's labor force participation rate has been declining because, according to the aforementioned study, some social obstructions obstruct women's working rights, for example gender discrimination in recruitment, gender wage gap, families' pressure and traditional stereotypes about women. Besides, the trend of unequal earnings does not appear to even out over time, and in job advertisements formulations like "male graduates only" are common. For example, a news report from *South China Morning Post* shows that "13 per cent of the jobs on last year's national civil service list specified 'men only', 'men preferred' or

¹ Catalyst, *Quick Take: Women in the Workforce: China* (August 31, 2017)

² Ibid.

'suitable for men'. There are some investigative news that shows that this phenomenon is very common in China, especially in private companies, whose requirement ads often are full of sexism.

"In essence, things are getting worse," said Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch. If you look at labour force participation, if you look at the gap between women's participation and men's participation, if you look at gender parity, everything is going in the wrong direction. This is an issue that affects 700 million people."

Data from The World Economic Forum (2016)³, a gender pay gap persists in China's labour force, women's income is 35% less than men for doing similar jobs. Data from The Global Gender Gap Report 2017, which examined gender parity in health, education, political empowerment and economic opportunity, show that China's rank is very low. Of 144 countries China's rank is 100 (Global rank in the range of country scores for the four subindexes: Health & survival, economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment and political empowerment), especially in the health & survival area (rank 144), rank tailender in the world. The other three areas are: economic participation and opportunity, rank 86; educational area, rank 102; and political empowerment, rank 77.

In 2018, China's ranking continued to decline in The Global Gender Gap Report, the global rank from 100 in 2017 declines to 103 in 2018, in the four subindexes except economic participation and opportunity still ranks 86, other three subindexes all kept declining.

On the other hand, the Human Rights Watch report 2018 also points out that in China, women have lower status in families, communities and the society and they have less of a say in decision-making than men.

What has happened in the Chinese labor market in these years? Which are the reasons for these conditions? This study aims at identifying reasons that influence female career life in China.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 Cultural and historical background

Some Chinese words indicate that even in the 21st century, sexism and misogyny exist in the Chinese society. Negative words are used to describe women: "leftover" means the women who are over 27 years old but are single (Leta, 2014); "third gender" is used to sneer at women PhDs: asexual, unattractive and old. However, women who get married with rich or famous men are called "winners in life".

Three factors has impacted women's positions in China: a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist view of gender equality, the Reform and Opening in 1979 increased discrimination against women, and traditional (Confucian) culture (Leung, 2003). In China, males are privileged in all aspects of their life (Cooke, 2001), an interpretation is that Confucianism makes women "*subservient and undervalued and [having] no place in public life*" (Leung, 2003; Kitching, 2001).

The founder of Confucianism was Confucius (Kong-Zi), who was born in 551 BCE in eastern China. His Confucianism principles contain three important points, Ren (benevolence,

³ The World Economic Forum (2016)

kindness), Yi (be righteous), and Li (proper conduct code) (Xiao-dong & Dale, 2014). Confucius believed that following these principles could create social and political harmony. These principles were later used to judge human behavior in the Chinese society (Chan, 1998; Chen, 1997).

Thus if we want to discuss women's positions and their career life in China, we should understand Chinese traditional culture first.

What is culture? Hofstede (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010:20) defines "culture" as a kind of "potential rules" in a society, or a "collective programming" which distinguishes its social members from other societies. He further explains that culture is a key word in a society, patterns of thinking, feeling and acting in this society are based on their culture. It is shared by people of the whole society, people learn the culture from the social environment, so culture is a collective phenomenon, a stable social influence from generation to generation.

In Schein's (2010) theories, culture represents the status in the present and can influence people in different ways, culture is the foundation of the social order which people need to abide by. Culture not only influences individual attitudes, in-side and out-side personal behaviors, but also organizations' models and styles (Child & Warne, 2002)

Fan (2000) mentioned that the culture of a nation is best reflected in the values held by its people. People's beliefs and attitudes in a nation are shaped by its cultural values, which also guide their behavior. Cultural values establish the criteria or standards for judging everything in a society. However, not all members of a cultural group share exactly the same values (Hofstede, 1984).

China is a country with a long history of civilization, it has more than 5,000 years of recorded history. Some researchers think that Chinese culture has been influenced by Confucianism for over two thousand years, they point out that Confucianism is an important factor for the Chinese society, and to some extent they think that Confucianism can be beneficial for economic performance and modernization (Xu, 2011; Chu, 1989; Franke et al., 1991). Xiao-dong & Dale (2014) describes Confucianism as a social ethics and a political culture that was a dominant ideology in Chinese history. Pye (1972) pointed out that Confucianism is undoubtedly the most influential thought, which has formed the foundation of Chinese cultural tradition for thousands of years, and still provides the basis for Chinese interpersonal behavior norms.

Confucius pointed out that human resources (people) are a critical resource in a country, its government has a moral responsibility to nurture and develop them.

"A man of humanity, wishing to establish his own character, also establishes the character of others; and wishing to be prominent himself, also helps others to be prominent" (Analects, 6:28)

That is why Seow (2010) also thinks that Chinese culture influences Chinese organizations' shaping and determining and Chinese cultural values have a significant influence in the management and practices of organizations. On the other hand, Child and Warner (2003) think that Chinese SOEs are administered by the government so "such enterprises tend towards bureaucratic behaviour", and these "behaviours" have been influenced and

reinforced by Chinese culture. Confucius insisted that social stability is built on inequality between people; this code of conduct has continued to this day (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010, ch. 2). Hofstede describes China as a large power-distance country, and Child and Warner (2003) also stress that this “large power distance” also exists in Chinese SOEs.

According to Child’s theory (1981), organizational behaviours are influenced by cultural orientations. Some researchers point out that Confucianism plays an important role in Chinese culture, because Confucianism has helped China to be stronger and have a positive influence in Chinese management at the same time, these developments are dominated by “*historical contexts like Confucianism and collectivism*” (Lin & Huang, 2014), and these positive results also bring excellent economic development for China after its “Open door” policy (Seow, 2010; Chen & Chung, 1994).

In addition, some researchers think that culture as a variable has been used to explain “the specific management” in China for the last decades (Child, Warner & Joynt, 2002). Not only Child, other researchers also stressed that the Chinese management style has been influenced by its culture (Pye 1985; Lockett 1988; Redding 1990, 2002).

However, Confucianism not only influences the Chinese management culture, but also shapes the thinking model “men are superior to women”. In China, women have to face some difficulties in their career life (compared with men): low employment rate, poor quality of women’s employment, large proportion of unemployment, difficult to get reemployment, females’ labor rights and interests can not be guaranteed (Wen-lian & Qun-yin, 2006). Cooke’s research (2005, 2012) also points out that Confucianism still is an important factor which deeply influences and shapes Chinese women’s positions in their career life.

In order to preserve the solidity of the patriarchal society and dictatorial system in Chinese ancient history, the concept of “male superiority and female inferiority” on the issue of men and women has been established by Confucian culture, therefore this notion, in Chinese traditional culture, has become the dominant mentality (Su-xiang, 2014). “Men are superior to women” is the core belief of traditional gender culture in China, with patriarchy becoming the main system of this dominating society, with males dominating and females subsidiary to males, and ethical norms and moral precepts for a woman’s whole life has been constructed by Confucianism, called “the three obediences and the four virtues”.

1.1.2. Economic background

In 1978, the Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping launched his economic reforms: the ‘Open Door’ and ‘Four Modernizations’ policies. Because of these ‘strategic decisions’, enterprise and management decentralization was introduced into China, thus the Chinese economic structure has gradually changed from being only based on Maoist principles, from central planning, to be based on market socialism (Newton and Subbaraman, 2002).

Since 1949, Chinese enterprises had a special hiring system called ‘iron rice bowl’ (Tie fan wan). This hiring system offered “jobs for life” and “cradle to the grave” welfare policy, mainly implemented in the industrial SOEs (State-Owned Enterprises), thus the ‘iron rice bowl’ means that one is never threatened with unemployment, it is a permanent contract until one reaches the age of retirement (Budhwar, 2013).

By the end of the century, the 'iron rice bowl system' was gradually being phased out because of the change of economic structure (Ding et al., 2000). However, it still exists in Chinese SOEs. In the whole country's economic system, Chinese SOEs used to be the economic backbone of the country, but even they are in a decline period. However, they still have important positions in the national economy. According to data from the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council and National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China, the total profit of Chinese SOEs in 2016 was 1,175.11 billion yuan, an increase of 6.7 percent over the previous year, in 2017 it was 1,665.12 billion yuan, an increase of 45.1 percent over the previous year. The total profit of private enterprises in 2016 was 2432.53 billion yuan, an increase of 4.8 percent over the previous year, in 2017 was 2375.31 billion yuan, an increase of 11.7 percent over the previous year. In 2016, Chinese SOEs had 60.17 million employees. Compared with the state of employment in the whole country in 2016, it occupies 15% (State of employment in 2016 in China is 414.28 million).

Every SOE has a different organizational culture but they are influenced by the owner - the state - to some extent. It is different from other types of enterprises, SOEs' culture is influenced by the state's economic and political policies and the cultural policies. However they are also based on the founders' (the state's) beliefs, values and assumptions, group members' learning experiences from organization involvement and new members bring in new ideas, values and assumptions. Hofstede (1980) also points out that different cultural lenses can influence different leadership ways, motivation methods and organizational structure in organizations.

It is generally known that SOEs have a special organizational culture because of their background, in general, state-owned enterprises dominate the country's economy. The operation and management of the SOEs were strongly influenced by traditional culture and communist ideology. So, the character of these enterprises is collectivism and Confucianism, as well as being accompanied with an emphasis on respect for hierarchy, in-group harmony, loyalty and so on since various researchers have found that Confucianism is a foundation for Chinese management styles and organizations' behaviour, and it has strongly showed special characteristics in the Chinese managerial and organizational system (Child & Warne, 2002; Seow, 2010). In addition, the bureaucratic hierarchy still influences the Chinese SOEs' organizational culture.

In 1954, the Constitution of the People's Republic of China specifically gave women "equal rights with men in all areas of political, economical, cultural, social, and domestic life." In 1982, this right was emphasized and strengthened in the constitution again, because the "Open Door" in 1979 created lots of working opportunities for women.

1.1.3. Social background

According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2017, China's gender data on vocational and technical workers and higher education enrollment rate are closer in 2017, but compared with last year, the data has declined in terms of income and leadership. Regarding the sex ratio of new population, China has been in a serious imbalance for a long time, affecting the global rankings. According to the report, women spend 44.6% of the total working time on

unpaid jobs such as caring for their families, compared with 18.9% for men. In addition, the proportion of Chinese women in high levels in economic leadership (boards) is only 9.4%.

There is a study from a worldwide professional recruiting group in 2016, showing that 61 per cent, both men and women in China, think there is equal pay between genders. However, a survey from the World Bank in 2016 in China, found that nearly 63% of women were in the labor force compared to 77.9% of men. But women earn on average one third less than men for doing similar work. Obviously compared with men, women not only have less working opportunities in the labour market, but also have to accept unequal remuneration treatment. Women's average annual income lags behind men's. In addition to the pay gap, there are lots of jobs that are only for men, there is still discrimination against female job seekers. It is easy to understand the discrimination against female job seekers in China from the data of The Global gender gap report 2017. The female labour force participation is 70.3%, compared to 84.3% of males. The rate of wage equality for similar work was 0.634, in higher positions, only 16.8% of females were in legislators, senior officials and managers compared to 83.2% of male. Chinese women in parliament, in ministerial positions, were also very low, only 24.2% and 10% in 2017 (The Global gender gap report 2017).

For many years, China had a "one child" policy (Whyte et al., 2015), but since 2014, the government has allowed Chinese couples to have two children in order to relieve the aging issue in China, and governments also encourage that women stay at home to take care of families. These policies not only help alleviate the aging of the population but also give a way for men in the labour market. From another perspective, this policy has caused a lot of blocks for Chinese females in their career life.

In the recruitment process, another kind of gender discrimination also exists. A report from Human Rights Watch, "Only Men Need Apply" (2018), points out that in some Chinese job advertising, women are treated as "an object of sexual desire". In some advertisements, women are required "to have certain physical attributes": height, weight, voice, facial appearance or age, but these requirements are not relevant with job duties. In some male dominated industries, female employees are considered as a kind of "benefit" to attract male applicants. For example, recruitment advertisements from some technology companies tell applicants, once they get the job, then they can work with "beautiful girls" or "goddesses". In the report "Quick Take: Women in the Workforce—China" (2019) it is also stated that Chinese job advertisements are full of gender stereotypes and discriminatory formulations: should be married with children, physical requirements, age and so on.

Apart from the labour market, Chinese women also suffer from different pressures from different aspects, family pressures have also added many obstacles to their career life, they need to spend more time on their families:

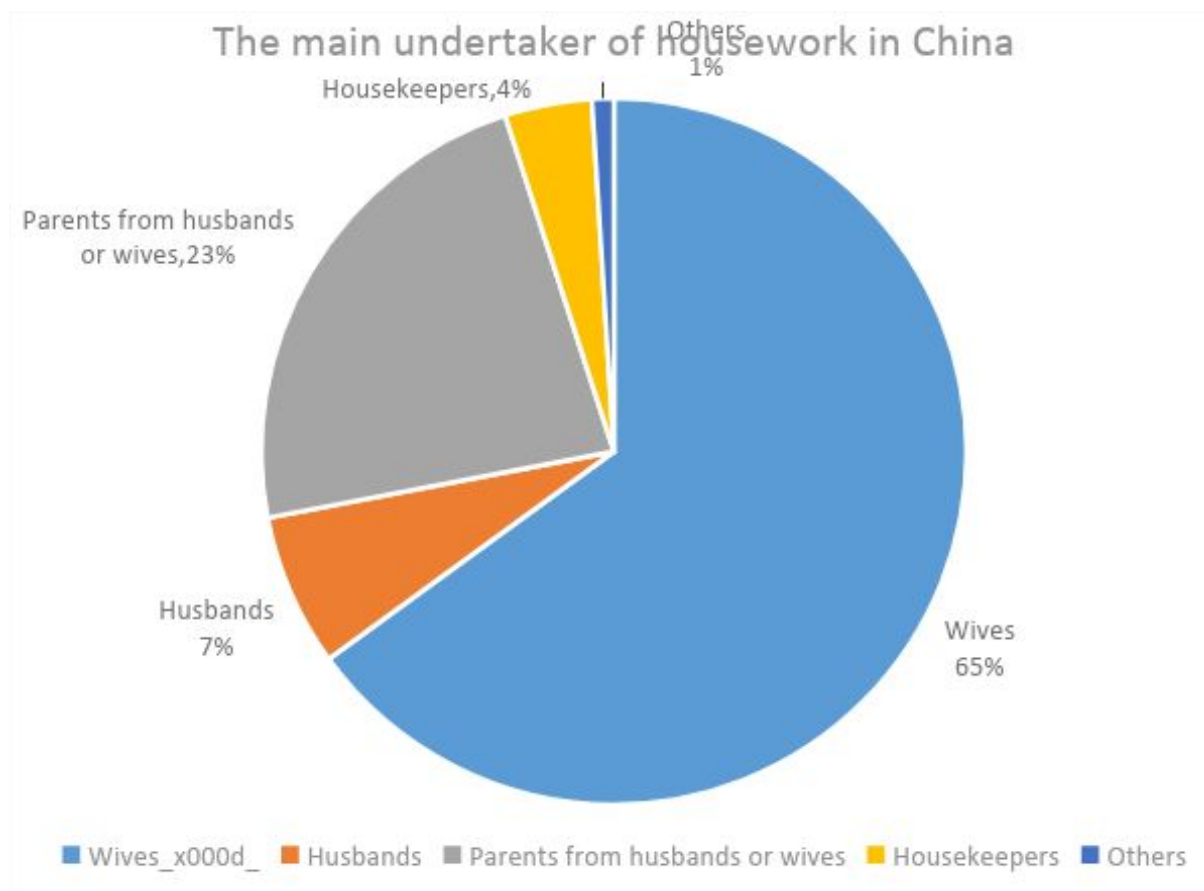


Figure 2: The main undertaker of housework in China

Source: Annual report on Chinese women's state of life (2017)

The chart in figure 2 above shows that in a Chinese average family, unpaid housework is mainly undertaken by wives and parents of husbands and wives. Except onerous housework, Chinese women also have to shoulder heavy responsibilities to look after their children.

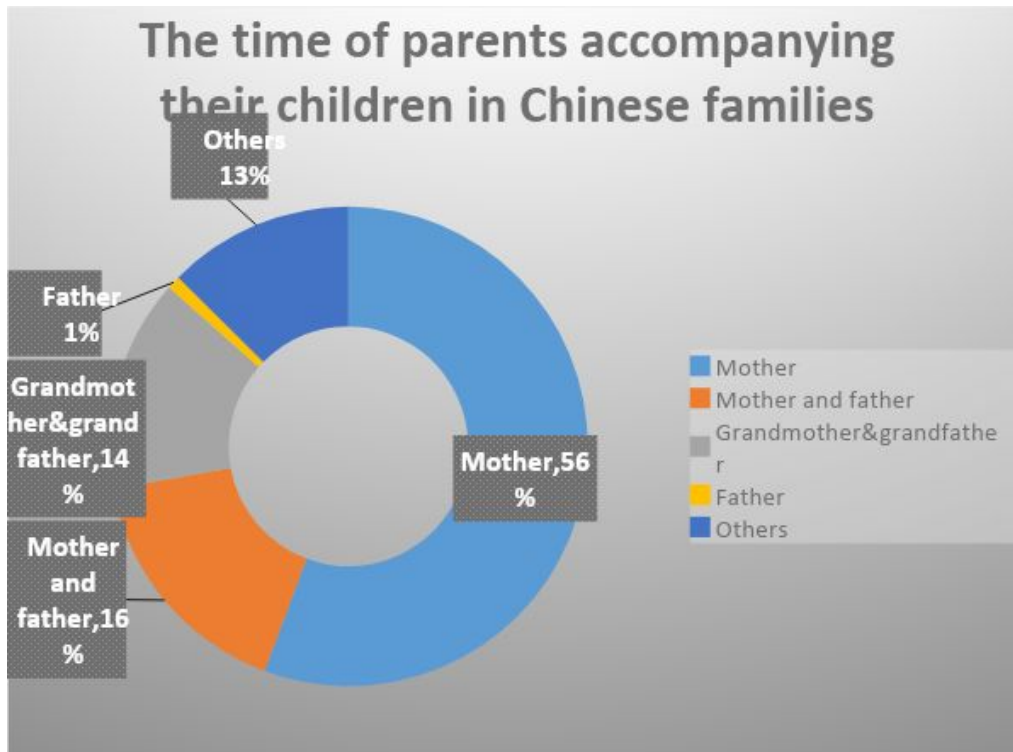


Figure 3: The time of parents accompanying their children in Chinese families

Source: Parent-child companionship of Chinese families in 2017

From these kinds of social phenomena, it is obvious to see that it is not easy to be a working woman in China, and difficulties can start early on the career path. Companies tend to worry about women giving birth and taking time off work. Gender inequality is a critical issue in the Chinese labour market, the report from Human Right Watch shows that most job ads in China have a specific gender requirement or preference, no matter high paying jobs or low paying jobs.

1.2 Research purpose and objectives

1.2.1 Purpose

Previous research studies have indicated how Confucianism influences Chinese culture and further influences Chinese SOEs' organizational culture. The data discussed above also show that Chinese SOEs have been dominant in the national economy. Last but not least, they also exhibit that Chinese females suffer from gender discrimination in their living conditions, for example, low employment rate, poor quality of woman's employment, difficulty to get higher positions, unequal pay for equal work, social requirement of "male superiority and female inferiority" and fertility pressure from Chinese traditional concepts and so on.

However, there is very limited research on the status of women in Chinese SOEs as well as if they also suffer similar gender discrimination and levels of discrimination.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to deepen or expand our understanding of the state of women's work life conditions and employment status in Chinese SOEs.

1.2.2 Research questions

The two main research questions of this case study are:

(A) Do women working in Chinese SOEs perceive that they are discriminated against by their employer because of their gender? If yes, how?

(B) To the extent that women do not have careers comparable to men in similar circumstances, what factors other than discrimination by the employer influence their position in work and life?

In this research, some cultural and organizational theories also would apply for this research, such as Scott's (2003) and Schein's (2010) institutional theories, which were used to explain how organizational cultures are embedded in every organization, as well as Hofstede's (2010) cultural theory. Moreover, Acker's (2006) theories, and theories from Parpart et al. (2000), Cook & Razavi (2012) et al are used for explaining gender inquiries in different social organizations and groups.

For these research questions, two Chinese SOEs have been chosen for this research, one is a telecommunication enterprise and the other is a postal enterprise. They are traditional SOEs (both were established in 1949), both male-dominated organizations, and they are typical large-power-distance organizations because China is a large-power-distance country (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010, ch.4). For these two questions, there was some previous research showing that Chinese women are discriminated against in their career life because of their gender. Nevertheless, not many academic research studies focus on female employees' career situations in Chinese SOEs. The aim of this case study is to collect and conclude the interview data from two Chinese SOEs, combined with relevant theories to figure out the reasons and the origins of gender problems in Chinese SOEs. These gender problems will be collected through interviews towards some Chinese SOEs employees and be analyzed. For these two questions, there was some previous research showing that Chinese women are discriminated against in their career life because of their gender. Nevertheless, not many academic research studies focus on female employees' career situations in Chinese SOEs. The aim of this case study is to collect and conclude the interview data from two Chinese SOEs, combined with relevant theories to figure out the reasons and the origins of gender problems in Chinese SOEs. These gender problems will be collected through interviews towards some Chinese SOEs employees and be analyzed.

1.3 Previous research

How Parpart et al.(2000) defined "Gender discrimination in labour market"? They pointed out that it is a gender barrier for gender equality, it exists in the laws, norms and practices of a society, it is an obstacle to gender equality.

A Chinese recruitment agency did a research (The current status of Chinese women's workplace report in 2019), which shows that in 2019 in China, there is still a gap of 23% between male and female average salaries and the chance of promotion for females is still narrow in their career life. Among the top management positions, the proportion of men is as high as 81.3%, while that of women is only 18.7%. There is a lot of previous research

showing that the reason for this social phenomenon is that the burden of childbearing women is still the core reason, thus enterprises and employers keep women out of the door. In terms of the reasons for the obstacles to get a promotion, the proportion of women who choose the reason "be in the stage of marriage and childbirth and passively lose promotion" is 4.6 times that of men, while the proportion of women who choose the reason "discrimination against women" is 10.6 times that of men.

Gender stereotypes still exist no matter where/when. Some primary words to describe women in communal characters: affectionate, helpful, friendly, kind, sensitive, soft-spoken and so on. To describe men's characters, these words are used: aggressive, ambitious, dominant, self-confident, forceful, self-sufficient, individualistic and so on. These stereotypes about gender are deeply rooted in the division of labour in a society and its labour market (Barreto et al., 2009). Therefore, in a male-dominated environment, it is usually not regarded as appropriate for women to have leader roles because of peoples' beliefs about gender and leaders. Women leaders are often blamed as lacking the qualities of a good leader, for example, "not tough enough", but if they have met requirements of a good leader, they would be accused as "just like a man". Furthermore, gender stereotypes have been treated which can influence women's performance in their working environment (Barreto et al., 2009).

Thus, in this case study, in order to reach a better understanding of Chinese women's status in their workplace in Chinese SOEs, previous academic researches about gender discrimination that Chinese women face in their career life will be introduced in this part.

Since 1949, the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Chinese women's status in their families has increased, they get more opportunities for education and employment. After that, there are some laws have published to protect gender against in workplace: the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (Constitution 1993), the Women Workers and Employees' Labor Protection Regulations (Labor Protection Regulations), the Labor Law and the Law for the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests (LPWRI). However, Bulger's research (2000) points out that some practices have proven that women actually couldn't get equal employment opportunities in the Chinese labor market, because laws emphasize that women's welfare that employers are obliged to offer, lead to the result that employers would like to hire men in order to reduce trouble at the workplace. In Chinese society, it is difficult for women to challenge gender discrimination in the labour market and the workplace because of imperfections of the laws (Bulger, 2000).

In contemporary China, women have become the main labour force in low-income jobs. Chinese employers normally hire men instead of women to reduce trouble in maternity leave and child care expenses. Traditional Chinese culture thinks that a woman's primary job is looking after her family, women not only work full time jobs but also need to do housework and looking after children and families after work. Some women have to do lower-skilled and lower-paid jobs (Bulger, 2000). The topic about "glass ceiling" not only focuses on USA's and Europe's women, but also exists in Chinese women's career life (Burnett, 2010).

In the Chinese labour market, gender gaps are reflected in three aspects (Jing-yi & Tao, 2020),

- Labor force participation rate
 - a. The inequality of educational resources leads to the accumulated inequality of human capital. Nowadays, more women are college educated than before, but they still suffer from gender inequality at the admissions policy in Chinese universities. Compared with male students, female students need to get higher credits to get offers from most of Chinese universities, and some programmes only admit male students. The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China thinks that “ This is a manifestation of gender equality in China”
 - b. The inequality of working time, women not only spent time on their job but also housework.
- Gender discrimination in recruitment and promotion. Despite China having a higher labor force participation rate compared with other developing countries, but there are few women in leadership roles, women were just 17% of all legislators, senior officials, and managers in China, and only 17.5% of firms in China have women as top managers.
- Labor reward, Chinese women’s average annual income lags behind men’s (Catalyst, 2017).

There are two figures which come from Jing-yi & Tao’s research in 2020, they show that the salary gap changes by gender in China.

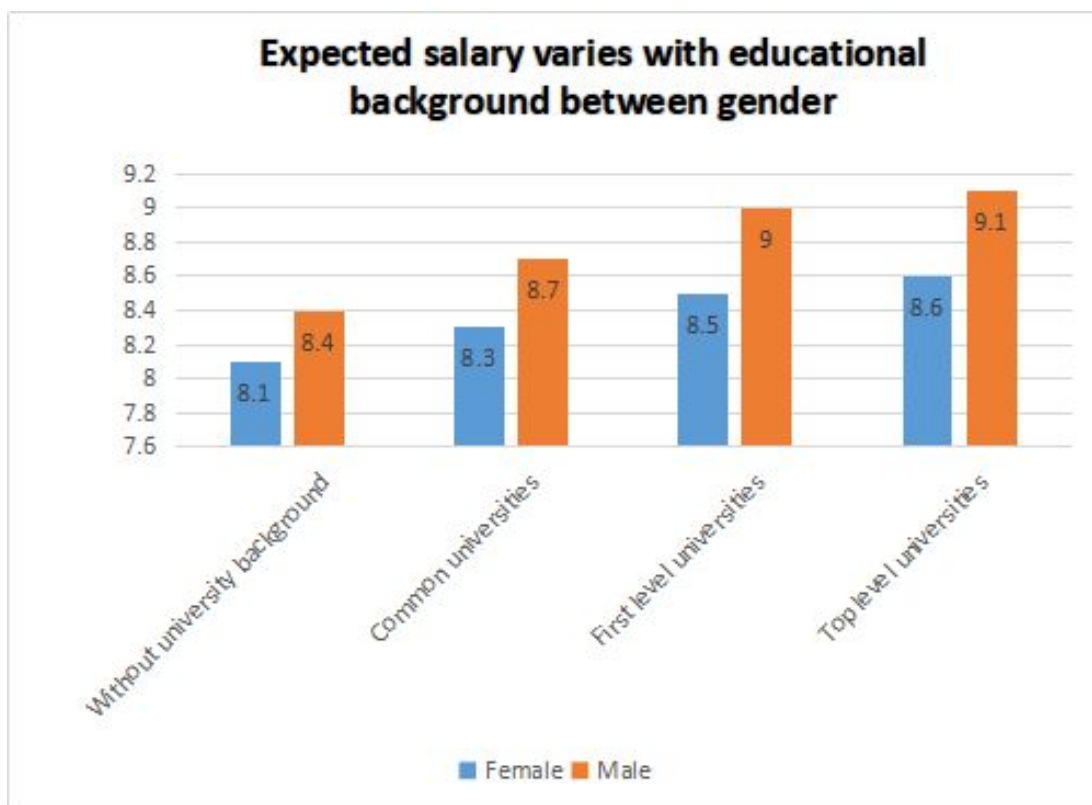


Figure 4: Expected salary varies with educational background between

Source: Motherhood Penalty in Career Development, Jing-yi, Liao & Tao Zhou, 2020

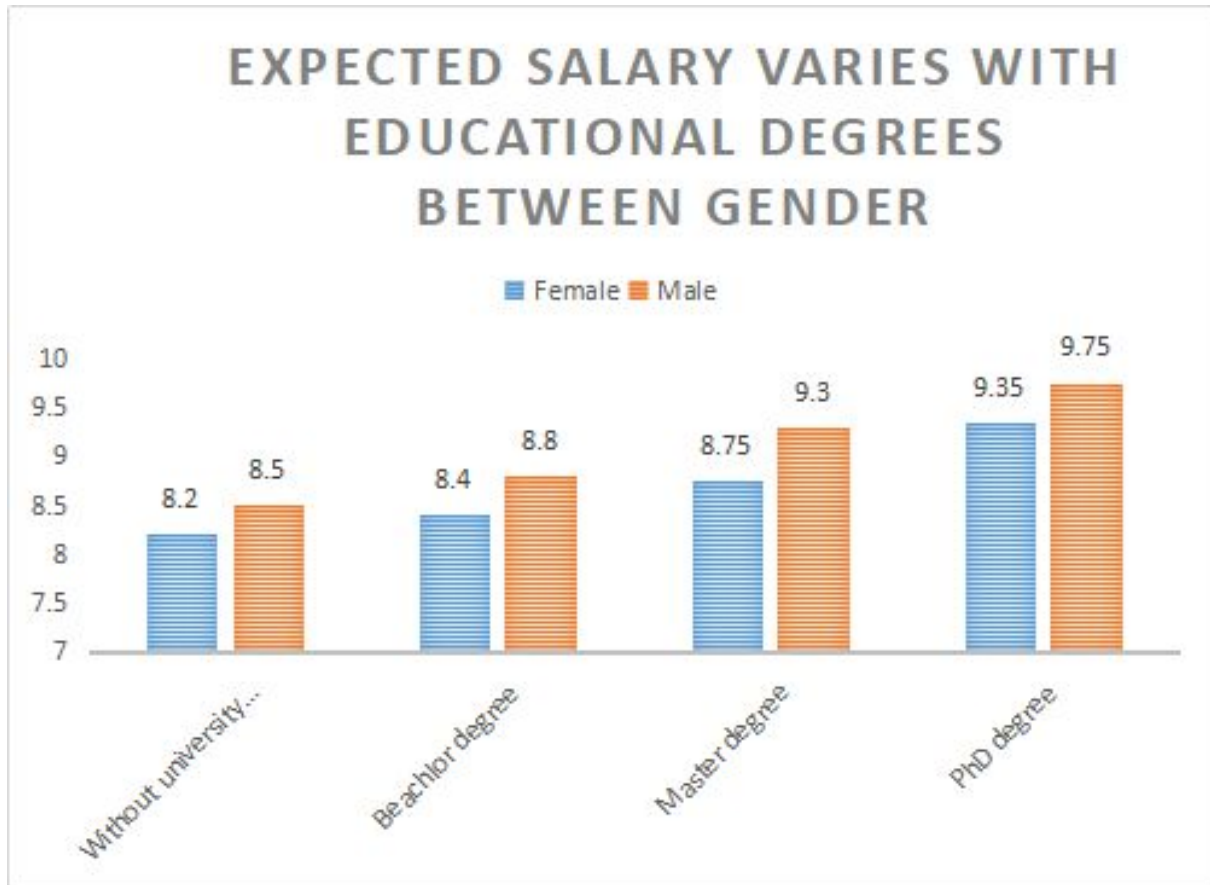


Figure 5: Expected salary varies with educational degrees between gender

Source: Motherhood Penalty in Career Development, Jing-yi, Liao & Tao Zhou, 2020

The Chinese government also has published some policies to improve employment at a period of unemployment caused by economic reform, but there is almost no policy that considers women's situations. In these policies, the government appealed that women stop working for several years after getting married or the birth of a child to give a way for men in the labor market. The policy was opposed by the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) (Bulger, 2000).

From a report of HRW (2018), five discriminatory practices were listed.

1. **Requirement of an educational background for females is higher than males.** For example, in a recruitment ad in China, a job is named "city management assistants", male applicants only needed a high school diploma then can apply for the position, while women were required to have an associate's degree. In a teachers college, the positions are political counselors, female applicants were asked for both bachelor and master's degrees must be from 211, 985 universities (211, 985 universities are first level and top level universities in China), but male applicants were only required second universities, and the gender rate of the positions is 2 female and 8 male.

2. **Women are a mere object of sexual desire in recruitment.** Using women's gender characteristics to recruit, such as slim bodies, beautiful faces and young ages. In an ad, the employer required "High school diploma or above, female, 18 to 30-years-old, net height 163 centimeters or higher, trim figure, aesthetically pleasing".
3. **Gender discriminations are based on women's marital status and family status, but not for men.** Many job ads in Chinese labour market require "female, married with children, excellent image and temperament" or "women must be married with children, or men."
4. **Use women as sexual attractions and props to attract male employees. women's physical attributes are described in job ads to attract male employees, these job ads emphasize women's physical attractiveness, creating a sexual/attractive working environment to encourage sexual harassment of female employees by male employees.**
 - a. "One employee who graduated from Harvard was quoted saying, 'The reason I joined Tencent (A Chinese IT company) originated from a primal impulse. It was mainly because the ladies at human resources and that interviewed me were very pretty.'(ibid.)"
 - b. "In September 2012, an on-campus recruitment poster by Meituan, China's largest group deals website, ignited widespread public condemnation. The poster showed the bare legs of a woman with a pair of underwear around her calves. It read, 'Finding a job = finding a woman. Do what you want to do the most.' (找工作=找女人, 干你最想干的) The Chinese word 'do' has a connotation of sexual intercourse. (ibid.)"
5. **Age discrimination.** Some job ads require " female applicants and that they should be between 28 and 35 years old" (ibid).

Not only gender, Chinese government requires retirement ages, women's retirement ages earlier than men for a few years. In some industries, they state age requirements when they are at recruiting and promotion processes(Bulger, 2000).

In 2007, China passed a law which influences females's rights to work: the Employment Promotion Law aims to create a fair employment environment in the Chinese labour market. The law supports Chinese women to get fair employment conditions. Nevertheless, this law has some defects which allow employers to evade the intentions of the law. For example, employers could use the label "unsuitable for women" to refuse females' job applications (Burnett, 2010).

A study by Tatli et al. (2017) shows that Chinese female managers suffer from the culture, market forces, competitive pressures, and individual choices, which make them subject to gender discrimination, and they found out that gender inequality in management is also maintained through the compliance of the women themselves, because the number of females in higher positions is less than males, so that they don't have ability against the unequal distribution in organizations, *"any challenge to the existing order is unrealistic"*

because of long-term traditional gender hierarchies in Chinese organizations (Tatli, et al.,2017).

Some researchers (Acker, 2006; Cooke & Xiao, 2014) also found that women's status has improved in the past decades, and women have made strides professionally, but higher positions in different organizations are still dominated by males. A statistics result from Cheng, Chan, & Leung (2010) shows that China is a culturally masculine country which is dominated by males in senior positions.

Men have the advantage of possessing more power, wealth and higher status through the Chinese traditional culture. Power, wealth and status is something women only can obtain from men, thus have caused a pattern of "male masters and female subordinates" or "male superiority and female inferiority" (Wen-lian & Qun-yin, 2006; Ni Su-xiang, 2014). Child and Warner (2003) also think that Confucianism still influences Chinese everyday life, one character of Confucianism is "fidelity of wife to husband in a family". Confucianism is a guideline for Chinese people's daily life and belief system.

And from social and economic perspectives, Tatli et al. (2017) point out that they got some key points about gender discrimination in the Chinese labour market from their interviewees: because of long-term cultural constructs of gender hierarchy and profit oriented market logic, the policy of "equal rights with men and women" does not work in the current Chinese labour market. After the interviews, they found out a deep reason which influences women's career life: "*men and women are ascribed different motives for very similar behaviors*" in the Chinese labour market. If a man changes his job, he is routinely described as "a person who has ambition", but a woman normally could get the comment: she doesn't have capability to do her last job (Tatli et al.,2017).

Since the 1990s reforms of the economic system, Chinese SOEs do not totally dominate the national economy, nevertheless this change doesn't impact the development of SOEs, it's still an economic backbone in China (Ralston et al., 2006), and Chinese governments still keep SOEs in key industries (Child, 2002).

Child and Warner (2003) explained that the current Chinese culture still is orientated by hierarchical and collective thinking, and as an inherent character in Chinese management culture, especially in traditional SOEs, its culture emphasizes top-down leadership and authority, collectivism and mutual dependence and loyalty, which come from Confucianism. In Chinese organizations, gender inequality in higher positions is created by the mental and physiological differences between men and women or Confucianism (Tatli et al.,2017).

In Bulger's research (2000), there were some suggestions that pointed out how Chinese women challenge gender discrimination at workplaces. He suggested that from education, legislative protections and social insurance to solve gender discrimination issues. At the same time, he also stresses that gender discrimination isn't an independent and single issue, it will need a long time effort to change hundreds of years of tradition and belief in China.

However, there were not too many previous research studies that focussed on Chinese women's status in the workplace and how they can deal with the relationship between family and career when they face different pressures.

Inequality is required to be solved promptly according to these reasons from a report by UNRISD (2015): 1) Economic growth and mitigation of poverty is hindered by inequality, 2) Inequality corrodes the social fabric, and the social fabric needs the economy to keep it stable. Therefore, gender inequality and economic development are correlative. This could be cited by Pateman and Brennan's (1998) points " This was an ironic, and tragic, development for women since at one and the same time, and as part of the same social process, liberal individualist ideas emerged that held out a promise of freedom and equality for women, yet socioeconomic changes denied that promise and reinforced patriarchy(1998: 97)"

2. Theoretical framework

This study about Chinese women in Chinese SOEs concerns gender equality. Acker's (2006) research showed that different organizations have different practices and methods in their development processes to achieve their goals, but these practices and methods produce gender discrimination in organizations at the same time. There are, according to Acker, six interconnected components of gender inequality regimes (Acker, 2006):

- The bases of inequality
- Shape and degree of inequality
- Organising processes that produce inequality
- The visibility of inequalities
- The legitimacy of inequalities
- Control and compliance

Acker (2006) also points out that inequality regimes have relationships with the social environment, politics, history and culture and different organization development processes. Gender discrimination has been ignored in organizations because awareness of inequality does not exist within organizations, in other words, organizations have some mechanisms that naturalize and normalize inequality, these mechanisms are harder to shake which makes gender inequality legitimized in organizations (Acker, 2006), and at the same time, organizational controls aim at maintaining the power of leaders, making employees accept the unequal systems. Gendered inequality has been embedded in the control mechanisms, it is complicated and diversified, and it is an impediment for women against inequalities and compliance in organizations. It is also a critical reason of organizations' discrimination (Acker, 2006).

Scott's (2003) institutional theories stressed that the social force and culture pressure have been embedded in organizations and impact organizations' practices and structures. Culture is not only embedded in organizations, but also exists in every group. As Hofstede (2010) points out, no organization can hide from culture, it is a precondition for organizations' survival and development. And once the culture is set in an organization, it will be copied and carried forward from generation to generation. In Schein's theory (2010), organizational culture has three sources, 1) the founders' beliefs, values and assumptions, 2) group members' learning experiences from the organizational development process, 3) new members bring in new ideas, values and assumptions. So, organizational culture reflects the organizations' ability to cope and learn.

In the concept of gender roles, most societies have a common trend, distribution of gendered social roles (Hofstede, 2010, ch4), men are considered to be more focused on

achievement outside their home, they “*are supposed to be assertive, competitive, and tough*”. Women's gender roles are more concerned with the inside environment: families. Because females are supposed to play a role of feminine characters - looking after homes, children and people (Hofstede,2010). The stable model of gender roles is decided by *socialization*, through socialization, males and females understand their social division of labor and social status, and most of them would follow this social orientation (Hofstede, 2010).

“Equal opportunity” is defined by Parpart et al. (2000) in their book as “ must create conditions that make women have the same options as men and the same life chances.” An important determinant of a woman's position in society is gender relations. It is a social construction of gender relationship, which is the social definition and determination of ideas and practices, the ideas and practices related to feminine and masculine characteristics, activities, and ways of relating to one another, it could be changed if needed (Parpart et al. , 2000).

Cook & Razavi (2012) point out that the labour market is a complicated institution which is organized by social norms, discriminatory forces and unequal power. When mentioned about gender issues in labour markets, Phillips and Taylor (1980:79) found that “the work of women is often deemed inferior simply because it is women who do it”, thus labour markets are gendered institutions which operate on social norms, discriminatory forces and power inequalities to value male and female labour in a different way.

After a gendered analysis from labour markets, Cook & Razavi (2012) got three important points: first, compared with men, women have less/bad resources to come to labour markets. Second, women’s less/bad resources influence their right to the market. The last but not least, because of the first two findings, “gender inequalities are structured into the way markets operate by discriminatory practices inherited from the past as well as by the differential exercise of power by different market actors”.

To sum up, gender discrimination in labour markets have key considerations from a gendered perspective(Cook & Razavi,2012):

1. Males and females have different resources which cause gender inequality
2. Females are more constrained by social obligations and and social norms because of gender inequality so that they do not have much opportunities as males to access labour markets
3. The regulations (no matter formal and informal) in labour markets, often embody discriminatory social/gender norms
4. Females have to face more constraints than males, on how they divide their time earnings because of family responsibilities.

China is, according to Hofstede, a collectivist country, thus the individualism index (IDV) scores are lower than in many other countries. “Power distance indexes could be computed not only for countries but also for occupations, individualism indexes can be calculated only for countries, not for occupations” (Hofstede, 2010). Most Chinese enterprises are performance-oriented units, employees have a strong pressure to do their job, the

organization is only interested in employees' performance rather than their personal and family welfare (Hofstede, 2010).

Scott (2003) shows that social identity could influence organizations' decisions, such as gender, age, social class, nation and so on. Then it is easy to know, there are some factors that create gender inequality in organizations: social, cultural, political, and economic setting (Acker, 2006), so Chinese long term historical and social background have been influenced by Confucianism's gendered relations theory at work and home areas (Leung, 2003). According to Acker's (2006) research, gender discrimination is often ignored in organizations because of legitimized evolutionary process and normalize inequality which are informed by social political ideologies and social and economic development level in a country (Acker, 2006).

3. Method

3.1 Research methods of the case study

To collect effective data, the critical factor of a research paradigm is the method that researchers select. For apply to data collection and analysis, there are two paths for data collection: qualitative and quantitative (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Qualitative research is a research strategy to collect and analyze valid data from text/words, the critical way of qualitative research is emphasizing an inductive method between theory and research.

Quantitative research is another research strategy which focuses on quantification in the data collection and analysis, it is a deductive method between theory and research.

There are differences between qualitative research and quantitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Table 1: Fundamental differences between quantitative and qualitative research strategies

Source: Business research methods, Bryman & Bell, 2015, P 27, Table 1.1

	<i>Qualitative research</i>	<i>Quantitative research</i>
Principal orientation to the role of theory in relation to research	A inductive approach; generation of theory	A deductive approach, testing of theory
Epistemological orientation	Interpretivism	Natural science model, in particular positivism
Ontological orientation	Constructionism	Objectivism

As mentioned above, this is a case study, the aim is the detailed exploration of a specific case, the critical factor of a case study is the case could focus on a community, organization, or person as a case. To build a successful case study, appropriate research methods are needed, which are used to collect data and relevant information (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Some critical elements of a case study need to be considered: 1) towards on "How" and

“Why” in a case research, 2) a case study cannot be manipulated by organizers, 3) organizers should consider contextual conditions because they reflect relevant phenomenon under the case study, 4) if the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are clearly distinguished (Yin, 2003).

In this case, two Chinese SOEs were chosen and used as one case study, the only reason is these two Chinese were a SOE, after enterprise reform, around 1990s, the old SOE became two independent SOEs, thus they had had a long time same historical background and now they still keep old business models (dominated by the country), therefore they have similar enterprise system and culture.

In this case study, semi-structured interviews associated with qualitative research would be used. Using semi-structured interviews is to make sure that interviewees’ responses can be aggregated and analyzed effectively (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Two resources are used for this case study, one comes from reports about gender issues from different research organizations, another one came from interviews which have been done. The interviews questions are relevant with gender discriminations issues and discriminations against women in the recruitment process and their career life. The interviews were conducted with eight Chinese career women and two Chinese career men, their responses will show in the next section, and will take a discussion based on the interviews’ responses. Therefore, grounded theory will be applied in this study. Grounded theory is a research method which starts from data collection, and then reading the collection word by word and coding the data in order to analyze and get study results (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2013). It is a very popular qualitative method for social science research, especially for organizations research (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2013).

In this case study, two sub-questions need to be discussed (A) Do women working in Chinese SOEs perceive that they are discriminated against by their employer because of their gender? If yes, how? (B) To the extent that women do not have careers comparable to men in similar circumstances, what factors other than discrimination by the employer influence their position in work and life?

The research design was to interview 5 respondents in each enterprise. The respondents should be both managers and employees, working (worked) full-time in the two enterprises, they should be under 50 years old and have a certain level of education. The educational backgrounds have been chosen over bachelor degree, since because SOEs’ special historical background, some older employees do not have a higher educational background, because some of them took the place of their parents’ position (employees’ children in SOEs could get employment favourable treatment, it’s like an internal recruitment in SOEs, this kind of requirement doesn’t need to meet normal recruitment conditions).

The interviews had a duration of about 20-30 minutes. The interview questions consist of background questions, experiences with gender equality, the motivations/ obstructions of female in leadership positions, personal opinions about gender discrimination, personal experiences about gender discrimination, personal career life, potential attitude of female in leadership positions and so on (see appendix 1). These questions aim to help us analyze the state of women's career life in Chinese SOEs. Interviews were conducted face-to-face. The range of interviewees focus on two Chinese SOEs, 2 men and 8 women who work in these

two SOEs, the positions' range is from common clerks to a few higher positions in these enterprises.

The interviews had a potential risk, it was not easy for interviewees to open up and discuss their feelings with a stranger because of Chinese culture. Thus all interviews required comfortable or cozy environments such as a coffee shop or personal offices. The interview questions aimed to delve into interviewees' experiences, obstacles and challenges in their career life, and tried to find some perspectives from males to discuss what influences females' career life. The interviews allowed interviewees to express their views and opinions and at the same time discuss some social problems freely, these processes contain the interaction between interviewees and interviewer.

All interviewees work (worked) full time in two SOEs in a regional capital city in the southwest of China. China has more than a thousand SOEs, so the case study has to limit the field research to a location to get an effective result. This city has a thriving economic environment and the population is almost 5 million. The two SOEs belong to the communication and transportation industry, interviewees all have (had) permanent contracts (Tie Fan Wan). The age of the interviewees was from 30 to 45 years old, and the educational background was normally at bachelor degree. The attributes of the interviewees are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Interviewees' Background

<i>Interviewees</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Length of tenure in the company</i>	<i>Educational background</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Marital Status</i>
1	Female	18 years	Bachelor	Vice-chairman of the Union	Married
2	Male	13 years	Bachelor	Manager of security administration	Married
3	Female	16 years	Master	Clerk in HR department	Married
4	Female	22 years	Bachelor	Clerk	Married
5	Female	11 years	Bachelor	Clerk	Married
6	Female	29 years	Bachelor	Deputy director of general office	Divorced
7	Male	15 years	Bachelor	Vice general manager	Married

8	Female	11 years	Bachelor	Financial management	Married
9	Female	4 years	Bachelor	Clerk	Married
10	Female	19 years	Master	Marketing and planning manager	Single

3.2 Coding

Data analysis is a difficult but important step in qualitative research. Miles and Huberman (1994) stress that usually codes are attached to words, phrases, sentences or entire paragraphs of different sizes, these codes are connected or unconnected to a specific context, they can be shown by shorter or simple category labels or metaphors. Researchers can use code to find out relevant phenomena, collect similar examples and analyze to get “*commonalities, differences, patterns and structures*” in these examples (Seidel & Kelle, 1995).

Data from qualitative research are textual, thus need coding to help data analysis, then these data can be understood and organized. Coding helps researchers to communicate and connect data, thus can combine theories to get research results (Tehmina, 2003). Charmaz (2014) points out that coding is a way to classify segments of interview data with a short name and analyze the data. The codes should show the choice of data and offer a way for analyzing. The way is a relationship between researcher’s data and respondents, after coding (segments of data by summary, classification and consolidation), the researcher can make an analysis of stories, statements and observations from interviews. This case study used conventional qualitative analysis with coding which followed by emergent examples in interviews. This method is designed to prevent bias and preconceptions which come from subjective consciousness (Charmaz, 2014). The codes focus on interviewees career experiences and personal perspectives which came from their working environments (see Table 3).

Table 3: Codes identified by the coder and illustrative examples

Codes	Illustrative examples (parts)
<i>Traditional opinion (interviewees)</i>	<i>...Most of Chinese female had to “ family comes before your career”...most male thinks that the Union’s work should be doing by woman because it is too “womanishly fussy”...</i>
<i>Perceived social pressure</i>	<i>...Women have to play some traditional role. you have to obey social rules...</i>
<i>Family pressure</i>	<i>...my husband complains that I just look after my son and ignore him...but he refuses to help me to do</i>

	<i>housework...</i>
<i>Discrimination in Career/organizations</i>	<i>...women, couldn't be better than men...</i>
<i>Gender in recruitment</i>	<i>...in the same condition, my colleagues would like to choose male...female will face maternity leave problems...</i>
<i>Gender in higher position (Internal environment)</i>	<i>...the chairman always be a male...in some higher positions, female is less than male...</i>
<i>Discrimination from external environment</i>	<i>...some clients don't like female salespeople, or they just like beautiful salespeople...</i>
<i>Work-family balance</i>	<i>... I have two children, I want my children to have a warm and sweet home...</i>
<i>Technical barriers (skills)</i>	<i>...in some departments, HR or finance, female in higher positions is a bit more (than male)...</i>

The above codes have been used for analysis and findings.

3.3 Research Criteria

A case study is a more suitable way that could help the researchers understand a real social phenomenon deeply in a limited time (Yin, 2009), and also a strategy for a descriptive study (Morris and Wood (1991)). Therefore, validity and reliability should be considered.

In interviews, respondents' answers could be untruthful or could be misunderstood (Patel & Davidsson, 2003), thus validity is about if the results match the reality and if the researchers have the ability to get real contents in the research (Merriam, 2009). For getting real contents, the interview questions in this study have used the same questions to all interviewees. To record what the interviewees really said, all responses were recorded. In order to get an effective results, construct validity also got improved, construct validity can help "*identifying correct operational measures for the concepts being studied*" (Yin, 2009), thus interview questions got from multiple sources of evidence from previous researches, and used mutual interview questions to avoid the interviewees misunderstanding interview questions (Yin, 2009). In addition, for avoiding untruthful responses, all interviewees were informed that the whole interview would be anonymous. The aim of choosing two SOEs was to consider external validity, which concerns the generalizability of the study results (Merriam, 2009), two SOEs could help to increase the external validity in this study.

Reliability refers to "*the consistency and repeatability of the research procedures used in a case study*" (Yin, 2009). In other words, reliability means that through repeated operations one should get the same results (Yin, 2009).

4. Interviews results

In the following sections, the interview data are explored to reveal the interviewees' perspectives of gender equality/inequality which they meet in their lives. The analysis is structured in 4 parts which corresponds to the contents in the analysis of the data.

From the codes described above, as can be seen in the table 3, Chinese women face four main typical problems in their career life: gendered traditional opinions, organizational discrimination, social pressure and individual/personal choices (under different pressure).

The coding categories:

The codes have been divided into four categories:

Gendered traditional opinions - Traditional opinion (interviewees' opinion of gendered tradition), etc.

Organizational discrimination - Discrimination in career/organizations, Gender in higher position (Internal organizational environment), Technical barriers (skills), etc.

Social pressure - Perceived social pressure, Discrimination from external environment, etc.

Individual/Personal attitudes (under different pressure) - Family pressure (interviewees suffer from active or passive stress, because in Chinese traditional culture, family is an important role, it is impossible to discuss individuals without considering their family), Work-family balance, etc.

Table 4: Multiple influences for gender equality in interviewees

Multiple influences for gender equality in interviewees				
Interviewees	Gendered tradition & gender equality	Organizations & gender equality	Social pressure & gender equality	Individual & gender equality
1	√	√	√	
2	√	√	√	
3	√	√		√
4	√		√	√
5	√		√	
6	√	√	√	√
7	√	√	√	
8	√	√	√	√
9	√		√	√
10	√	√	√	√

4.1 Gendered tradition

The interviewees, no matter what kind of positions, educational background or gender, seem to be influenced by the traditional Chinese mindset: a family is dominated by its husband.

Social limitation, I think. Women have to play some traditional role. (Interviewee 2, male)

I think that it is a social division of labor, male is born with ambition/careerism, but females, you know, their natural mission is to give birth to and raise [bring up] children. (Interviewee 3, female)

Especially for women who have been influenced by Chinese traditional education/culture, they are more willing to focus on their family, even put their life in their families. (Interviewee 5, female)

These three interviewees' words all show a Chinese traditional thought: men go out to work while women look after the family. However, in contrast with ancient Chinese women, modern Chinese women not only need to look after their families, but also spend time and energy on their jobs. One research study (Anqi, 2004) shows that the attitude about "men go out to work while women look after the family" between Europe & US and Asian countries, women in Europe & US are opposed to it, but in Asian countries, women are more supportive, especially in Philippines, Japan and China.

Especially in the marketing field, some clients think that a female is just a vase, just need to accompany them to have dinner and drink. And if you finished a bigger programme, the male colleagues would say: Look! Woman's advantages! But once you didn't get the sale target, they would say: Oh, women, couldn't be better than men. I feel very high pressure from my career life. (Interviewee 10, female)

The interviewee's words indicate very obvious gender discrimination from her working environment. China and its organizations have been influenced by Confucianism and its culture for a long time, it means that it also has been influenced by the "Men's Superiority and Women's Inferiority" thought, this kind of thought also impacts organizational management and behaviour. That is one reason for women to suffer from gender inequality in their living environment and why some of them could accept these thoughts.

I agree with "as a woman, your family should come before your career". Do you think that men could take care of their children? I don't think so! They even cannot take care of themselves. (Interviewee 3, female)

I admit this view [as a woman, your family should come before your career], because, you know, everyone has to pay for their family, or sacrifice for their family. I have two children, raising children needs a lot of money, so I have to pay more energy for my family and my husband, thus my husband can be at ease to earn money. (Interviewee 4, female)

If I got a higher position, I wouldn't have enough energy to handle it, I have to look after my children, my husband, my parents, my parents in law. (Interviewee 4, female)

From interviewee 3 & 4, it is obvious to see that patriarchal ideology is strongly rooted in some Chinese females, no matter what their educational backgrounds are. Under the influence of this special social atmosphere, most women are getting used to the patriarchal ideology, they seem to think the ideology is a "correct guidance" or "oriented behaviour" in their life and follow it as behavior criteria in daily life. It might be a reason for them to forget about gender equality.

4.2 Organizations' gender equality/inequality

Gender inequality has been built in organizations' processes.

Even though my leader is a female, but she is just a leader in a small branch, and you know, this branch is located in a suburb in this city. This branch is not important but it has to exist, the productivity is low and the incomes are small.....If you talk about higher positions, I think so, gender is a main reason. (Interviewee 4, female)

But "Equal pay for equal work" doesn't mean gender equality. The promotional space of woman in our company is small, especially in higher positions.....When I wanted to get a higher position in my company, even though I got the highest score in the exam of promotion, but examiners think that I don't have too much energy to suit the position, and they told me, "you need to consider your son, you are a single mum, we hope you could have more time to accompany with your son". (Interviewee 6, female)

Interviewee 6 was faced with a "good intention" argument - her managers thought that she needed more time to accompany her son, so she couldn't get a higher position. Her organization put her in a traditional role of "a mother" instead of a career woman.

Normally, we would like to choose male, because, you know, male employees are stable, I mean, males don't have problems with pregnancy and feeding babies. Especially those females who have just graduated from universities, I have to say, we would like to choose males who have just graduated from universities, we need to consider cost. For example, if we hire a female who has just graduated from university, and we spend money and energy to train her, but might after a year, or two years, she might be getting married and preparing to be pregnant, at that time, we need to find someone to share her work... (Interviewee 7, male)

All organizations have gender inequality, no matter what kind of form of gender inequality.

Em, I cannot say gender is the "main reason" to influence the recruitment in my department or company, but it is a reason. Like I said before, I admit that many women are superior to men, but... social limitations, I think. Women have to play some traditional role. (Interviewee 2, male)

I think so [gender is a main reason to influence recruitment results]. For example, in the same condition, my colleagues would like to choose male, if they don't consider social networks and interpersonal relationships. Because females will face maternity leave problems, that is a long period. (Interviewee 3, female)

If you talk about higher positions, I think so, gender is a main reason [to influence the results]. (Interviewee 4, female)

Yes, it is [gender is a main reason]. For example, if we want to "borrow" a employee from another branch company, we would like to choose a male..... In that situation, that means we have a lot of due work that needs to be finished. A male doesn't need to look after his family and has more energy than a female. So, when we recruit, we

also would consider these factors. By the same token, also for higher position recruitment. (Interviewee 5, female)

Recruitment is a process for organizations to choose suitable employees, but in this process, employers would like to use gender-based requirements on applicants, females are suitable for some positions and males are suitable for others. Some interviewees think it quite common in their working environment, but they also tacitly approve a hidden rule: men are more suited to higher positions because they have no family “troubles”, it means that they also tacitly admit the gendered inequality.

Especially in the marketing field, some clients think that a female is just a vase, just needed to accompany them to have dinner and drink. And if you finished a bigger programme, the male colleagues would say: Look! Woman’s advantages! But once you didn’t get the sales target, they would say: Oh, women, couldn’t be better than men. I feel very high pressure in my career life.

.....I was told that I couldn’t get a higher position because some people think that one day I would get married and try to have a baby, it is a potential risk, they would like to have a man. (Interviewee 10, female)

From interviewees’ responses, it is also easy to see how gender influences recruitment in their organizations.

Table 5: Interview question: Gender is a reason to influence the recruitment in interviewees’ department/company?

Interviewee	Gender of interviewees	YES	NO	Inclined gender
1	Female	√		Male
2	Male	√		Male
3	Female	√		Male
4	Female	√		Male
5	Female	√		Male
6	Female	√		Male
7	Male	√		Male
8	Female	√		Female
9	Female	√		Male
10	Female	√		Male

Among ten interviewees, only one interviewee’s department prefers female employees, and the interviewee thinks that it is a “gender characteristic”, but she also mentioned that *“But...compared with males, we don’t like females who have just graduated from universities...you know, training cost...and when a woman is pregnant...means need someone to replace her work...”*

Organizational culture is an accumulation of organizational images, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors and values, this culture is particular, might share with other organizations or might

be unique, but organizational culture contains gender differences and equality/inequality (Acker, 2012). The interviewees' responses show that Chinese SOEs' organizational culture obviously includes some Chinese traditional ideology: "women are inferior to men" and prejudice against women from Chinese society.

4.3 Social pressure

There were some officious people, they don't care how many programs you have done, they just care about if you are getting married. In their opinion, if you don't get married, you must have a hidden disease or you are an insane person, or you are a lesbian...

Honestly, yes, I am worried! According to my experiences, the whole labour market is very unfriendly to females.....

As I told you before, women suffer from giant social pressure, unless you want to be a common woman, follow the requirements of society, to get married, to have a baby, to follow men.....

No matter where are you going, social pressures always exist in your life.....(Interviewee 10, female)

Obviously, interviewee 10 has gotten some offensive/discriminatory remarks from her working environment (colleagues) just because she has career ambitions and she doesn't want to follow some traditional rules, and these remarks are not only from males, but also from females.

Sometimes, Chinese social circumstances are not friendly for Chinese women, in Leta's research, a woman lost her job just because she wanted two weeks unpaid vacation for her honeymoon (Leta, 2016). This is just one issue in gender inequality, actually unmarried Chinese women arrive a certain age, they will get a term "sheng nv" (剩女), which means women who are left from the marriage market. Most unmarried women suffer from the pressure from their parents, relatives, friends and colleagues and from the mainstream media in China. Some mainstream media even teach Chinese women how to avoid being "a leftover woman". Some papers or reports from these media propagated "pretty girls without higher educational background can easily find rich husbands", and they hope women should realize their age, because women growing with age are worth less and less (Leta, 2016). The value of women in China is measured by their age and face instead of by their capability and educational background.

Leta (2016) points out that "women in China have experienced a dramatic rollback of rights and gains relative to men." Leftover women get the message from their social context: don't work hard and have high ambitions in your career life, don't be picky and with higher sights, when facing men, as a woman, you shouldn't be so picky. Then they will get rid of their "leftover" identity.

My husband always complains that I don't have time to look after our child, but, he never helps me to do any housework, and he just has little income, so we cannot afford a nanny. Now I advise you, if your lover has low income, don't get married, otherwise, you would become a nanny, a mother, an ATM. (Interviewee 9, female)

It seems some of them have gotten rid of the “leftover” identity, but they also have to suffer more identities and responsibilities.

Social pressure makes them [women] to make this choice. Only if she wants to be single.....otherwise, women have to return to the family. But, a woman's rights and interests can not be guaranteed under the current social system, once she had a family misfortune, for example, abandoned by their husband...that would be a bad result. (Interviewee 5, female)

And for higher positions, as I talked before, women might not have too much energy to focus on their career, because a career woman needs to pay a high price. And women's capability is doubted for a long time, some social opinions think that women can only stay at home. (Interviewee 8, female)

Women have to play some traditional role. you have to obey social rules... (Interviewee 2, male)

Actually, from the above responses, these are most Chinese people's expectations of women: need to give way to Chinese men in the labour market (especially in higher positions) and submit to men. After work women should stay at home, to be a nanny, a mother, and sometimes even to be an ATM for their families. From female interviewees' responses, no matter single or non-single, Chinese women all suffer from social pressure, and the social pressure makes women make some choices which they don't really want, such as to be a housewife and give up career life. These women have to give up different opportunities to satisfy the social traditional requirements, otherwise, they would be treated with some discriminatory judgement, which also becomes barriers in their career life.

4.4 Individual Choices

When asked about the statement “as a woman, your family should come before your career”, most female interviewees chose the answer “AGREE”.

Table 6: Female interviewees' choices about career and family

<i>Interviewee</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Unmarried/married</i>
1	Female	√			M
2	Male	√			M
3	Female	√			M
4	Female	√			M
5	Female			√	M
6	Female			√	Divorced
7	Male	√			M
8	Female	√			M
9	Female	√			M
10	Female		√		U

A few interviewees choose neutrality, they think that Chinese women's choice has to obey social pressure.

It depends on personal planning, I think. If a woman is a career woman... then she must make her career before her family, but I think this kind of woman is rare in China, especially for women who have been influenced by Chinese traditional education/culture... On the other hand, social pressure makes them make this choice. Only if she wants to be single... otherwise, women have to return to the family. (Interviewee 5, female)

I think it is just a social requirement, a social requirement from Chinese traditional culture. But for me, I have to obey it, because I am a single mum. (Interviewee 6, female)

This is very contradictory. For me, I hope my wife put our family at first position, but... I hope my daughter could choose what she really want to do when she grows up... "strong males and weak females" is not a gender discrimination, it is decided by physiological factors... and maybe social pressure. (Interviewee 7, male)

Interviewee 6 thinks that she doesn't have a choice, because she is a single mother, she has to get back to her family and she also thinks that women's choices are decided by social pressure. Contradictory choice from interviewee 7, shows that as a man, he understands gender equality and inequality influences women's choice, he hopes his wife could follow the traditional role, but doesn't hope his daughter to follow it, and he also understands that it is not easy to solve this issue. Actually it is a common thinking among interviewees that traditional ideology is a long-term constraint for women's personal choices.

No, I don't think so, I love my career life, I put a lot of effort into my career life. I would like to put it before my family...

I was told that I couldn't get a higher position because some people think that one day I would get married and try to have a baby, it is a potential risk, they would like to have a man...

According to my experiences, the whole labour market is very unfriendly to females. (Interviewee 10, female)

Compared with other female interviewees, interviewee 10 is the only one who insists to be a career woman, as apparent from her words above. To be a career woman is not easy in the Chinese labour market, it is not relevant with individual choice and personal capability. Gender, married/unmarried, divorced become barriers in Chinese women's career life. Chinese women's individual choice about their career life is more like a choice under gendered inequality pressure under current society instead of their truly individual choice.

As some interviewees point out, women's career life are more difficult than men's in China, interviewee 10 suffers from varied forms of gender discrimination, her capability, her private life is judged by working partners and employers who are all influenced by Chinese traditional culture, and of course, her "leftover" identity also makes her to suffer from discrimination, which also a barrier for her to be a career woman. Chinese traditional ideology is that women are inferior to men, serious discrimination exists in the tradition, and is thus full of all aspects of society, also is embedded into features of Chinese culture and

society, which makes women have to face lot of disadvantages in their career life. (Cooke,2001; Fan 2003; Meng & Miller, 1995)

The expected career for Chinese women is subordinating to their husband and to take on family responsibilities (Cooke, 2005). So, under this ideology, “Widowed marriage and widowed childcare (丧偶式婚姻/育儿)” has appeared in the current society, widowed marriage and widowed childcare mean that In a marriage, the husband doesn’t care/participate any family affairs/activities, doesn’t communicate/talk with his wife/children, like he was dead. It is also a reason which influences women’s career life.

I think family comes first. If you want to investigate if gender discrimination influences Chinese women, you’d better understand what is “Widowed marriage and widowed childcare”, then you would know why they have to do some choices. (Interviewee 8, female)

Have you heard of “Widowed marriage and widowed childcare”? I think I have these kinds of problems, not always, but from time to time. And my husband complains that I just look after my son and ignore him... but he refuses to help me to do housework. And I don’t think that my company would like to give me opportunities in higher positions. Compared with females, males have more opportunities in this company, actually, not in this company, in the whole society. (Interviewee 5, female)

Obviously, all their choices are made under pressure from traditional ideology and society, under pressure to get married, under pressure to be inferior to men (husband, female colleagues and so on), under pressure to do individual choices.

4.5 Another aspect of Chinese culture: social obligations (dinners) for business development

In addition to the above four multiple influences, another aspect of Chinese culture also has impacted Chinese women’s career life. For Chinese, “dinner” has special meaning, thus generally important banquets are scheduled for the evening (Xuefei & Miaoqing, 2011). In the current Chinese society, interactions between enterprises more use social obligations (dinners) to develop their businesses, most contracts are signed at the table of dinners (social obligations). In these kinds of dinners, drinking is a sign of cooperation, the more drinking, the more sincerity of cooperation (Gaofeng, 2004).

You know, a higher position, a greater responsibility, and more social intercourse. Now every week, I have social obligations two or three times (dinners), that means I cannot have dinner with my daughter on those days. If in a higher position, maybe the times of social intercourse would increase, that’s not what I want... I could not choose a female to be my deputy, because I couldn’t ask a female to work at night, couldn’t ask a female to have a longer business trip, I couldn’t ask a female to do social obligations (dinners), you know, in this kind of dinner, you need to drink too much. Otherwise, the female might lose her family, her husband won’t be happy with what she does. Because she couldn’t look after her family when she focuses on these kind of working issues... (interviewee 2, male)

Sometimes leadership positions should be distributed to male may have some special reasons. For example, it's easy for men to have social obligations (dinners) with clients. These kinds of social obligations (dinners) usually are organized in the evening and you need to drink, in this aspect, the Chinese male has more advantages: they don't need to take care of children. And there are some negative comments to women who participate these kind of social obligations (dinners) in Chinese society...(Interviewee 6, female)

I have to say, yes, the social obligations (dinners) is also a part of work sometimes...(Interviewee 7, male)

Women should focus on family, otherwise I wouldn't resign my previous job. Because my husband doesn't like, he doesn't like my previous job, that job had too much “应酬 (social obligations (dinners))”, he thinks that I didn't have much time to look after our child...(Interviewee 9, female)

From the above responses, obviously men have more advantages in this special culture, and women, the culture of social intercourse is like an invisible door that blocks their career life. No matter if the social obligations is a normal social phenomena, if they really wanted to join the “dinner”, then they probably would meet another problem: sexual harassment.

You know why marketing departments like to hire females, especially beautiful females? Because clients like it! You know, when you have dinner with them, when you start drinking, they can't keep their hands off you, once you say no, then you would lose this business. I think it is a kind of gender inequality... (Interviewee 9, female)

5. Discussion

From the interviews results, it can be seen that Chinese women suffer from at least three different pressures: Chinese traditional gendered opinion, organizational discrimination and social pressure. These keep imposing pressure on Chinese women, thus making some women have to focus more on their family life, which puts them under increased family pressure and in turn making their family have to come before their career.

Why do these pressures exist in Chinese society and is it difficult to be changed?

Most of the researchers referenced above point out that Confucianism is a pervading guiding ideology in Chinese traditional culture and thought. Chinese traditional culture is dominated by Confucianism, some ideas were emphasized in Confucian culture (Wen-lian & Qun-yin, 2006; Su-xiang, 2014). In Confucius's opinions, husbands and wives are subordinate relationships, wives' status was lower than husbands' in ancient China (Fan, 2000). There are three basic guides from Confucianism: ruler guides subjects, father guides son and husband guides wife (Child & Warner, 2002).

In Child's research (2002), he thinks that culture and institutions can influence organizational behaviour via different ways, especially to personal behaviour and attitude, which also could extend to organizational management and practices.

Patriarchal society is a common problem in the world, but because of Chinese long history and traditional ideology accumulation, this problem is particularly prominent in China. The gendered culture formed in the long-term development of patriarchal society, such as male strength, female weakness, male superiority and female inferiority, are deeply embedded in the Chinese social environment (Yinghua, 2015). On the other hand, Chinese people, especially Chinese females' lack of consciousness of equal rights, have not been liberated from the traditional division of gender roles yet. Of course Chinese females have already moved from the private area (family area) to the public area (working field), but they still cannot get rid of traditional roles, to educate and take care of their children, parents (including parents in law) and cumbersome housework in the family is still regarded as women's responsibility and obligation in Chinese current society (Yinghua, 2015).

Under the above social environment, apparently these cultures have already influenced different organizations. The foundation of gender inequality has been built in organizations' processes, from positions, levels of salary, making decisions, supervisory power and rules in the working environment, all apparent and non-apparent in organizations (Acker, 2012). Some of the direct gender inequality might have been hidden by some mandatory provisions of laws or administrative regulations, but it might hide under the table and get back in different ways. For example, "objective appraisal of women's abilities to do a specific job" (Acker, 2012).

Acker's studies (2006) show that all organizations have gender inequality, these inequalities include decisions in organizations, opportunities for promotion, security in employment and benefits, respect and so on, just several levels are different in various organizations. Gendered and sexualized assumptions still decide the class situations of women and men in organizations. Inequality in organizations are flowing and changing, it is influenced by surroundings - society, politics, history, and culture (Acker, 2006).

Gender selection as a prejudice creates structures of inequality in organizations, in this process, criteria of competence is not only a criterion of recruitment, organizational criteria involve judgment of gender selections (Acker, 2006).

Sometimes interactions on the job (between males and females) normally would become an affirmation of gender inequality, males use interactions to belittle or exclude females, especially in male dominated organizations (Acker, 2012).

When women live in an atmosphere which is full of gender inequality, most of them would easily compromise with the society. The social roles of Chinese women are wives and mothers, their main social responsibilities are "serving for their husbands and families" and "to have children", thus, traditionally, single or non-single career women all violate social expectations (Xudong, 2016; Walton & Takeuchi, 2010).

In one research study (Tatli et al.,2017), all interviewees' words in the study can show that there are some conflicts between the spheres of Chinese women's work, personal life and family.

Moreover, the interviewees' responses in this study mentioned another aspect of Chinese business culture, “应酬” (social obligations (dinners)), this is a reason but now main reason for some Chinese men who cannot look after and keep company with their family from time to time, and also to be a block for some Chinese women in their promoting way.

6. Conclusion

This study used four main multiple influences (Gender tradition, Organizational pressure, Social pressure and Individual choices) to discuss gender inequality, to inquire into the gender inequality and sexism in two Chinese SOEs in two industries. In some extent, these influences could emerge barriers on Chinese women's career life, these barriers contain gendered traditional pressure, organizational discrimination, social pressure and individual/personal choices and so on. The traditional ideology that “women are inferior to men” covers thousands of years, and also influences current social culture and ideology, which impact women's advancement in their career life, and make them suffer from huge pressures. In a male-dominated society, women's performance and career choices are influenced by gender stereotypes, the glass ceiling (women's limitation of how high positions they can get in organizations) and other forms of gender inequality has become a critical issue for organizations (Barreto et al., 2009). Culture and traditions under Chinese characteristics make gender inequality and sexism to become invisible, legitimized, and internalized, which means the inequality regimes actually is made up by Chinese culture and traditions (Tatli et al., 2017).

Compared with men, Chinese women have to face varied barriers in their career life, in addition to the recruitment stage, there are also many barriers in women's career life, such as progression, redundancy and retirement, they are promoted more slowly than men, no matter in SOEs or other types enterprises, and women are more at risk of unemployment than men, to get married or become pregnant also put women in the risk of unemployment (Cooke 2001, 2005; Leung 2003; Liu 2006).

An editorial in mainstream media taught Chinese women how to “improve” themselves (Leta 2016, p 20):

“When you find out that he is having an affair, you may be in a towering rage, but you must know that if you make a fuss, you are denying the man “face”... No man is capable of spending a lifetime being loyal to an outmoded wife who never changes... Try changing your hairstyle or your fashion. Women must constantly change for the better.”

Under these remarks, women are taught to be a “nice woman”, only need to get back their families and please their husbands. These remarks also make them choose their families

when there are conflicts between family and career. Are these really their individual choices?

After the interviews, one of the female interviewees would like to show her schedule (activities) of a normal weekend, and she thinks that her female colleagues also have similar weekends in every week.

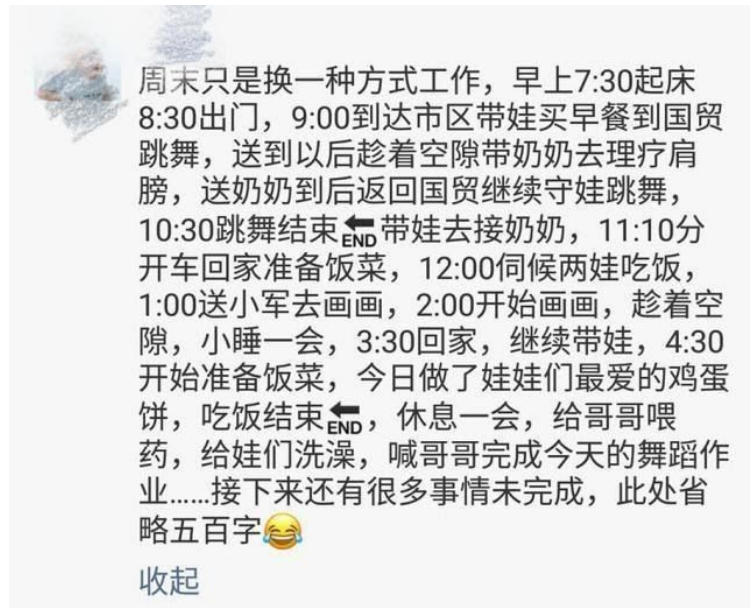


Figure 6. An normal weekend of an interviewee, the content has translated in English:

<i>In Chinese</i>	<i>In English</i>
<p>周末只是换一种方式工作，早上7:30起床8:30出门，9:00到达市区带娃买早餐到国贸跳舞，送到以后趁着空隙带奶奶去理疗肩膀，送奶奶到后返回国贸继续守娃跳舞，10:30跳舞结束带娃去接奶奶，11:10分开车回家准备饭菜，12:00伺候两娃吃饭，1:00送小军去画画，2:00开始画画，趁着空隙，小睡一会，3:30回家，继续带娃，4:30开始准备饭菜，今日做了娃娃们最爱的鸡蛋饼，吃饭结束，休息一会，给哥哥喂药，给娃们洗澡，喊哥哥完成今天的舞蹈作业.....接下来还有很多事情未完成</p>	<p>The weekend is just working in another way, I got up at 7:30 in the morning, going out at 8:30, driving children to dance course, after that, driving my mother-in-law to a hospital for physiotherapy. And getting back to the dance class and waiting for the end, taking the children to pick up my mother-in-law from the hospital. 11:10 getting back home and started to cook, 12:00 looked after the children and mother-in-law to have lunch. 13:00 drove a kid to a painting course and waited outside the class to get a nap in my car. 15:30 getting back home and looking after the children, 16:30 started to cook dinner. After the dinner, bathed the children, and helped the children to review their courses. After that, I still have to do housework and overtime work at home.</p>

In all activities, the father, her husband didn't show up. From the schedule, it can echo earlier studies and context in this case study. Men have lost their roles and responsibilities in their families. Women have to undertake almost all family responsibilities. The absence of male roles in the families, makes women have to suffer from more pressure of society and working, and these behaviours as mirrors also influence their next generation, has prompted gender discrimination against continue to exist.

Fortunately, 10 interviewees in this study all enjoy "equal pay for equal work", even though the gender wage gap is a quite common problem in different countries (Cooke 2001, 2005; Leung 2003). In this view, it seems that Chinese SOEs offer a relatively better working environment for female employees. Some interviewees even enjoy extra female welfare. However, female employees can enjoy "equal pay for equal work" and extra welfare, but also suffer from gender inequality and sexism, it might be a contradiction between modern law and traditional ideology, or an important point of the social change process. Furthermore, influenced by Chinese traditional Confucian culture, Chinese men tend to be more masculine, and it is difficult for them to accept a stronger wife (capability) than them (Xuefei & Miaoqing, 2011).

Based on the interviewees' statements, one problem is obvious; most females lack equality consciousness, or they know but do not have awareness to change the gender inequality. Interviewees' education and living environment make them accept gender inequality and sexism subconsciously, only one female interviewee has realized clearly but cannot fight. A male interviewee has realized the sexism in Chinese society but he has contradictory thoughts: he hopes his wife could follow the traditional requirements, but on the other hand, he hopes his daughters could get rid of the traditional shackles. At the same time, different social pressures (reports from media, hidden rules from labour marketing and so on) make the contradictions grow in scope and in depth.

The good news is, a notice on further standardizing recruitment practices to promote women's employment has been published by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security of the People's Republic of China in 2019. This notice is trying to standardize Chinese labour marketing, emphasizing that: gender restriction and gender priority are not allowed in recruitment processes, fertility restriction cannot be taken as a condition of employment, cannot restrict women's job search and refusing to hire women because of gender and so on. It seems that women's rights could be protected to some extent, but this doesn't mean gender inequality and sexism will change, because they have been deeply embedded in the social cultural and ideological system.

Promoting gender equality is a long and difficult process, especially since it is influenced by thousands of years of traditional culture, there are a lot of limitations to improve social progress, such as economic level, educational level, population base, governments policies and so on.

This case study was based on Child and Warner's research(2002), only applied Acker's (2006), Scott's (2003), Hofstede's (2010) frameworks that explain organizational culture influences organizational behaviours, and use Barreto et al., (2009), Tatli et al., (2017) researches result to prove gender discrimination in women's career life in a superficial way. However the gender discrimination not only influence by these points, causes of gender

discrimination could also be found out from many other reasons, it not only exists in a country.

The limitation of this study is the sample numbers, 10 interviewees and two SOEs, it means a need for caution in drawing conclusions from the study. It is representative to some extent, but not for the whole situation. In other words, the biggest limitations and shortages in this case study are: I could not reach the whole Chinese SOEs and the interviewees size cannot simply represent the majority of female employees in Chinese SOEs. Different people who have different age/ background/ educational level from different locations might have different experience about gender discrimination.

Limitations of Chinese SOEs as illustrations of the case study. This study used Chinese SOEs as a case study example, but it could not represent the labour market in China. Different industries, different types of companies have different working environments.

Gender discrimination could also be influenced by many other factors. In addition to cultural analysis, further investigations might focus on the roles of legal protection and the educational system, e.g. to what extent these are influenced by Confucianism. Other countries also have gender inequality issues, but they are not influenced by Confucianism. It might also be fruitful to explore whether there are other aspects of traditional culture, apart from Confucianism, that contribute to explain Chinese women's status. Women have a higher status in some countries than in China, and it might be useful to study the historical processes that increase women's status, in order to identify paths to improvement for Chinese women.

Therefore, from the results of analysis and discussion, there are three main factors that influence Chinese women's positions in current China.

1. Organizational culture (Organizational discrimination). The career road from job ads to promotions, every step for Chinese women is full of gender inequality, at the beginning of their career life, they are waiting to be chosen for a position, and at the end, they are left out from the discussion of being promoted because of men's gender advantage.
2. Social culture (Social culture). As mentioned above, Confucianism is embedded into the foundation of the Chinese cultural tradition, which means that Chinese women's positions could not be changed in a short period of time, especially when the government only considers economic purposes, thus women's right would be ignored completely.
3. Social pressure (Personal choice). Based on the above two factors, it is easy to understand that to some extent, the government actually encourages the whole society to discriminate against women to get / increase a stable economy, since they believe that women's role should be a housewife. After they look after their husbands very well, their husbands could create more economic value for the country. Under this sort of social atmosphere, some women have to yield, choose that their family comes before their career life. And for some women, if they don't choose the expected way of life (get married, raise babies, look after husband), they would get even more social pressure from their parents, workpartners and even the social media.

Therefore, this complexity means that women's positions not only need a long time to change, but also that significant change requires huge efforts.

In addition, there are some suggestions from the interviews for further discussions:

- Unpaid work is also important, such as looking after children, cooking, cleaning and so on. Women's status and importance need to be recognized, instead of being erased in the Chinese society.
- Care services should be re-built. Around the 1950's, a series of relevant regulations and notices were issued by the Chinese government to clearly encourage enterprises, institutions and organizations to set up kindergartens and nurseries. Enterprises and institutions also undertook a large part of the work of child care at that time. However, after 1990's, these regulations stepped down from the stage of history (Jing-yi & Tao, 2020).
- Give more opportunities to women in the labour market instead of to limit their career life.

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