Struggling to be more visible: Female digital creative entrepreneurs in China

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Abstract
Entrepreneurs have become the driving force of China’s economy over the past few decades. With a rapid surge in the growth of digital platforms, and the success of China’s platforms outside China, the aspiration to be entrepreneurial is recognized and celebrated. Increasingly, women are benefitting from this entrepreneurial fever. However, behind the increasing number of emerging women digital entrepreneurs, is the struggle to gain recognition. Drawing on cases studies of female digital startups, the article investigates some of the dilemmas faced when women strive to develop entrepreneurial identities. The article problematizes distinctions between the entrepreneur in a general sense, the creative entrepreneur, and female creative entrepreneurs. Whereas an entrepreneur in China is often conflated with a business owner, the identity of the creative entrepreneur is more precarious and unstable. The article finds that besides the difficulty to sustain a creative-based entrepreneurial identity, the hyper-competitive and masculinist fields of digital entrepreneurship and technical fields, combined with traditional gender roles and family responsibility, results in a devaluation of female entrepreneurship.

Keywords
China, digital creative industries, entrepreneurial identity, female entrepreneurship, identity dilemmas

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Introduction

On 11 March 2019, the People Daily, the nation’s official English language masthead, announced that Chinese women were increasingly represented in political decision making (Cao, 2019). The article reported that the National People’s Congress (NPC) had seen an annual increase of women’s participation as deputies by 1.5%, taking proportional representation of females to almost 25%. Meanwhile, the proportion of female representatives on the Chinese Peoples’ Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) over the same 12 months period had increased to 20.3% of overall members.

In the business sphere in China, women have achieved higher levels of participation and some have scaled commanding heights. According to a report which has tracked Chinese business for 20 years, Chinese women entrepreneurs account for 61% of ‘self-made’ female billionaires in the world. In the top 10 female billionaires list, nine are from China (Hurun, 2020). Luminaries include Wu Yajun, the co-founder of Longfor Properties, Zhou Qunfei of Lens Technology, and Zhang Yin of the Nine Dragon Paper Holdings.

In the cultural and creative industries more broadly, women have played key roles in China. According to the last national census (National Bureau of Statistics 2010), women made up 46% of the total employment in the fields of culture, sports and entertainment; more specifically in subsectors, women accounted for 44% in the press and publishing industry, they contributed 47% in the arts, and represented 51% in entertainment. Women writers have achieved fame in the 20th century, and are found in school curricula, names such as Ding Ling. Modern writers who have broken through include Hao Jingfang and Can Xue. Actresses are arguably the most well-known exemplars. Every TV drama or movie requires a female lead. Movie stars have hit the celebrity headlines even outside China, such as Zhang Ziyi and Gong Li. TV hosts are much loved in China, for instance Yang Lan and Dong Qing. A list of famous women, however, would be short compared to famous male counterparts.

A report issued by State Council Information Office (2019) indicates that more than 560,000 women had participated in entrepreneurship and innovation competitions conducted by Women’s Federation in 2017. The report also concludes that 55% of entrepreneurs in the Internet field are women. Notable female leaders include Peng Lei from Alibaba and Didi’s Liu Qing. The numbers appear to be empowering; that is, until one investigates further. In 2019, Zhang Quanlin, the CEO of a teen education App called Shaonian Dedao was quoted online as saying ‘questions about work-life balance are biased against women entrepreneurs’. This admission raised the level of debate about how women were faring in the hyper-competitive online industries.

In Caring in Times of Precarity: A Study of Single Women Doing Creative Work in Shanghai, Chow (2019) contends that while entrepreneurship does not eradicate abuse, exploitation and precariousness, it can give women more control in ‘arranging a work life’ (p. 129) that has a degree of autonomy, and which can avoid some of the negative elements associated with sexism and patriarchal abuse.

This article considers women in China’s digital creative industries, particularly their entrepreneurial identity. Are female creative entrepreneurs visible? How do they struggle to establish an entrepreneurial identity? The article is organized as follows: in the first section, we provide background to entrepreneurship and the digital creative industries in China. We then introduce the approach, which is based on the concept of ‘(in)visibility’, as well as drawing on theories of identity and gender. Following this, the article describes the research strategy and methods used in the study, and how data were analysed. This is followed by stories of several female creative entrepreneurs in Shenzhen. Finally, we point out directions for further research, noting the distinctions we observe between mass entrepreneurship and personal identity.
Entrepreneurship in question

For much of the 20th century the terms entrepreneurship and China were seldom correlated, aside from referring to overseas Chinese entrepreneurs (Ahlstrom & Ding, 2014). In traditional China, the social hierarchy of scholar, farmer, artisan and businessman (shinonggongshang) placed merchants at the bottom. During the Maoist period beginning in 1949, business people were downgraded in status and this negative sentiment culminated in the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). In 1978, Deng Xiaoping triggered the ‘Reform and Opening up’ initiative. The economic transition from a command to an increasingly market-oriented economy gradually lifted the constraints on market activity, as well as spurring rapid development of private enterprises (He et al., 2008).

The description of the entrepreneur (qiye jia) began to enter public discourse only after China opened up. The choice to identify as an entrepreneur coincided with China’s economic rise. Over the past four decades, entrepreneurship has made significant contributions to job creation, industrial output and technological innovation (Z. Li et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2011). H. Li (2013) identifies four stages of entrepreneurship in China after 1978. The first stage was the emergence and rise of Township and Village Enterprises (TVEs) following China’s reform and ‘opening up policy’ (1978–1992); a second stage during the same period was the emergence of individual household businesses (getihu) and private enterprise; from 1992–2000, a third stage witnessed a decline in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and the rapid growth of non-public sectors. The fourth stage dates from 2001 when China entered the World Trade Organization (WTO), leading to a surge in exports and foreign investment in China, thus providing opportunities for more people to get rich. Moreover, with digital technology becoming widespread, the Internet, and Internet entrepreneurship, are becoming headline news. In March 2015, the central government announced Internet+ (hulianwang jia), a ‘blueprint’ to ‘reboot’ China’s economy. This followed a policy initiative in late-2014, ‘mass entrepreneurship and mass innovation’ (dazhong chuangye wanzhong chuangxin), which encourages ‘the masses’ to start up a business and unleash innovation. Entrepreneurs, especially grass-roots entrepreneurs, now had the green light.

There are a number of different theoretical models of entrepreneurship (Hartley et al., 2012, pp. 92–95). A conventional ‘business school’ model identifies entrepreneurship with management; that is, entrepreneurs start and run businesses, and they gain profit from the value they create. According to a neoclassical economics model, entrepreneurs are agents who are alert to opportunities. They play an important role in keeping the market economy competitive. A third model is the Schumpeterian model (Schumpeter, 1942/1994), which is well known and applied in the creative industries and in evolutionary economics; here, the entrepreneur disturbs the existing economic order with a new idea that may become an innovation. An exemplary creative entrepreneur in this sense is Steve Jobs. In this latter sense, entrepreneurs are key change agents in the creative industries. The key point of comparison in the Schumpeterian model is uncertainty and this where we can draw a comparison with the arts. The creative artist is often a person less interested in profit than creating something new. Similarly, a self-identified creative entrepreneur may be motivated by innovation and recognition more than economic success. In the digital creative economy, Schumpeterian ‘creative destruction’ is most applicable, because of the disruptive impact of pervasive and multipurpose digital technologies (Rudman, 2015).

Digital creative industries gaining visibility

Creativity has become an important indicator of modernity and national competitiveness in China and it now finds its way into popular discourse (de Kloet et al., 2019). The discourse of creativity
arose in the west in the 1950s in the areas of psychology and education (see Keane, 2013). It was not until the late 1990s that it entered into policy discourse. Within a decade, creative solutions were being offered and the term ‘creative industries’ was born in the United Kingdom, which put considerable emphasis on individual creativity, skill and talent (Department for Culture, Media and Sport [DCMS], 1998). Chinese policy makers in Beijing resisted the foreign concept initially but by the end of the first decade of the new millennium, it was apparent that ‘creativity was changing China’ (W. Li, 2011). The Chinese government formally instigated the cultural industries in 2001, the year when China joined the WTO. According to a report from National Bureau of Statistics (2019), from 2005 to 2018, the average annual growth rate of cultural industries added value was 18.9%, which was 6.9% higher than the average annual growth rate of GDP. However, despite its uptake by local officials and entrepreneurs, it was still a managed form of creativity, highly reliant on practitioners staying within boundaries. This was in stark contrast to the western idea of the creative individual as a person who challenges the boundaries and who maintains a certain disruptive ethos.

Internationally, the terminology of creative industries is now associated with the digital economy. The convergence of technological innovation and cultural creativity has gained momentum in China over the past decade (Flew et al., 2019; Keane, 2016). This convergence is expressed in the descriptive term ‘digital creative industries’, now used in Chinese policy, defined as ‘industries that engage in creative cultural content, production, circulation, and services based on Internet technology and core digitization’ (Xie et al., 2019). Digital creative industries have been listed as one of the five ‘strategic emerging industries’ in China’s 13th Five Year Plan (2016–2020). While Internet+ has been widely cited, cultural academics have taken a different approach. Fan Zhou offers the proposition ‘Culture+’ in his account of the history of China’s cultural industries from 1978–2018: Fan says that it [Culture+] ‘is the wide-ranging integration of fields of culture and the national economy, precipitating more comprehensive, deeper and more multi-layered innovations, which through the promotion of industrial transformation, upgrading and optimization, stimulates the vitality of industrial development and endogenous forces’ (Fan, 2019; Keane et al., 2020). Both ‘+’ formulas, however, point in the same direction.

Engendering change: becoming visible

The business writer, John Howkins, who is well known in China for his consultancy work, refers to ‘invisible work’ as the kind of work that is largely unnoticed until one makes a breakthrough (Howkins, 2020). It takes time and perseverance, he says. As a champion of free markets, Howkins is not talking about precarious labour so much as a kind of incremental thinking that has the potential to develop into a start-up or an innovation. He says, invisible work ‘feeds off personal interests and is therefore more rewarding than routine, visible work. It is more highly valued by companies, especially startups, and therefore more highly paid’ (Howkins, 2020, p. 69).

While there has been a greater levelling of participation in entrepreneurship, female voices are often devalued. When women’s voices are visible in the media for instance, their identities may be sexualised; and when women speak to power in politics, they become larger targets for criticism. According to a report on women in business by Ballakrishnen, Fielding-Singh and Magliozzi,

Going visible is taking a line so others will notice. We need witnesses. This presents a conundrum for women. It can provoke a backlash by violating expectations about how women should behave. So they may step away in search of ‘intentional invisibility’. (cf: Howkins, 2020, p. 310)
In this sense, the concept of ‘gendering entrepreneurship’, as described by Calás et al. (2009), offers a way forward. The term implies a gradual evolution, identifying practices that align with a female subjectivity. In line with the ‘business school’ models of entrepreneurship mentioned earlier, the female entrepreneur is therefore just part of the economy, which is capitalist by definition. When looking at China, therefore it is necessary to contextualize China’s hybrid model – its socialist market economy. We will return to this question in the final section. Calás et al. (2009) say that a second way of understanding women entrepreneurs is a liberal, psychoanalytic, radical feminist approach to entrepreneurship, which might identify unequal power relations and gender injustices. Positive discrimination is addressed among various solutions. The social disadvantage of female entrepreneurs is an effect of the male dominated structuring of society, a view that is echoed in several of the case studies. A third perspective is a socialist, poststructuralist and transnational feminist perspective. This approach deals more with extant discursive representations of entrepreneurship; the paradigm is social constructionist and echoing the findings of Ballakrishnen, Fielding-Singh and Magliozzi mentioned earlier, positions the researcher/ethnographer as a ‘modest witness’ to the process of change. The practices thus attempt to carve out a more flexible and constantly changing space to address subjectivities of entrepreneurship. It is important therefore to reiterate that representations of female entrepreneurs are social constructs, as is the concept of ‘creativity’. We will return to this point later.

From identity to entrepreneurial identity

Today the concept of identity is divisive and identity politics has become a contested field. In The Lies that Bind, the philosopher Anthony Kwame Appiah (2018) writes about how identities ‘religion, nation, race, class, and culture – divide us and set us against one another’ (p. 123). In popular, political and scientific discourse, identity emerged during the second-half of the 20th century; according to Moran (2014, p. 11), it is therefore a relatively new concept. Unpacking the social history of identity, and identity politics, is not our goal in this article. As in the literature on management, identity is at the heart of meaning and decision making, action and commitment, stability and change, motivation, and loyalty (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). We therefore turn first to an understanding of identity, then to entrepreneurial identity.

Identity research is central to psychology and sociology, which have ‘grappled with the problems of individual deviance and normality, and the development of the individual in relation to her/his social environment’ (Moran, 2014, p. 14). Sociologically oriented identity research builds on the premise that social life is structured, and that this structure affects the development of the social person and the production of social behaviour. Identity therefore serves as a bridge between social structure (i.e. society) and the social person (the self) (Simon, 2008, pp. 20–25). In this sense, Couldry and Hepp provide important work as they draw attention to Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) original sociology of social constructivism approach, and emphasize the embedded, interconnected or ‘mediated’ nature of our experience, as well as how identity is constructed, and regularly updated, by digital technology (Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

With regard to psychologically oriented research, identity is an important ‘social-cognitive mediator that operates between people’s social environment and their perceptions and behaviours’ (Simon, 2008, p. 42). Social identity theory (SIT) is widely diffused and extensively employed in this strand (Brown, 2000). Tajfel and Turner’s social identity theory suggests that human beings not only have a personal identity, but also have a social identity: individuals need to distinguish
themselves from others to gain personal identity, while they need to have similarities with others to make the social identity salient. Positive social identity can make people feel part of the social world and help develop a full identity (Brown, 2000; Tajfel, 1978; Werthes et al., 2018). In other words, your identity makes you visible. Social identity is viewed as the significant intervening mechanism in intergroup relations.

The Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) offers another way of framing identity, one that draws from postmodernism as well as incorporating elements of Eastern philosophy that may be more germane to everyday cultural relations in China. In addition, CTI conceptualizes identity as a collective or group process. Identity is relational whereby social relations and roles are internalized by individuals and expressed, or ‘enacted’, through communication (Hecht et al., 2005; Jung & Hecht, 2004). Compared with sociologically oriented and psychologically oriented theories mentioned earlier, CTI proposes a syncretic view. Identity is both multifaceted and dynamic, and is experienced on multiple levels or layers. CTI identifies four loci or frames of identity labelled personal, relational, enacted and communal identities. These four frames are not separate from each other; in other words, they ‘interpenetrate’ (Hecht et al., 2005; Jung & Hecht, 2004).

In the realm of entrepreneurship, identities matter. From a management and business perspective, Navis and Glynn (2011) define entrepreneurial identity as ‘the constellation of claims around the founder, new venture, and market opportunity as to “who we are” and “what we do”, and it serves as a touchstone for investor judgments about new venture plausibility’. Entrepreneurial identity propels individuals to take on entrepreneurial roles (Murnieks & Mosakowski, 2007). Down and Warren (2008) stress the significance of entrepreneurial identity and suggest that it is used to create organization- and self-legitimacy in the early stages of enterprise development and furthermore that entrepreneurs are skilled at managing and manipulating perceptions of identity in order to achieve desired outcomes.

**Research methods**

The primary data in this study of female digital entrepreneurship derives from qualitative research methods, including ethnography and in-depth, semi-structured interviews lasting from 1–6 hours with 16 women digital creative entrepreneurs. The women are founders, co-founders or core members of digital creative startups. The interviews were conducted from April to November 2019, mainly in Shenzhen, a technological and economic hub in southern China. Interview questions explored a range of issues around personal backgrounds, education, working experience and entrepreneurial practices. The startups were all established after 2014, which means that they were still in an early developing stage, and this is in tandem with the development of digital creative industries. Seen from the table below (Table 1), the majority of the interviewees are in their 20s–30s, and have different marital status, while many studied abroad for degrees or have had short exchange experience.

Supporting information was gathered in semi-structured interviews with people involved in, or related to digital creative entrepreneurship, including five male digital creative entrepreneurs, three academics, two government officers and four association managers. Participant observations took place in several events, such as incubators sharings, innovation competitions and startup’s experience activities. In addition, informal discussions were conducted with students, practitioners and observers. Secondary sources include media (local magazines and newspapers), social media (especially interviewees’ WeChat moments), communities focused on gender and technology or women entrepreneurship (such as Ladies Who Tech) and online websites focused on the women entrepreneurship phenomenon (such as CYzone and huxiu). The conceptual discussions are informed by analysis of the most illuminating examples from the sources mentioned earlier.
Table 1. Demographic information of the women digital creative entrepreneurs.

| No | Name     | Age | Family status          | Education                              | Fields                               | Working/interviewing place         |
|----|----------|-----|------------------------|----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1  | Yongying | 50s | Married with a child   | Bachelor                               | Digital visual design                | Shenzhen/Shenzhen                  |
| 2  | Heting   | 38  | Married with a child   | Bachelor                               | Incubator manager                   | Wuhan/Wuhan                        |
| 3  | Li       | 41  | Separated with a child | Bachelor                               | Gaming                               | Wuhan/Wuhan                        |
| 4  | Rui      | 30  | In relationship        | Master                                 | Freelancer                           | Beijing/Beijing                    |
| 5  | Yuanying | 26  | Single                 | Bachelor with short overseas education experience | Digital short video            | Beijing/Beijing                    |
| 6  | Jenny    | 28  | Single                 | Overseas master                       | VR exhibition                       | USA–China/Qingdao                  |
| 7  | Xiaoyuan | 36  | Single                 | Bachelor                               | Digital content service             | Shenzhen/Shenzhen                  |
| 8  | Feixue   | 37  | Married with a child   | Occupational school                   | Digital content service             | Shenzhen/Shenzhen                  |
| 9  | Yang     | 29  | Single                 | Master                                 | Digital content service             | Shenzhen/Shenzhen                  |
| 10 | Kira     | 30  | In relationship        | Overseas master                       | Fashion design                      | Shenzhen/Shenzhen                  |
| 11 | Liting   | 31  | Divorced with a child  | Bachelor                               | STEAM education                     | Shenzhen/Shenzhen                  |
| 12 | Xiaoli   | 30  | In relationship        | Bachelor                               | Online art gift trade, and art education | Shenzhen/Shenzhen              |
| 13 | Qi       | 26  | Single                 | Bachelor                               | VR education                        | Shenzhen/Shenzhen                  |
| 14 | Sandy    | 24  | Single                 | Overseas bachelor                     | Digital gaming                      | Shenzhen/Shenzhen                  |
| 15 | Minka    | 30s | Single                 | Overseas master                       | Fashion design                      | Shenzhen/Shenzhen                  |
| 16 | Yafei    | 30  | Married without children | Master                                | Art craft                           | Shenzhen/Shenzhen                  |

Struggles to become visible

Creativity

With the publication of works like Richard Florida’s *The Rise of the Creative Class* (Florida, 2002), many people have accepted myths about the autonomy, flexibility, and fulfilling nature of creative work. For some, buying into aspirational entrepreneurial discourse is part of the journey. However, this discourse is far removed from reality. One of the shared experiences of an increasing number of people working in the cultural and creative fields is of precariousness (Chow, 2019; Conor et al., 2015; Liao, 2020). Under the model of entrepreneurial start-up culture, creatives are now responsible for non-creative tasks as well, such as business tasks (financing, investor relations, marketing and promotion), and managerial tasks (project management, publicity and media relations) (Hracs, 2012). This kind of multi-tasking can cause some female entrepreneurs to feel quite overwhelmed. Yang, who is running a social media company, used a playful term ‘entrepreneurial dog’ (*chuangye gou*) to describe herself, where the line between life and work blurred. Minka, the founder of a fashion company, took on extra roles to save costs in the nascent stage of her business career.
With the rapid capitalization of cultural and creative industries in China, the discourses of creativity that define certain occupations and ventures seem to float in the air in Shenzhen. One of the case studies, Xiaoli, talked about the ambiguity of ‘creativity’.

Growing up in Shandong, an inland province where Confucianism originated, Xiaoli went to Shenzhen after completing her bachelor course of art and design in 2013. She set up her own business to customize corporate art gifts in 2016. She sensed this business opportunity when she was working for a watch company, where she noticed that luxury brands like Gucci, LV and Tiffany gave away small but delicate gifts to customers during her frequent business visits to Hong Kong.

When asked whether she identified herself as an entrepreneur or not, Xiaoli confided,

I don’t think I am an entrepreneur, because I don’t think I am creative. I just copy what others do, and I don’t create new things.

She added,

Before I came to Shenzhen in 2013, I seldom heard of ‘creativity’ in Shandong. However, in Shenzhen, you hear ‘creativity’ from everyone, everywhere

Another interviewee Yafei, a designer, expressed a view that the market does not accept her creativity. Coincidentally, Yafei is also originally from Shandong, the home province of Confucius, the sage who symbolizes learning and ‘following the leader’ more than individual creative enterprise. Of course, one of the dilemmas facing many creatives is whether to be successful or to do work that is meaningful (Chow, 2019; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). Yafei said,

I recommended some very creative works to my clients, [they are] of very high artistic value. However, I find my clients do not want these. What they want are very practical things.

Xiaoli’s and Yafei’s cases exemplify the precarious nature of creativity embedded in its transitional stage in China. According to one definition, precarious creativity is a condition where people attribute a certain autonomy to the cultural products they create, while bearing the uncertainty, insecurity, and unpredictability within their cultural environment (Curtin & Sanson, 2016; Liao, 2017). When Xiaoli designs corporate gifts, she based her design on luxury brands, making few changes, ‘because the clients want to follow the steps of luxury brands [to show their taste], that’s what the market wants’. As a result, she does not develop her identity as a creative entrepreneur as this feeds an insecurity that she is not creative enough.

According to Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011, p. 3), creativity has strong implications of innovation, newness, invention, making something afresh. Drawing on Berger and Luckman’s social constructivist model, Monika Reuter (2015) raises the pertinent question of how a definition of creativity is taken for granted in one country but not another. Reuter (2015) says, ‘Social reality and phenomenon such as creativity are constructed, institutionalized, and handed down to new generations within fields as traditions until they are reconstructed, newly institutionalized, and handed down again’ (p. 48). Being conspicuous, unique or ‘out of the box’ is less accepted. In a transitional economy those who were left behind now want to catch up, to emulate. In China, the discourse of creativity among the public is therefore still developing.

As noted before, most cultural achievement in China is associated with male creators. Proudfoot et al. (2015) find that the ‘outside the box’ creativity is more strongly associated with stereotypically masculine characteristics (e.g. daring and self-reliance) than with stereotypically feminine
characteristics (e.g. cooperativeness and supportiveness). China thus provides a complicated field, as in much of its traditional history, the role of a ‘creator’ was taken by a man, or put it in another way, ‘creativity’ was male-coded in ancient China.

However, there is much more to say in the context of modern China, especially when Chinese government employs ‘creativity’ to boost national power and lauds the participation of female entrepreneurs in the economy. In his major work The Governance of China, J. Xi (2014) writes,

Innovation is the soul of a nation’s progress, the inexhaustible force enhancing a country’s prosperity, and indeed the profound endowment of the Chinese nation. Against the backdrop of international competition, only those who innovate can make progress, grow stronger and prevail. (pp. 1003–1005)

For many creative entrepreneurs in China, the choice is to construct an identity that accommodates state development goals while having a moderate and careful association with individualism.

**Gendered culture: technology and entrepreneurship**

Technology is predominately regarded as male-coded. ‘Technology is – both materially and symbolically – a huge, often critical, element of hegemonic masculinity’ (Faulkner, 2001). Marlow and McAdam (2015) say ‘there is a gendered order whereby women are positioned as designated end users of technologies, whereas men have primacy as innovators and designers’. Men are assumed to be the ideal information and communication technology (ICT) workers because of their perceived rationality, while women are assumed to be less technical, and they often take on the gendered roles, such as doing people-facing work like help desk work (W.-F. Leung, 2019, pp. 86–87). Accordingly, research investigates the structural barriers to women’s participation in technical sectors, by looking at sex discrimination in employment and the kind of socialization and education that girls receive which have dissuaded them from studying math and science (R. Liu, 2018). This accords with the liberal, psychoanalytic, radical feminist approach (Calás et al., 2009). In China, there was a time when women were associated with technology; that was the period of the inception of New China (1950s–1970s), when Mao Zedong’s proclamation ‘women hold up half the sky’ was seen as emancipating women. However, as Zhang and Liu (2015) argue, the popularity of these so-called ‘iron girls’ did not change the gender stratification in field of technology. Today, in the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the national scientific think tank in China, male fellows account for 94% of incumbents, while female fellows constitute only 6%.

Even though entrepreneurship is described as a good opportunity whereby human can realize their potential for creativity and innovation and be free from the constraints of organizational and institutional regulation, persistent and systematic gender bias prevails (Ahl & Marlow, 2012). Entrepreneurship is characterized by hierarchy, the ‘old-boys’ networks’, and the use of directive power (Orhan & Scott, 2001). Examining the gendered nature of entrepreneurship and its relationship with entrepreneurial intentions, Gupta et al. (2019) find that both men and women see entrepreneurship as a male-typed occupation (male gender-role stereotype). Research identifies that constrained access to appropriate funding, information and support are parts of a wider system of disadvantage (Marlow & Patton, 2005).

Although digital technology can be seen as a way to level the playing field between gender by opening up opportunities for both men and women to set up low-cost startups, this is not the reality of female digital entrepreneurship. W.-F. Leung’s (2019) empirical work on Taiwan has found that the same hierarchy exists in the digital sphere because female entrepreneurs suffer discrimination in the start-up sector. A male founder for a VR company confided to the lead author that he
preferred not to recruit women for his company, as women have to give birth to children and this increases the human resources cost. A creative industries programme director in a tertiary school said the male/female student ratio in his programme is 1:5 as the programme identified itself as liberal arts not as a technical programme. Girls were therefore highly represented. Such views are common.

Most of the events associated with entrepreneurship in China, except those with a clear ‘female entrepreneurship’ theme, are male-dominated. Unsurprisingly, the gender bias exists in both the technical sector and within entrepreneurship discourse, and this sustains assumptions that women are reluctant entrepreneurial subjects, lacking and incomplete compared to men, who require ‘fixing’ by specific policy interventions to provide them with the tools and skills to do so (McAdam et al., 2019). Another example comes from 2018. The San Francisco-based magazine *Make* published a cover story on the Shenzhen woman ‘maker’ Naomi Wu. This was a compensation for damage to Wu’s reputation and opportunities when the magazine founder Dale Dougherty doubted the veracity of Wu’s identity and the authorship of her work.4

Liting, founder of a makerspace, provided an example of this casual gender bias:

When I made a keynote speech in a conference, sharing the things I had done in recent years, I didn’t get much applause. Another man coming from Taiwan, who just set up his business, talked about his startup plan, but he yet to refine his entrepreneurial ideas. However, he received more applause than me. After the keynote speeches, I joined the panel discussion, and I think I gave good answers. My colleague told me that the audience around him were commenting about why I, such a young-looking woman, could give the keynote speech. But they gradually understood after hearing the panel discussion.

Liting’s experience illustrates that her gender devalued her entrepreneurial identity. Gender bias also hinders female digital creative entrepreneurs in accessing potential business opportunities. Yang’s Internet advertising relationship with a game company was abruptly curtailed. The game company’s investors thought she and her partner were ‘girls’ and too young, therefore, they must not have the requisite ability to conduct business. In order to leave a good impression on the clients, and not let them think of a ‘girly girl’, Yuanying, co-founder of a short video company, dressed up every day to look professional. This is about fitting in. Gill (2014) notes that in the creative industries, when compared to men, women more easily regulate their conduct to fit into the work regime and popular cultural images, thus resulting in a new precarious subjectivity associated with more flexible, agile and mobile labouring process. Lewis and Simpson (2012) describe the visibility and invisibility of gender construction. Women are marked out by femininity (a kind of visibility) as well as adopting dominant masculinized modes of being (seeking to be less visible as women). The word ‘androgyne’ (cixiong tongti) is not uncommon in the lexicon that interviewees used to describe themselves, which shows the nuanced strategies that many female entrepreneurs adopt to fit with the field of the masculine entrepreneurship.

Even though Liting would like to engage fully and fairly with the entrepreneurial community, the stereotype that entrepreneurship is masculine hinders her progress. The absence of social recognition together with negative social perception undermines the credibility of women digital creative entrepreneurship. However, this not only happens outside the family, but also inside the family. Wrestling with a constellation of power – the developing creative economy, digital nationalism, the gendered culture of technology and entrepreneurship, and the resilience of Confucian values, female digital creative entrepreneurs have to contend with different role expectations.
Family

As mentioned in the ‘Introduction’, Zhang Quanlin famously articulated a gender bias when asked how she maintained balance between work and life. In her book *Lean In*, Sheryl Sandberg, the CEO of Facebook, also mentioned conflicts between work and life. The dichotomy of work and life, the labour divisions within households, and the precariousness embedded in every kind of work are important topics for further research. What we will explore now is the role of family and marriage in China. China has shown trends towards later and less marriage, and less childbearing. Over 50% of the female interviewees we spoke with do not have children, and there was a high percentage of single status (see more discussion about single women and creative work: Chow, 2019). However, in reality, marriage problematizes female entrepreneurship. In the Chinese context, marriage remains a ‘gendered institution supported by cultural norms’, such that men can maintain a traditional gender role regardless of women’s growing preferences for a more egalitarian relationship (Ji, 2015).

Family responsibility was raised in the discussion of entrepreneurial recognition with Liting. Showing a digital game work created by her daughter, Liting mentioned that she had divorced 2 years ago:

When China adopted the second child policy, my parents-in-law wanted me to have a second child as I just have a daughter [not a son]. They thought I was wasting my time on entrepreneurship since I didn’t have much time to keep my daughter accompany and didn’t make loads of money. My husband then didn’t speak for me, so I chose to get divorced.

In much of China’s history, women lived within the Confucian doctrine which places emphasis on a patriarchal and hierarchical framework; in other words, Chinese women had to support their husbands and raise children, and they were not supposed to be active outside (A. S. M. Leung, 2003; F. Liu, 2014). Even though the government advocates equality between men and women, ideological constraints often place women in a disadvantaged place where they need to choose between marriage, family and career (Han, 2016). Or put it in other way, the gender revolution has stopped short of the private sphere of family in China (Ji, 2015; Zuo, 2003).

Women in China are more visible due to social and economic development under the influence of globalization and consumerism. Markets are sensitive to women’s demands as they have increasing purchasing power. Moreover, better-educated women are extensively involved in professional work (Feng & Karan, 2011). Related research has suggested tensions remain between traditional expectations and obligations within the family and the increasing opportunities for women outside the family (Bumpass et al., 2009; McDonald, 2013).

Another participant, Rui, alluded to traditional gender norms and a gendered division from a different perspective. Even though she does not say that the family is an influencing factor for her entrepreneurial identity, her comments demonstrate that women’s work is devalued, legacy of traditional values. As a freelancer and a founder for an online knowledge co-creation platform which has not made much profit, Rui does not have a stable income. When asked whether her family or her boyfriend’s family care about her income, and why she chose a field that can-not make much money, Rui replied,

I don’t feel much pressure about money, maybe because I lower my living costs . . .
I notice a lot of female figures in the non-profit field. Maybe [women are more suitable] because of feminine characteristics, such as care, not pure rational judgement. Another reason might be women have less pressure than men speaking from their social roles. Your [women’s] family role doesn’t require you to make a lot money, and this brings opportunities for women to do something they truly love.

As Yang (2016) suggests, in China women are supposed to fulfil contradictory roles as economic contributor and housewife. The uncertainties and high-risks of entrepreneurship may influence the family’s attitudes. Demands for family responsibility impact on aspirations and identity as a woman entrepreneur. In Liting’s case, conflicts related to gender expectation and family recognition cause problems. Liting feels her family do not see any value in her entrepreneurship. However, a sense of accomplishment and recognition are part of the reasons that drive many women to take up entrepreneurship. Another interviewee Yafei mentioned,

Even though I work late every day, [very exhausted] I feel rewarded when I dedicate to something. I hope I can be a successful entrepreneurship. Success here, doesn’t mean I need to make a lot of money, but to get people’s recognition, or other gains in entrepreneurship.

Conclusion

This article has focused on women entrepreneurs in the digital creative industries in China, and has considered their entrepreneurial identities. The article made a distinction among entrepreneurs more generally, those working in the creative industries, and female digital creative entrepreneurs. There is a degree of overlap. Digital creative industries are directly associated with entrepreneurship. The western notion of thinking disruptively, ‘outside the box’, has been replaced with notions of positive (i.e. mass) energy and entrepreneurship. In contrast to previous generations that were passive consumers, the twin aspirations of entrepreneurship and creativity now empower the rising middle classes. In the words of one of the promoters of digital individuality, people are gradually shifting from a ‘sit-back-and-be-told culture’ to a ‘making-and-doing culture’ (Gauntlett, 2011).

Women digital creative entrepreneurs, however, are a group of people who are standing at the crossroads of digital technologies, creativity and commerce. At a transformative time where digital creative industries are booming, female practitioners could be regarded as pioneers. But their visibility is a work-in-progress.

The article provides a supplement to the emerging field of scholarship on female creative entrepreneurship, focusing on experiences in China. It has shown that digital creative entrepreneurship is not a level playing field. Women face struggles when developing entrepreneurial identities. Visibility is limited and conditional. On an individual level, the conundrum of what constitutes ‘creativity’ makes many question their entrepreneurial identity. On a social structure level, their gender identity in the masculinist entrepreneurship and technical fields, and their gendered roles and family responsibilities result in a lack of recognition from both their community of practice and their family members.

At the same time, the article also adds a gender dimension into studies on ‘creative labour in China’. Mass innovation, to use the government’s term, is for all. It is reminiscent of previous campaigns that address the masses and is directly linked to patriotism, that is, build a prosperous society; in this sense it echoes the 1950s’ political slogan that ‘women hold up half the sky’. In this context, to be an entrepreneur in China is to participate in social transformation within the context of the socialist market economy.
Women creatives’ participation in the government’s Chinese Dream will be to some extent determined by how they take advantage of their economic, social, cultural, and digital capital. The global and domestic women’s movement may indeed have an impact. Further research is required into this important topic, particularly the evolving relationship between individual and collective female entrepreneurial identity, as well as the impact that greater participation by women will have on the kinds of creative narratives that are produced about China’s future, and women’s contribution to that future.

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Notes

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