Navigating the dynamic leadership labyrinth: Exploring narratives of women academics in Chinese higher education

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Abstract

This thesis explores women academics' leadership experiences in Chinese higher education. It is situated within the literature on gender, organisations, and women's leadership. It takes a social constructionist perspective and brings together the 'leadership labyrinth' and the 'leadership web' to form an analytical framework to examine how women academics make sense of their leadership trajectories. A semi-structured interview method was adopted to gain insight into women's leadership experiences, and a narrative approach was used to analyse and present the findings. Three narratives of women academics' leadership journeys were identified, namely: navigating the winding path towards leadership, learning while in the centre of the labyrinth, and leaving the centre of the labyrinth. Through combining the leadership labyrinth with the leadership web to conceptualise the findings of the research, it was found that women academics navigated the leadership labyrinth with the support of their leadership web. Specifically, they encountered challenges and opportunities that are characteristic of gendered organisations, but they were able to use their individual agency to use resources and power to help them to achieve their leadership goals. It was also found that, while navigating the leadership labyrinth, women academics' attitudes and behaviours were shaped by gendered organisations, while their actions, in turn, influenced organisational culture and structures. The thesis makes theoretical and empirical contributions to knowledge of women's leadership. Firstly, it shows that the leadership labyrinth is dynamic as its walls move and 'disappear', and that the labyrinth is co-constructed by both individuals and organisations. Secondly, the thesis demonstrates that individuals and organisations are undergoing changes in contemporary China, which will provide both new challenges and opportunities, for women on their paths towards leadership.

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Author's declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

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Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter provides an introduction to the thesis, which critically examines the phenomenon of there being very few women leaders in Chinese universities. In this chapter, a description of Chinese women academics and of Chinese higher education is provided, to contextualise the thesis. The theoretical foundations of the thesis are introduced, as well as the research aims and research questions, which are designed to enable an in-depth exploration of women's leadership trajectories.

1.1 Women in Chinese academia today

The thesis focuses on women academics' leadership trajectories in Chinese higher education. The research was instigated by the observation of there being a dearth of women in leadership positions in universities in China. Despite an abundant number of women academics, few of them reach high leadership positions (Aiston and Yang, 2017). According to data from the Chinese Ministry of Education (2018), approximately half of academics in China are women (50.32%); furthermore, as potential academics of the future, 40.37% of doctoral students are women. Data show that women academics are playing, and will continue to play, the vital role in China (Tang and Horta, 2021), but there is a 'leaky pipeline' (Blickenstaff, 2005, p.369) in as much as a gender gap exists at the level of leadership. As Blickenstaff (2005) has pointed out, the increasing number of women at the bottom of the hierarchy does not necessarily increase the number of women at the top. Further evidence of the 'leaky pipeline' was provided by an investigation that revealed that only 4.5% of Chinese universities had a female president (Yang, 2007). A more recent investigation showed this figure to be 7% (Liu, 2018), indicating that, while the proportion of women presidents in Chinese universities has increased, it nevertheless remains low. Altogether, the data provide a typical picture: while there are many women academics, only a few of them reach the highest positions in Chinese universities. This thesis

therefore investigates what happens on women academics' path towards leadership in Chinese academia.

1.2 Theorising gender in the thesis

In order to explore the aforementioned phenomenon, the thesis takes as its key starting point the relationships between gender, organisations and women's leadership, to advance theory and build conceptual frameworks. In this study, gender is defined as socially constructed, where individuals 'do gender' through daily interactions, shaped by socially guided principles (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Organisations are viewed as being 'gendered', in that their processes produce and reproduce inequality regimes, including a gender gap in leadership (Acker, 1990). This thesis therefore understands the relationship between gender and organisations as being related to the way in which gendered organisations both affect, and are affected by, individual practices of doing gender.

1.2.1 A gender perspective on women's leadership

Considering this thesis concentrates on exploring women's leadership, the discussion of gender and organisations is narrowed down to focus on women and leadership specifically. A typical characteristic in gendered organisations is the gender gap in leadership. According to Kark and Eagly (2010), women and men sharing leadership equitably can help to attain the overarching goal of gender equality. Although contemporary organisations appear to provide equal opportunites for women and men to obtain leadership positions, for example through banning explicit discrimination in job requirements, organisational structures and cultures still bring more challenges for women than men to advance towards and attain leadership positions (Kark and Eagly, 2010). It is noticed that women have less access to leadership opportunities than men do, because they encounter various intricate obstacles as they move up the ranks. The image of the 'ideal leader' in organisations is usually a man that is able to concentrate

on work for long hours making personal sacrifices, which is more difficult for women to achieve considering they usually take a greater share of family obligations (Eagly and Carli, 2007). The expectations of the 'ideal leader' also closely links with masculine characters such as being assertive, agressive, and dominant (Eagly and Carli, 2018). Organisations value and manifest this masculine leadership culture that makes it difficult for women to fit in (Kark and Eagly, 2010). Women for example tend to be stereotyped as having supportive roles in the workplace, which not only influences others' evaluations of their professional ability, but also impedes their leadership aspirations (Morgan *et al.*, 2011). Despite formal organisational practices, women also find it is harder to build social capital such as networking with others, which is a vital factor of advancing towards leadership (Casciaro *et al.*, 2014). Due to exclusion from the 'boys' club', women often lack access to finding mentors and role models to gain guidance and key information to develop their career (Greguletz *et al.*, 2019).

Eagly and Carli (2007) argue that those influencing factors make women face a more winding path than men during their way towards leadership positions. They use the metaphor of a *leadership labyrinth* to denote this winding path. However, Stead and Elliott (2009) provide another perspective, saying that women can nevertheless use their agency to construct and maintain a *leadership web* to gain support and then help them achieve their leadership goals. As will be shown later in the thesis, the labyrinth and the web provide useful complementing tenets for analysing women's leadership trajectories.

Empirically, little research has been carried out into women's leadership in academia in the Chinese context (Lu, 2020). Therefore, drawing on gender, organisations and women's leadership, this thesis aims to explore women academics' perceptions of leadership trajectories in Chinese higher education, and to investigate how women as individuals, and universities as organisations, are mutually affected by each other.

1.3 The context of the thesis: Chinese higher education and women academics

This section introduces the context of the thesis, including the relationship between the Chinese Government, the Communist Party, and higher education; the organisational structures and leadership systems in Chinese universities; and Chinese women academics' leadership status. This background information about Chinese universities is provided to help understand the working conditions and status of women academics in China.

1.3.1 Higher education in China

Higher education is an optional final stage of formal learning that occurs after completion of secondary education, worldwide. Altbach *et al.* (2010) note that higher education has three basic missions: teaching, research and public service. Since it creates and disseminates information to contemporary society, higher education is becoming a global market (Coate and Howson, 2016). Even though globalisation implies that higher education systems have become more standardised to some extent, country-specific differences remain (Morley, 2014).

There are a number of different types of universities in China. This study mainly focuses on 'regular universities', since this type is viewed, officially, as representing the highest level of Chinese higher education. The term 'regular university' refers to institutions that have four-year degree-level programmes and have the right to confer degrees. This type of university is publicly funded and operated by the government, and they are more highly ranked in China than private higher education establishments (Zhang and Jiang, 2013). This study focuses on the comprehensive university among regular universities (a specific type of regular universities). Comprehensive universities usually have a fairly equal proportion of women and men academics (Jie, 2021). This is because this type of university offers courses in both traditional sciences, such as biology and mathematics, and social sciences and humanities, such as management and

history.

A unique characteristic of Chinese higher education, which makes it distinct from other countries' higher education systems, is that it is under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. Here it is worth emphasising, that the People's Republic of China is a socialist country, governed and led by the Communist Party of China, under this system, the higher education sector is also led by the Communist Party (National People's Congress, 1998). Party branches, usually named 'Party Committees', are established in every university. These Party branches participate in every aspect of the universities' daily operations, including deciding the development direction of a university, and organising student activities (Zhang and Jiang, 2013). As such, Chinese higher education relates closely to the development of the country, not only in terms of economic and social development, but also in terms of the development of the Communist Party of China. Specifically, the Chinese higher education system shoulders responsibility for implementing Party ideology and educating high-quality talent for the Chinese Communist Party (Zhang, 2010).

Chinese higher education institutions are governed and led by the Government, under highly centralised control. Internally, universities have a hierarchical administrative structure, which is designed and monitored by the Government (Xiong *et al.*, 2011). For example, admissions, job appointments on graduation, the use of resources, subjects offered and the details of the curriculum have all been decided and controlled by the Government. After 1978, as China's systemic economic reforms began, some voices started calling for autonomy for universities. In 1985, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCCP) issued a '*Resolution on Reform of the Educational Structure*', which stated that the government should give more autonomous rights to universities, including the right to manage their own affairs (Hayhoe, 1989). Subsequently, the CCCP, the Central People's Government (State Council) and the Committee of State Education have issued a series of resolutions that have stressed the necessity for the introduction of workable measures for university

autonomy (Zhang, 2010). For example, the '*Essentials of reform and development in the Chinese education system*', in 1993, and the higher Education Act, in 1998, marked the first time that university autonomy had been stipulated by law. Modern universities in contemporary China have gradually gained more autonomy to make decisions on internal structures, operations and staffing affairs, continually aiming to respect their academic freedom and to maintain a good academic environment (Zhang and Jiang, 2013). To summarise, Chinese universities are still guided and led by the government and the Party, but with the autonomy to adjust their practices in certain situations, including practices related to gender equality (Bie, 2011).

1.3.2 The basic organisational structure of higher education institutions

At present, the main organisational model of Chinese higher education institutions is the 'university-school-subject' three-level model, with three leadership systems: the Party leadership system, the administrative leadership system and the research leadership system (Liu, 2016). Because this thesis focuses on women academics' leadership experiences, it is important to understand the operation of leadership systems in universities.

There are three leadership systems which are separate, but closely related. The Party leadership system assigns titles such as Secretary of the Party Committee, while the administrative leadership system assigns titles such as Head of School and Director of Research Centre. The research leadership system assigns titles such as Lecturer, Associate Professor and Professor. Even though the different leadership systems have different tasks, they are nevertheless closely related and individuals are able to flexibly change their career path between the three systems (Lin and Zhang, 2021). For example, a Professor can be promoted to Head of School or Secretary of the Party Committee, if she/he satisfies the requirements of the university. Moreover, the Academic Committee, which is composed of lecturers, Associate Professors and Professors, plays a vital role in administering the academic affairs of universities. For example, it is responsible for

evaluating the recruitment of teachers, developing research programmes and evaluating the academic ranking of teachers.

Chinese universities are mainly composed of three categories of employee: academic staff (teachers and researchers), administrative staff, and Party Committee officers. This categorisation implies a clear division of labour, and the carrying out of defined duties by staff to maintain the operation of teaching and research in universities (Zhang and Jiang, 2013).

Generally, academic employees take on both research and teaching duties in Chinese universities. There are four types of research title: Lecturer, Associate Professor, Professor and Academician (*Yuanshi* in Chinese). The title of Academician is the highest academic title in China. It is the most difficult one to attain, since only a few academics, who have made a notable contribution to science in China, are granted this title (Long and Huang, 2011). These four titles represent the research promotion pathways in universities. A Doctoral degree is the basic requirement for gaining a research title, while teaching performance and research output are vital factors for gaining promotion (Du, 2017). Academics with years of research experience overseas are prioritised, because they are perceived as being more competitive and as having a broader academic vision. Age is also a qualification factor for academics. For example, some universities state that applicants for the title of Professor should be younger than 45, while Associate Professors should be younger than 40 and Lecturers should be younger than 35 (University name withheld, 2022). For candidates, the teaching positions, reputation, ranking, wages and benefits and the geographical location of the university are crucial criteria for employment and promotion. Wages and benefits are comprised of a fixed salary, a national or province-level bonus, housing allowances, support for children attending school (through the University-Affiliated Education System) and help with arranging work for spouses (Ye, 2021).

There are many types of performance assessment for academics, with each university having its own characteristics and regulations. Generally, however, there are three elements: an annual assessment, a scientific research assessment and a teaching assessment (Zhang and Ma, 2013). The annual assessment is a comprehensive assessment, which includes five aspects: morality, ability, diligence, performance and integrity (Du, 2017). Academics usually draft a statement, or an annual report, and universities rate them using three grades: fail, pass or excellent (Zhu *et al.*, 2018). The research assessment is primarily used to evaluate academics' research ability, mainly comprising the quality and quantity of research output and research funding achievements. The results of the scientific research assessment are crucial, since they are related to promotions and bonuses for academics; therefore, academics are more concerned about this assessment than the other two (Zhang and Ma, 2013). At present, the teaching assessment has two aspects: teaching workload and teaching efficiency. Teachers with different academic titles have different teaching workloads and target students (Guan and Chen, 2009). For example, Professors usually teach postgraduates, while Associate Professors focus on masters and undergraduate students, and lecturers mainly teach undergraduate students. In order to evaluate teaching efficiency, universities usually distribute evaluation questionnaires to students and let them grade their teachers; students' evaluations are then used to appraise teaching qualities (Ye, 2021). To achieve a promotion through this assessment system, an academic usually needs to have worked full-time for three to five years.

Qualified academics can compete for administrative leadership positions (*e.g.* Head of School) and Party leadership positions. Previously, decisions as to who can become an administrative leader were usually made by the leadership team of the university, but, in recent years, more universities have instead held public competitions for these leadership positions, taking account of votes from both their leadership teams and their current employees (Ye, 2021). Individuals who are appointed to administrative leadership positions usually have a high level of academic ability and a good reputation, already having a senior academic title. They are usually selected from within the

university, rather than externally. They have a heavy workload and, finally, most of them are male (Liu, 2013). In addition, these leaders often hold a number of titles and positions, which are known as ‘double shoulder tasks’ (Yu and Duan, 2018, p.72). For example, a Head of School might need to take responsibility for teaching and research, as well as dealing with administrative affairs.

Academics can transfer between the three leadership systems in search of opportunities for promotion. Administrative departments focus on the daily management of universities and schools; these include the human resources department, the accounting office, the logistics department, the alumni office and the Party Committee offices (Dai and Zhang, 2010). Party officers take responsibility for propagating and implementing Party policies, supervising the operations of universities, cultivating potential talent for the Chinese Party Committee and selecting candidates for leadership positions (Zhao, 2015). Almost all Presidents in universities are also Deputy Party Secretaries.

1.3.3 Women academics’ leadership status in Chinese higher education

Having introduced the external and internal relationships of Chinese universities, women’s leadership in Chinese academia will now be examined. Although few studies have been conducted into this issue, they nevertheless provide insights into the status of women leaders in Chinese academia.

As previously stated, it is difficult for women academics to gain leadership positions in Chinese academia (Lu, 2020). The traditional Chinese patriarchal culture and societal structures have been highlighted as being among the fundamental reasons that limit women academics’ advancement towards leadership positions (Bush and Haiyan, 2000). Historically, the dominant positions in Chinese society have belonged to men, both in the family and outside the home, while women have had a subordinate status (Attané, 2012). This historical patriarchal culture is viewed as the source of related obstacles, such as gender stereotypes and discrimination, work-family conflicts,

gendered discourses and practices, and so on (Aiston and Yang, 2017; Gaskell *et al.*, 2004; Lu, 2020; Zhao and Jones, 2017). These barriers are common issues faced by women academics globally, but, as Bush and Haiyan (2000) argue, the difference is that Chinese universities seem to be slower than other countries to recognise and address them in order to reduce the scarcity of women leaders. Over the past 22 years, with the issue attracting increasing attention from researchers, both in China and elsewhere, (*e.g.* Aiston, 2014; Jie, 2021), the Chinese Government and Chinese society have become aware of the issue and launched policies to instigate change (Zhao and Bao, 2020). For example, there is now a national policy that requires Chinese universities to assign at least one woman leader to their top leadership team.

There is, however, a particular barrier in China that might be absent elsewhere in the world. According to Lu (2020), Chinese women academics create obstacles for themselves in their journeys towards leadership, that women show low-level ambitious of pursing leadership. I disagree with this argument. As a social constructionist researcher, I aim to explore the factors that encourage women academics to develop their attitudes and behaviour towards leadership, rather than simply view women leaders' underrepresentation as being due to individual issues. Gaskell *et al.* (2004) call for more feminist research to be conducted in China, to inspire Chinese women academics to review and change their circumstances. In the 18 years since Gaskell *et al.*'s (2004) appeal, more researchers have paid attention to the paucity of women leaders in Chinese academia, which has been conducted alongside the social changes that are now happening in China (*e.g.* Tang and Horta, 2021; Zhang, 2010; Zhao and Jones, 2017).

Overall, Chinese universities provide a complex context. The university answers to the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese Government. Additionally, within Chinese universities, there are three leadership systems: the Party leadership system, the administrative leadership system and the research leadership system, in which academics can switch between. Currently, with more researchers noticing the

dearth of women leaders in Chinese academia, greater certainty is emerging as to women academics' circumstances and the factors that influence them. This thesis aims to advance this field of inquiry by exploring women academics' perceptions of their daily experiences, to understand how their leadership trajectories are shaped.

1.4 Research questions and outline of the thesis

Given the theoretical interests of the thesis, and the context discussed above, the overarching aim of the thesis is to explore women academics' perceptions of leadership in Chinese higher educations. Following on from the aim, the thesis seeks to address two research questions:

1. How do women academics make sense of their leadership trajectories in Chinese higher educations?
2. How can the gendered interplay between individuals and organisations be conceptualised in the context of women's leadership experiences?

In order to address the research questions, this thesis is organised as follows. The Literature Review chapter, which follows, is divided into two parts: firstly, the theoretical and conceptual framework of the thesis is introduced, followed by a critical examination of the influencing factors for women's leadership, as discussed by previous researchers; secondly, the extant literature on the leadership experiences of women academics is reviewed. After that, the Methodology chapter describes the philosophical positions of the thesis: social-constructionism and feminism, with the narrative approach adopted to collect and analyse data. The data are then presented in three Findings chapters, as three separate narratives that portray women's leadership trajectories namely: navigating the winding path towards leadership; learning while in the centre of the labyrinth; leaving the centre of the leadership labyrinth. The Discussion chapter which follows, places the findings in the context of the relevant literature, demonstrating how the research questions have been addressed through combining the

concepts of the leadership labyrinth and the leadership web. The Discussion also examines the theoretical and empirical contributions made by the thesis leading to an understanding of women's leadership trajectories in contemporary China. Finally, the Conclusion chapter summarises the main outcomes and value of the thesis, as well as pointing out the limitations of the research and making suggestions for future research.

Chapter Two: Gendered organisations and women's leadership

2.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to review previous literature on gender, organisations and leadership, to gain basic knowledge relating to women academics' leadership experiences in Chinese higher education. Firstly, literature on the gender and organisations are reviewed, to help construct the theoretical framework for this thesis. Then, since this thesis is concerned mainly with women's leadership, the factors that typically influence women's leadership are outlined, both at an organisational, and an individual, level. This part of the review deals with issues of masculinity, gender stereotypes, work-family conflict and the network (*guanxi*). While the concepts of leadership labyrinth and leadership web are discussed that can appropriately organise those influencing factors of women's leadership, to shape a conceptual framework for this thesis. A description is then provided of how the research questions for the study emerged from the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that were chosen. Finally, because this thesis concerns women academics' leadership, in particular, the focus of the literature review was on women's careers in academia. This chapter enables me to shape the appropriate theoretical and conceptual lens, to explore women academics' leadership trajectories with main questions and concerns.

2.2 Theorising gender and organisations

This section reviews two classic theories concerning gender (West and Zimmerman, 1987) and gendered organisations (Acker, 1990), which examine gender in the context of organisations. Firstly, the theory of patriarchy is reviewed, as an introduction to societal gender relationships, to provide a broad landscape. The theory of 'doing gender' is then reviewed, to conceptualise the notion of gender and provide an individual

perspective to show how individuals construct their gendering practices within organisations. The theory of gendered organisations is also reviewed, to provide an organisational perspective, showing how gender shapes organisations. Finally, an explanation is provided as to how this thesis combines these theories to create a single theoretical framework for exploring gender inequality within organisations.

2.2.1 Societal gender relations

Before discussing how gender and organisations are related, it is important to describe the broader societal landscape of gendered relations. This is because organisations reflect this broader landscape. The term 'patriarchy' is often used to explain how gender shapes society. Weber (1947) described patriarchy as a system of government in which men ruled society through their position as heads of household. Walby (1990) explained that patriarchy is a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women. She used the term 'social structure' to reject biological determinism and highlight the universality of patriarchy, arguing that every individual man in society is in a dominant position, while every woman is in a subordinate one. Patriarchy is deeply rooted in both private and public contexts, since men not only dominate women and children in their family, but also hold power in social structures through dominating women's employment opportunities (Walby, 1990).

The nature and extent of patriarchy is, however, changing (Walby, 1990). Since ongoing interactions between individuals in society are based on negotiation, attempts are made to break the boundaries of gender (Brannmark, 2021). In Chinese society, great efforts have been made to achieve gender equality. For example, a law to protect women's rights and interests, in China, was established in 1992. The development of a new generation of feminists has questioned the traditional gender hierarchy, resulting in a new form of patriarchy, named 'patchy patriarchy' (Evans, 2021, p.99). Patchy patriarchy highlights a paradox in contemporary Chinese society, where women's status is improving, in that it is easier for them to access education and employment

than in past years, but they remain submissive as a result of traditional social expectations of the 'ideal woman', who undertakes most domestic duties (Evans, 2021). Patchy patriarchy affirms the improvement of women's status in contemporary China, but confirms that they remain in a subordinate position. It involves, but is not limited to, a gender-related division of labour and certain attitudes towards female virtue and reproduction (Evans, 2021). This reflects Lim's (1997) assertion that patriarchy is a persistent system from the past that endures to the present day, with men continuing to dominate women in the context of the economy, culture and society. Gender therefore continues to shape social relations, from individual daily interactions to organisational constructions (Brannmark, 2021). The next section explains how this thesis defines gender, and how gender influences an individual's life.

2.2.2 The theory of 'doing gender'

An important task for this thesis is to conceptualise the notion of gender in a way that is helpful for the present study, as well as to investigate how gender operates in human life. A core sociological concept, 'doing gender' was proposed to advance a new understanding of gender as a social practice embedded in the interactions of daily life (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Doing gender has been a cornerstone theory, providing new insights for researchers that have enabled them to understand individuals' gendered practices. This is followed by an examination of how this theory can be used as a theoretical lens for exploring the relationships between individuals and the gendered structures of jobs and organisations.

The notion of sex and gender

The debate surrounding the notion of gender has a long history. 'Gender' differs from 'sex', in that 'sex' is a term that relates to biology, while 'gender' relates to psychology and culture (Oakley, 2016). Initially, sex was determined using natural biological criteria to categorise individuals as females or males, namely, the genitalia present at birth or the chromosomal typing before birth (West and Zimmerman,1987). In early

time, a dichotomous perspective of sex involves two, and only two, perceived sexes: female and male (Garfinkel, 1967). The received view of sex in the 21st century, however, is that a person's sex can be male, female, not designated or some other category (Sterling, 2012). The reason for this is that recent studies have shown how someone's culturally defined gender, as being masculine or feminine, might co-exist with an indeterminate sex - termed 'intersex' (Oakley, 2016). This provides evidence that sex and gender are different, but sex is nevertheless closely related with gender.

Gender is linked to sex by 'sex category', sex category is the socially agreed statement of identification that places a person in either the 'female' or 'male' category (Goffman, 1976). The previously accepted attitude in Western society was that gender could be identified by an individual's reproductive functions, with the difference between men and women being one of nature, which in turn guides their psychological and social activities, so that a specific sex category defines their gender (Garfinkel, 1967). Using sex-linked traits and behaviour that are rooted in biology to identify people's gender intensifies the confusion as to how to distinguish the concepts of sex and gender. A limitation of this view has been identified as being that people are categorised and separated by their sex before their gender emerges (Kelan, 2010). West and Zimmerman (1987, p.127) suggested that 'sex' and 'sex category' might be incongruous, so that gender should be understood from a social constructionist perspective:

'Gender is the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category.'

They defined gender as an ongoing accomplishment that is established by individuals based on the socio-cultural conceptions of behaviour required by their sex category (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Two key points are highlighted here: firstly, gender is an activity carried out by individuals; secondly, individuals are accountable for 'doing gender' appropriately for their sex category. This suggests that gender is conducted by individuals under the influence of cultural factors in society, so that it is culturally

based, while sex is biologically based. The contemporary view of gender is that it is based on an individual's own psychological and cultural characteristics, rather than just on biological factors; it relates to levels of masculinity and femininity, which may be independent of biological sex (Oakley, 2016).

In China, the discussion of gender started in the 1990s, through interaction with Western scholars (Gao, 2019). Previously, Chinese society had categorised women and men according to the traditional dichotomous method. Through absorbing and adjusting the Western notion of gender, in a Chinese context, Chinese scholars defined and translated the concepts of sex and gender (Song, 2018). In Chinese, 'sex' is translated as '*Shenglixingbie*', which refers to biological gender, while 'gender' is translated as '*Shehuixingbie*', which means social gender (Ham and Xin, 1995). It can be seen from these translations that the Chinese language has a single word that refers to both sex and gender – '*Xingbie*' so Chinese scholars distinguish the two terms by highlighting the feature of social construction that relates to 'gender'. The term 'social gender' has also been developed based on the Chinese understanding of Marxism, which considers a human being to be a social construct that is determined by environmental factors. This helps people to better understand the social constructionist approach to gender in China (Ham and Xin, 1995). Gender is currently defined as a social construct created through interactions. It is influenced by social expectations, is involved in the power structure and hierarchy, and is related to psychology and culture (Song, 2018).

Both contemporary Western and Chinese notions of gender emphasise that gender is the product of social activity, rather than being something that one possesses. During the process of doing gender, individuals reflect or express gender through many and various activities as they interact with others, and they tend to understand others' behaviour from a similar perspective. By viewing gender as an ongoing activity, West and Zimmerman (1987) shifted researchers' attention from the properties of individuals to the processes that they enacted in their daily interactions (Linstead and Pullen, 2006).

Therefore, based on the above discussion, this thesis claims that gender is not the same as sex, but is an ongoing activity that individuals carry out during the course of daily interactions, which is influenced by social factors (*e.g.* culture, history, politics). This understanding of gender enables this thesis to explore how women academics' activity of doing gender is influenced.

Doing gender

The concept of 'doing gender' conveys the idea that individuals express and display their gender during the process of interaction, and that this is affected by socially-guided perceptual, micro-political and cultural aspects (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Doing gender involves enacting specific identities that are associated with stereotypical and socially-constructed masculine and feminine characteristics (Holmes, 2007). If an individual talks, or acts, like a man, then she/he will be perceived as a male (in terms of sex) and be required to do gender as a man appropriately, which means to display further masculine behaviour (Mavin and Grandy, 2013). Doing gender appropriately based on sex category causes individuals to sustain, reproduce and legitimise gender-based institutional arrangements (Messerschmidt, 2009). Doing gender inappropriately, however, usually happens, in that individuals' gendered behaviour does not match their perceived sex category, or it fails to satisfy the gendered expectations of society (West and Zimmerman, 1987). For example, girls' masculine behaviour is criticised, since it is not performed with, and through, the socially-defined male body (Messerschmidt, 2009). Individuals rather than the institutional arrangements, always account for their character and motives (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Therefore, doing gender inappropriately carries the risk of being assessed using a normative conception of femininity or masculinity (West and Zimmerman, 1987).

Mavin and Grandy (2013, p.235) argued that, as well as doing gender inappropriately, individuals might do gender differently if behaving 'against perceived sex category and expected gender behaviour'. For example, women leaders might challenge the traditionally expected gendered norms of women; they might show masculine

characteristics such as confidence, rather than feminine characteristics such as modesty (Eagly and Karau, 2002). Nadin's (2007) study of women leaders illustrated that they do gender well through feminine roles, which might include being good wives and mothers, while they also do gender differently through presenting typical masculine behaviour, such as by being ambitious. This example also highlights the multiplicity of ways of doing gender, emphasising that individuals can do gender well, but also it is possible to do gender differently at the same time (Mavin and Grandy, 2013).

In the context of the current thesis, the argument of doing gender multiplicity implies individuals' agency when they 'do gender', that women can be guided and obey the socially based gendered arrangements to do gender appropriately, but also they can struggle to against the constraints that enacting multiple ways to do gender differently. Exploring the many ways in which it is possible to do gender not only provides insights into how gender inequality is sustained at an individual level, based on individuals' interactions, but also provides an overview of how gender inequality in institutions (*i.e.* organisations and society) is either reinforced or changed (West and Zimmerman, 2009). The former has been examined above, while the latter involves an investigation of how individuals might change gendered structures within institutions. For example, feminist social movements can provide the impetus for questioning the gender order and related arrangements, but gender equality in law does not guarantee equality in other areas (West and Zimmerman, 1987). West and Zimmerman (1987) pointed out that, because of this, social change must be pursued at both an institutional and an interactional level. Since this thesis focuses on individuals' experiences, observing the multiplicity of ways in which individuals do gender enables an exploration of women's agency. This also provides insights into how the power of individuals might change gendered structures within organisations and in society as a whole.

Doing gender as 'doing structures'

West and Zimmerman (1987) argued that doing gender is unavoidable, because the allocation of power and resources not only exists in the domestic, economic and

political domains, but is also present in the broader context of interpersonal relationships. The concept of doing gender emphasises the link between individual interactions and social hierarchies and structures, and has provided the current study with a means of gaining insights into the notion of gender and how genders are constructed. Based on the argument of West and Zimmerman (1987), gendexr scholars have developed, and reflected on, the doing gender theory through empirical studies of work and organisations. Nentwich and Kelan (2014) conducted a literature review that led them to define five themes to using the theory of doing gender in empirical organisational research: 1) structures, 2) hierarchies, 3) identity, 4) flexibility and context specificity, and 5) gradual relevance/subversion. Because this thesis focuses on women academics' leadership experiences in Chinese universities, it has been vital to understand their relationship with jobs and organisations, and specifically how they do gender within academia. Therefore, after reviewing these five themes, 'doing structures' was selected as the core approach for this current study. This approach will now be described in detail.

Doing gender is utilised as the theoretical lens through which the gendered structures of occupations and organisations will be examined (Nentwich and Kelan, 2014). This approach is suitable for research that examines how individuals do gender within organisations, and that aims to explore the gendered structures of jobs and organisations. Gendered structures are embedded in jobs; they are apparent in the definition or requirements of jobs (Acker, 1990). Individuals tend to satisfy the requirements and expectations of jobs by adjusting their ways of doing gender, so that they construct the gendered structures of jobs (Nentwich and Kelan, 2014). In other words, jobs require performance that is usually closely related to gender, which encourages the individuals who undertake them to do gender in a certain way.

For example, a study focusing on the gendered practices of women academics (Rhoton, 2011) examined how the requirements of an academic position affected the gendered practice of those women; the study also investigated the impact of these gendered

practices on the gendered structures of each job. Academic jobs are proclaimed to be gender-neutral, with an emphasis on the fact that success depends on individual skill and merit, which both men and women should be able to learn and maintain (Gherardi and Poggio, 2001). The gender bias of the job might nevertheless be revealed from its discipline, or it might require that an 'ideal academic' should be objective, competitive and assertive, which are traits that are often associated with masculine characters (Rhoton, 2011). Moreover, a job description might include the requirement for full dedication to academic output, at the expense of any other responsibilities (*e.g.* domestic duties), which is easier for men, given that women are usually more likely to undertake domestic duties (Etzkowizt *et al*., 2000). To satisfy the requirements of a job, women academics might choose to avoid appearing too feminine (*e.g.* by behaving emotionally), displaying typically feminine traits (*e.g.* by always smiling) and admitting to gender stereotypes (*e.g.* by agreeing that women tend to overreact). Women academics might react to the influences of gendered culture and a job description by attempting to present themselves as the 'ideal worker' by hiding their personal gender characteristics (Acker, 1990). As a result, their gendered practices both confirm and prolong the gendered structures of the job and the organisation (Nentwich and Kelan, 2014). Gender inequality is reproduced in academia; stereotypes of women academics are reinforced and the gendered structure of a job can be hidden and replaced by 'women's individual issue' (Rhoton, 2011).

In the example provided above, individuals are doing gender as a result of the job's gendered structure, which is being maintained. Individuals might, however, do gender in a way that is not related to the job's gendered structure. Murray (1996) argued that such a situation might increase the challenge for individuals at work, rather than make any change to the stereotypical gender assignment of a job. Rhoton's (2011) study demonstrated that women who fail to meet the gendered discipline of an academic job will be evaluated as having insufficient merit by the organisations and other workers. The impact of a gendered structure is that the claimed 'gender-neutral meritocracy' is replaced by a 'women's issue' (Kemelgor and Etzkowitz, 2001), which results in

women academics, as individuals, taking responsibility for any poor job performance. The meritocratic model in academia will be discussed in detail later, when there will be an exploration of how women academics are blamed by gendered structures within academia. Using the theoretical lens of 'doing gender as doing structures' has enabled this thesis to draw upon women's practices of doing gender within organisations. It has enabled an assessment of how the gendered structures of academia shape women's beliefs and behaviour, and of how these structures are constructed, and possibly changed.

In summary, the theory of doing gender (West and Zimmerman, 1987) defines the notion of gender in this thesis. It asserts that gender is not sex, but is an ongoing activity, and that individuals' conduct in their daily interactions is influenced by social factors. Individuals can do gender in a multiplicity of ways. Moreover, they have the agency to obey or challenge gendered arrangements, and obey or challenge feminine and masculine stereotypes or present both stereotypes at the same time. This perspective enables the current study to explore women academics' practice of doing gender, acknowledging that they have the agency to choose how to do gender within their organisation. Because this thesis focuses on women academics' experiences in Chinese universities, the theory of doing gender has been used to facilitate understanding of how the gendered structures of academia are constructed. This approach has enabled an analysis of the relationships between women academics and academia, given that women's practices when doing gender are guided by the gendered structure of academia also in turn reconstruct the gendered structures. Combining the perspectives of doing gender in a multiplicity of ways and doing gender by doing structures has provided this study with new insights into women academics' gendered practices. Women academics have the agency to do gender in a multiplicity of ways within academia. They are influenced by the gendered structures of academia, but these structures can be reconstructed.

Although the theory of doing gender examines individuals' gendered practices, less attention has been paid to how jobs and organisations become gendered (Nentwich and Kelan, 2014). Therefore, the theory of gendered organisations (Acker, 1990) is reviewed in the following section.

2.2.3 The theory of gendered organisations

Gender continually shapes organisations, since men hold power in the most important organisations in society (Lerner, 1989). The relationship between gender and organisations has been discussed ever since feminist researchers noticed that the most powerful positions in organisations were occupied by men (*e.g.* Kanter, 1977; Walby, 1990). There has, however, been a lack of systematic theory on gender and organisation, to enable further analysis of gender inequality problems in the workplace, such as gender segregation, the gender pay gap and issues of individual identity within an organisation (Acker, 1990). Acker (1990) put forward the concept of the 'gendered organisation' to challenge the widely accepted viewpoint of gender neutrality in organisations, describing five processes in which gendering occurs, to explain how inequalities in organisations are produced and reproduced.

The theory of gendered organisations

The concept of the gender-neutral organisation was challenged by Kanter (1977). She argued that a gendered structure results in gender differences in organisations, rather than this being caused by individuals' characters as men and women. Specifically, organisational roles are gendered, and those gendered roles are assigned to individuals who satisfy the required image (Kanter, 1977). For example, '(the) masculine ethic elevates the traits assumed to belong to men' as a requirement for satisfying the role of manager (Kanter, 1977, p.43). Kanter (1977) thus criticised the argument that organisations are gender neutral because authority structures are dominated by masculine principles. Kanter (1977) did not explore the relationship between gender

and organisation further, since her research focused on organisational structure, rather than gender.

With the development of the feminist movement, feminists have claimed that gender is more than just a socially constructed concept, as it can also be viewed as an analytic category to explain the subordinate status of women in society (Connell, 1987; Scott, 1986). Acker (1990) continued Kanter's (1977) discussion of the relationship between gender and organisations, claiming that the organisation as an analytic unit is gendered, with action and emotion, operation and control, meaning and identity being distinguished and labelled as being either masculine or feminine (Acker, 1990). Gender is not simply an addition to these organisational processes; it is deeply embedded in the organisation through the production and reproduction of these processes (Acker, 1990). This is because men's behaviour and perspectives are taken to represent 'universal human beings' in the workplace; because they control the structure and are the decision makers, this reinforces masculine domination (Acker, 1990).

Continuing to explore the gendered nature of organisations, Acker (2006) discussed whether inequality regimes (*i.e.* the practices and processes that produce inequalities) can change, coming to the conclusion that change was possible, but difficult. The key reason was that the organisational processes that produce and reproduce inequality were subtle and difficult to change (Acker, 2006). For example, the family-friendly policies that many organisations now practise may enhance, rather than destroy, the masculinity-dominated organisation model (Acker, 2006). A recent study that explored the impact of family-friendly policies in the workplace showed that women took the risk of being stigmatised when they took advantage of those policies, (Padavic *et al.*, 2020), being labelled as being less competent and losing the opportunity for advancement. In order to alleviate the inequality problem, Acker (2006; 2009) pointed out that more government legislation was needed to influence the goals, structure and culture of organisations so that they support women, also calling for more research to explore inequality issues from a system process perspective, rather than from the

perspective of the failure of individual women. While the current thesis uses gendered organisation theory as a theoretical lens through which to analyse the leadership trajectories that Chinese women experience in higher education, instead of limiting the perspective to individual experiences, as Acker (2009) argued, attention is paid to the organisational perspective, exploring how individuals shape, and are shaped by, the gendering processes of the organisation. Therefore, the interactions between individuals and organisations constitute a key issue to be investigated in this thesis.

Acker's theorising is, however, not without its critics. For example, Britton (2000) criticised Acker's viewpoint as being too essentialist, arguing that considering all organisations to be conceptualised and distinguished by masculinity and femininity may result in reproducing and reinforcing gender differences. Kantola (2008) agreed with Britton's comments on gendered organisation theory, arguing that the essentialist patriarchy was over emphasised by Acker (1990). Kantola (2008) also pointed out that this limitation did not prevent scholars from using Acker's theory to demonstrate individuals' gendered patterns and behaviour in organisations, especially Acker's discussion of the five processes of gendering.

The five processes of gendered organisations

Specifically, Acker (1990) claimed that the gendering of organisations occurred through at least five processes: construction of division along lines of gender; symbols and images that explain, express and reinforce these divisions; interactions between individuals that produce gendered social structures; the production of gendered components of individual identity; the fundamental ongoing process of creating and conceptualising social structures. These five gendering processes of organisations provide different analytical perspectives for examining how the organisations become gendered (Kantola, 2008). Therefore, understanding these gendering processes enables this thesis to explore gendered interplay between individuals and organisations from different angles.

Firstly, a gendering process happens in the construction and maintenance of division by gender, including variations in patterns, the division of labour, permitted behaviours, power and so on, that happen in the workplace, the family and society (Acker, 1990). In other words, women and men are often assigned different tasks and roles in labour markets. For example, women's roles in an organisation usually tend to be linked with support tasks, such as buying coffee, taking minutes of meetings and caring for others' emotions, all of which are related to services and assistance rather than leadership or career development (Gao, 2019). Secondly, gendering occurs in the construction of symbols and images that appear in society, including in language, traditional and popular culture and dress styles, which aims to explain, express, maintain or even sometimes oppose divisions of gender (Acker, 1990). A pertinent example is the popular word in China used to describe women who concentrate on work: 'Strong women' (*NvQiangRen*). The word is used to criticise these women, who are aggressive and behave like men, and who are too ambitious in their career, therefore ignoring their family (Jie, 2021). In other words, these women are described as being far from the image of the ideal Chinese woman that aligns with societal norms. This term has previously been a strongly derogatory word in China, but things have changed in recent years (Yu, 2020). With the development of feminism in China, more and more working women have realised that being a strong woman is not a shameful thing, but shows their efforts to be independent, capable and powerful in their own life (Yu, 2020). The derogatory nature of this term is decreasing, as women's competitiveness and achievements become more accepted. According to Acker (1990), the third category of processes that produces a gendered social structure and gendered organisations is daily interactions between individuals. For example, Eagly and Carli (2007) showed gender differences in terms of self-promotion and negotiation behaviour, as men are normally seen as being better at, and more likely to indulge in, promoting themselves than women in the workplace. According to these authors, this is because women take on more pressure and risks during self-promotion, as they may be criticised as lacking femininity because of being immodest (Eagly and Carli, 2007).

Fourthly, Acker (1990) pointed out that these processes also construct the gendered components of individual identity. For example, individuals' choice of a perceived appropriate job, use of language, dress style and way of presenting themself are all part of being a gendered member within an organisation (Reskin and Roos, 1987). It causes a dilemma for women when their gender identity is inconsistent with the gender identity required for their job (Smith and Hatmaker, 2017). For example, Eagly and Karau (2002) observed that female leaders are criticised for their leadership behaviour when it does not seem appropriate for women. When they act according to feminine characteristics, however, they are criticised as not being tough enough as leaders. Thus, women have to develop self-image and a work orientation according to an organisational culture that is dominated by masculine traits, which may eventually inhibit career development and career ambition (Zhang, 2001). Finally, Acker (1990) highlighted that gender is deeply rooted within, rather than outside, the process of producing organisational and social structures. As Clegg and Dunkerley (1980) argued that gender is a fundamental element in the construction of an organisational logic, and Acker (1990, p.149) stated that 'an abstract job can be transformed into a concrete instance if there is a worker'. When industrial capitalism describes the 'ideal worker', the requirement is for a male worker whose life centres around doing his job, abandoning other obligations, such as domestic duties (Acker, 1990). Acker (1990) thus argued that jobs already entail a gendered division of labour, rather than being gender neutral. Through these processes, gender is practised in the division of labour and power, through language and culture, in individual behaviour patterns, and in the choice of appropriate work. These factors have frequently been observed by researchers, such as Martin and Collinson (2002), as being factors that result in gender inequality.

In summary, Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organisations illustrates that the way in which organisations are gendered and are continually gendering through at least five processes that relate to interactions between individuals, organisations and society. Those interactions construct and reinforce the gendered structures and culture of organisations, while gendered organisations, in turn, reproduce inequality through those

gendering processes. The theory of gendered organisations enables this thesis to explore gendered inequality from an organisational perspective, to understand how gendered structures and cultures are constructed and maintained. This organisational perspective improves upon the limited individual perspective of the theory of doing gender, so providing a more comprehensive theoretical lens for this thesis, to reveal the gendered interplay between women academics and Chinese higher education.

This thesis combines the theory of doing gender (West and Zimmerman, 1987) and the theory of gendered organisations (Acker, 1990) as theoretical frameworks to explore women academics' leadership experiences in Chinese higher education. This combination of theories provides a relevant analytical lens for this thesis. Firstly, the theory of doing gender (West and Zimmerman, 1987) defines gender as being socially constructed, with individuals doing gender based on complex socially guided perceptions. Moreover, individuals can do gender multiplicity based on their agency; they can either obey or challenge those socially guided perceptions, and they can also obey and challenge simultaneously (Mavin and Grandy, 2013). The theory of doing gender places an emphasis on exploring gender inequality from the perspective of individuals' gendered practices. Secondly, Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organisations provides an organisational perspective on the gendering of organisations, drawing attention to how they are gendered and operated by masculine principles. The five gendered processes are outlined that construct and maintain gendered structures and the culture of organisations, which are closely related to interactions between individuals, organisations and society (Acker, 1990).

Both theories are valuable for this thesis, as the theory of doing gender explores how individuals' gender practices are shaped by organisational and social factors, while the theory of gendered organisations investigates how organisations are constructed to be gendered through those gender practices. These links have inspired consideration, in this thesis, of the gendered interplay between individuals and gendered organisations, in the context of gender inequality issues relating to women's leadership. For the

purpose of this thesis, both perspectives have been combined as one theoretical framework that accounts for how individuals' viewpoints and behaviours are affected by a gendered organisational structure and culture, and how organisational gendering processes are, in turn, influenced by individuals' actions. Specifically, the thesis is interested in examining women academics' gendered practices in relation to leadership in Chinese higher education, and then exploring the gendered interplay between them and organisations during their leadership trajectory. There will now be a discussion of women and leadership.

2.3 Women's leadership: Influencing factors

Based on the theoretical framework described in the previous section, this section concentrates on reviewing the literature on gender inequality issues in leadership. Earlier literature on women and leadership are reviewed first, to show the gender gap in leadership in research and in reality. The most frequently mentioned factors that influence women's leadership are then discussed in detail, to illustrate the various situations women face on their leadership journey. This section focuses particularly on examining women's leadership, since the thesis explores the leadership experiences of women academics in Chinese universities. This develops an understanding of women's leadership trajectories for this thesis.

2.3.1 Women and leadership

Leadership is an evolving concept, without a universal consensus, which many scholars have attempted to define, explore and expand for over a century (Northouse, 2021). Leadership has been conceptualised in many ways, since it can have different meanings for different people in different contexts (Stogdill, 1974). Traditional leadership theories tend to view the leader as being central to the definition of leadership, investigating leaders' personal traits and behavioural styles. More recent theories have taken the follower into account and have argued for process-centric definitions. As

Northouse (2021) suggested, leadership is a process that occurs between leaders and followers, achieving common goals by power of influence. Specifically concentrating on women and leadership research area, Stead and Elliott (2009) argued leadership as relational at micro and macro levels, that women leaders' interactions with other individuals and with wider organisations and society. Combining those understandings of leadership, this thesis views leadership as a process, that is constructing during the interactions between women and other individuals and organisations. As context is also argued to be an important factor that shapes leadership (Klenke, 2018), this thesis views leadership as being constructed socially, encompassing not only leaders and followers, but also the context of society, the political situation and history. Gender, as a crucial context of conceptualising leadership, has attracted more research attention in recent years (*e.g.* Eagly and Carli, 2007; Stead and Elliott, 2009) and is also a focus for this thesis.

Situating women's leadership in the gendered organisation

Research into gender and leadership has a long history, as there is a continuing phenomenon of gender inequality in leadership worldwide (Eagly and Heilman, 2016). Although the increasing emergence of women leaders shows that the gender gap has gradually decreased, most leadership positions are still occupied by men (Simon and Hoyt, 2021). For example, a Chinese investigation has shown that there were 97 women leaders within a sample of 75 Chinese universities, which equated to 12.39% of the total number of leaders (Jie, 2021). Numerous examples of qualitative and quantitative evidence all tend towards one argument: that men, rather than women, frequently emerge as leaders (Badura *et al.*, 2018).

Following Acker's theory of the gendered organisation, Ely and Meyerson (2000) proposed a model to categorise the various understandings of gender inequality issues in organisations. The model contains four types of explanations: 'fix the women; value the feminine; create equal opportunities; access and revise work culture' (Ely and Meyerson, 2000, p.106). Originally, the model was used to understand gender and

organisational change, but it is also valuable for this thesis for investigating gender inequality in leadership within organisations. This model will be used, with a focus on the four types of explanation listed above, which researchers have often used to examine women's underrepresentation in the leadership of organisations.

The first category is 'fix the women', which implies that women lack leadership skills. The basic assumption is that individual success and failure in leadership depends on the individuals themselves, and that the gender difference in leadership attitude and behaviours results in the gender gap in leadership. This suggests that women should learn leadership skills and traits, to be more competitive, like men, which means 'fixing' themselves (*e.g.* Evans, 2001). This explanation allocates excessive blame to women and ignores the problem of gendered organisations (Eagly and Carli, 2007). In contrast, the second viewpoint, 'value the feminine', emphasises that women possess the skills to be leaders, but their skills are not valued and recognised by organisations. Typically, research related to this viewpoint focuses on gender differences in leadership style and effectiveness, but the results demonstrate that such gender differences are too slight to support this viewpoint (Kaiser and Wallace, 2016). Moreover, this kind of viewpoint, which supports maintaining gender differences, may strengthen gender stereotypes, role incongruity issues and double-bind issues (Eagly and Karau, 2002).

The third viewpoint, 'create equal opportunities', refers to the structural issues that women face when they are promoted to a leadership position. Compared with men, women lack the access, opportunity and formal/informal networking to promote themselves as leaders in organisations. Therefore, a substantial policy-based measure is required, designed to help women to achieve leadership positions, such as establishing a more transparent promotion structure, stipulating the required proportion of women leaders and practising flexible working time arrangements. Such measures may, however, have the reverse effect. For example, women worry that their use of flexible working time arrangements may decrease their competitiveness and undermine their career advancement (Padavic *et al.*, 2020).

The fourth category of explanation proposed by Ely and Meyerson (2000), named 'assess and revise work culture', rejects what is regarded as a fundamental flaw in the previous three types of explanation. Taking a different point of view, they argue that the source of gender inequality is a series of gendered social practices within organisations, from formal structures (organisational level) to informal interactions (individual level). These gendered social practices are mainly created by, and for, men, rather than women, and so tend to reflect and support men's experiences and career advancement (cf. Acker, 1990; West and Zimmerman, 1987). In other words, these practices appear to be gender neutral, but imply a gender order that is dominated by masculinity. As Meyerson and Fletcher (2000) suggested, people should recognise and dismantle these gendered practices, to change structural and cultural conditions within organisations. In agreement with the fourth viewpoint argued by Ely and Meyerson (2000), this thesis examines gendered social practices within organisations, to explore gendered inequality in leadership. Specifically, the focus of the thesis explores how gendered social practices, at both an individual, and an organisational, level can shape women academics' leadership in Chinese universities. Throughout this process, as Ely and Meyerson (2000, p.113) highlighted, the key point is not some form of predetermined gender difference, 'but rather, the often subtle, seemingly neutral organisational processes that lead to differentiation'.

Understanding women's leadership

As Ely and Meyerson (2000) pointed out, most definitions and discussions of leadership are dominated by a masculine discourse. This is because much leadership and managerial theory has been created, and developed, by men, generally focusing on male leaders as the research subjects; thus, men's behaviours are treated as leadership norms (Lämsä and Sintonen, 2001). Leadership continues to be developed with the typical ideal of the white, western, middle-class, heterosexual male within organisations (Acker, 2006). However, this ideal image of a leader ignores other individuals' experiences and limits the diversity of leadership theory (Stead and Elliott, 2009).

Considering, in particular, the continuing increase in the proportion of women in the global labour market, it is imperative to explore the intersection of gender and leadership (Jenner and Ferguson, 2009).

Among the inadequate number of studies of women's leadership that have been undertaken, most of the research has focused on investigating the styles and characteristics of women leaders (Simon and Hoyt, 2021). For example, one explanation of women's underrepresentation in top leadership positions has been the gender difference in leadership style and effectiveness. Indeed, the value of women's leadership style has been identified, to some extent, within this research area, as tending to be more transformational than men's style, in terms of facilitating effectiveness, focusing more on promoting others' welfare and increasing the corporate responsibility of organisations (Boulouta, 2012; Eagly *et al.*, 2003). Therefore, examining which styles of leadership women prefer to use, and the impact of applying them in organisations, is viewed as benefitting society by recognising and valuing the advantage of women's leadership (Esch *et al.*, 2017). While the significant contributions that these discussions have made should be acknowledged, they are nevertheless examples of the discussion of women's leadership being rooted in male-dominated discourse, since they use mainstream male leadership norms to compare and evaluate the performance of women leaders. As Elliott and Stead (2008) pointed out, the media and literature illustrate women's success in leadership, while still emphasising their inability to succeed, since the fundamental framework of leadership continues to be based on male values. Therefore, adopting women's practices to develop leadership theory is necessary to inhibit the further marginalisation of women's leadership (Stead and Elliott, 2009). Elliott and Stead (2008) also called for more attention to be focused on women's leadership practices in a variety of sectors, not just in the business domain, with the aim of establishing a broader sociological understanding of leadership. In response to their proposal, this thesis concentrates particularly on collecting and analysing women's leadership experiences in Chinese academia, with the expectation of offering new insights into women's leadership theory.

2.3.2 Discourses and practices of masculinity

Based on the understanding of women's leadership status, this section focuses particularly on examining factors that influence women's leadership. Identifying the influencing factors continues to be a research topic that receives a great deal of attention from researchers (Goryunova *et al.*, 2017). These factors are the specific gendered social practices that, at both the individual, and organisational, level (Ely and Meyerson, 2000), women face in their journey towards leadership in organisations. Referring back to the theoretical lens of doing gender (West and Zimmerman, 1987) and gendered organisations (Acker, 1990), these factors relate to individual perceptions from within gendered organisations, implying that this thesis should analyse individual practices of doing gender. This section aims to introduce and discuss four typical factors - discourses and practices of masculinity, gender stereotypes, work-family conflicts and social networking (*guanxi*) - to explain how they influence women's leadership.

The debate about masculinity centres on researching men's identity, traits and power relations, from psychological, sociological and poststructuralist perspectives (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). A conclusive definition of masculinity is, however, still lacking. Connell (1995) suggested that this is because masculinity is a contested concept. In agreement with Connell, Bird (1996) suggested the reason to be that individual experiences within particular organisations and in various cultural contexts affect conceptualisations of masculinity. There is, however, a widely accepted understanding of masculinity that is viewed as providing the cornerstone of debate on the concept. Connell (1995, p.75) argued that masculinity is not defined by the personality traits of individuals, but by the 'configurations of practice', which differ with culture, history and time, and which result in men practising multiple types of masculinity in social actions. Therefore, researchers have recognised that masculinity is open to change and can be interpreted based on their own research perspectives. From an individual perspective, masculinity is acknowledged to relate to gender norms that

enable men to understand, internalise and become ‘not-female’ (Bird, 1996). Meanwhile, hegemonic masculinity has been primarily regarded as being the social ideal of masculinity, which involves being ‘emotionally detached, competitive and supportive of the sexual objectification of women’ (Bird, 1996, p.131). Martin (2001) explored masculinity from a feminist standpoint, suggesting that masculinity, as defined in discourses and practices, could be interpreted in terms of gender relations. Through observing individual routine behaviours in organisations, the process of constructing masculinity becomes visible, perceivable and interpretable within certain cultural and historical circumstances (Martin, 2001).

Even in contemporary society, the discourses and practices of masculinity steadily dominate in organisations (Knights, 2019). For example, Knights and Richards (2003) found a typical display of masculine discourses and practices in academia in some subjects’ refusal to allow female researchers to participate. They explained that there was a subject distinction, in that men were viewed as being more suitable for research into some ‘hard subjects’, such as energy, maths and physics, while women were categorised as being more suitable for ‘soft subjects’, such as humanities. This also reflects a gendered division of labour in the structure of academia, which in turn reinforces masculine domination (Letherby and Shiels, 2001). Fitzsimons (1994) pointed out that it is not the nature of science, but the masculine discourses that build the boundary between women and the subjects that are dominated by men. Additionally, apart from the structural issues, women are also marginalised culturally by masculine discourse and practice. Hatmaker (2013) pointed out that women are always evaluated from the point of view of their gender, rather than their professional abilities in the workplace, which is dominated by a masculine culture. For example, women employees are asked questions relating to issues such as their arrangements for childcare, during job interviews, demonstrating that their identities as wives and mothers takes precedence over their professional identity (Hatmaker, 2013). Similar situations arise during interactions in the workplace, so that some women, in order to establish their professional identity, may become ‘the conceptual man’ (Ranson, 2005). ‘Conceptual

men' refuse to be treated as women and avoid showing feminine characteristics, in order to prove that their professional ability and success are not relevant to their gender (Jorgenson, 2002). These women aspire to be valued, however, at the expense of devaluing their gender. As Hatmaker (2013) stated, the appearance of 'conceptual men' reinforces, rather than challenges, the domination of masculinity in the workplace.

Moreover, masculine discourse and practices are confirmed that continually construct leadership, through affecting individuals' patterns of belief, values, attitudes, expectations and ways of thinking (Billington *et al.*, 1998). Based on the fact that the ideal worker is continually portrayed in the image of a man (Acker, 1990), and the dominant leadership literature is mainly created through masculine discourse and practice (Ely and Meyerson, 2000), the ideal leader is widely positioned as, and accepted as, a man. This image of the ideal leader causes a role incongruity issue for women, as the roles of women and leaders are viewed as being inconsistent, which eventually results in women's difficulty in becoming a leader and being successful in leadership (Eagly and Karau, 2002). The role incongruity results in women being perceived less favourably than men as potential leaders, and their leadership behaviours are evaluated less favourably than those of men (Eagly and Karau, 2002). A reason for this is that men, rather than women, are viewed as having more valuable traits as leaders, which are always related to masculine characteristics, such as independence and assertiveness (Eagly, 2005; Ridgeway, 1997). To summarise, masculine discourse and practice within organisations are continually maintained, and are difficult to change, in women's path towards leadership.

2.3.3 Gender stereotypes

Gender stereotypes are 'generalisations of what men and women are like', these stereotypical beliefs are not only descriptive, but also prescriptive, guiding individuals as to what they should believe and how they should behave (Hentschel *et al.*, 2019, p.2). Gender stereotypes set out gender differences between men and women and establish

behavioural norms concerning how men and women should act (Heilman, 2001). Men are stereotyped as being agentic, having traits such as being aggressive, decisive and rational; meanwhile, women are stereotyped as being communal, helpful, kind and emotional (Koenig and Eagly, 2014). It is clear that there is an overlap between men's stereotypical attributes and those of the 'ideal worker/leader', while women's stereotypical attributes closely connect with those of 'servers/helpers' in the family and workplace (Morgan *et al.*, 2011). On the one hand, women are required to satisfy expectations that are based on gender stereotypes, and if they fail or violate those stereotypes, they will be sanctioned (Heilman *et al.*, 2004), excluded (Watson and Hoffman, 2004) or even harassed (Berdahl, 2007).

Women who pursue leadership experience a double-bind dilemma that is based on conflicting stereotypes between gender and leadership (Rhode, 2017). When advancing into a leadership position, women have attempted to imitate 'ideal leaders' and be more aggressive; however, they may be labelled as 'an iron maiden' or 'an ice queen', and criticised for lacking feminine characteristics (Heilman *et al.*, 2004). Conversely, if they show too many of their feminine traits, questions may be asked concerning whether they are able to make important and professional decisions in leadership positions (Catalyst, 2007). For example, crying is a typical expression related with multiple emotions, to show the powerless feelings of individuals, and it is stereotyped as being feminine (MacArthur, 2019). The paradox for women is that, if they cry, they may be criticised as being not tough enough and less competent as leaders, but they also do not become more desirable if instead they choose to show toughness (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Van de Ven *et al.*, 2017).

The conflicting stereotypes related to women and leaders not only influence how society and organisations view women, but also encourage women to internalise and reinforce these stereotypes (Powell, 2011). A psychological 'glass ceiling' is established when women believe and practice such stereotypes, as they devalue themselves and other women who struggle to attain a leadership role (Rhode, 2016).

For example, women may accept the explanation of their underrepresentation in higher positions in organisations as being because they 'lack the necessary qualifications or commitment' (Rhode, 2017, p.319). Ibarra *et al.* (2013) illustrated how this internalisation can diminish women's aspirations for leadership and, in turn, reinforce gender stereotypes. In conclusion, stereotypes impair women's advancement towards leadership in two ways: 'by fueling people's doubt about women's leadership abilities and by making women personally anxious about confirming these doubts.' (Eagly and Carli, 2007, p.137).

In order to combat the influences of gender stereotypes and forms of discrimination, and to encourage women to pursue leadership, various strategies have been put forward by researchers. A common type of strategy involves 'fixing' women, suggesting that women should act like men. For instance, White (1995, p.7) emphasised that 'a gutsy girl breaks the rules'. Meanwhile, Eagly and Carli (2007) advised women to make adjustments to satisfy the requirements of the 'ideal leader', in order to pass through the leadership labyrinth. Conversely, Rhode (2016) proposed a strategy that focused on 'fixing' organisations, suggesting that organisations should take responsibility for creating a 'gender-equal' workplace for women employees. As a minimum, equality needs to be reflected in published promotion criteria, organisational polices and reward structures (Dobbin *et al.*, 2007), because women have always had to make more of an effort than their male competitors to reach the higher levels (Eagly and Karau, 2002). Kellerman and Rhode (2007) insisted that gender equality should be an organisational commitment that starts from being practised by the top leadership in the organisation. Specifically, distributing responsibility for gender equity issues to top leaders, and recording their performance *via* job evaluation means, makes them accountable for results (Kellerman and Rhode, 2007). Dodge *et al.* (1995) pointed out that gender stereotypes are resistant to change, once constructed, but that this nevertheless implies that they can be changed. The change relies, however, on both individuals and organisations, as Rhode (2017) stated, the reform of anti-gendered stereotypes should not be viewed as a 'women's issue', but should instead be seen as an organisational

issue involving all employees.

2.3.4 Work-family conflict

The most common obstacle to women's career concerns the conflicting responsibilities between work and family, and the national contexts and changing social trends that shape experiences relating to this issue (Lewis *et al.*, 2007). Toffoletti and Starr (2016) divided research on work-life conflict into two strands: the conflicting experiences of work and private life (the individual level) and the evaluation of the efficiency of work-life policy and practice (the institutional level). Individual experiences of work-family conflict are discussed first in this section.

Onsongo (2006) asserted that women are usually required to take more responsibility, and spend much time performing the roles of wives and mothers, within their family, undertaking duties such as childcare and domestic chores. In this way, women sometimes expend their time and energy on their family life at the expense of their career. The gendered division of labour is identified as a key reason for work-family conflict. According to Acker (1990), the construction of the gendered labour division process has many aspects, being embedded in the structures of family, labour markets and the state. Men are expected to be the 'breadwinner' for the family, while women are required to take on housekeeping and childcare responsibilities in a traditional segregation of family life (Davies and Frink, 2014). China is no exception, where men are traditionally viewed as the people who should develop their career to support the family, while women are expected to be a good wife and mother (*i.e. xianqiliangmu*) and take care of the family. Even with an increasing number of women entering the labour market, undertaking paid work, they continue to take most of the responsibility for childcare, while men can be cared for and spend all their time and energy on developing their career (Evans, 2021).

Another obstacle is that, once women have children, the stereotypical expectation is that their aspiration of being a good mother will exceed that of being a good worker (Ely *et al.*, 2014). While it is not necessarily true for all women, it tends to be a common view in society. In addition to the influence of the traditional gendered division of labour and gender stereotypes, which insist that women should primarily pay attention to family roles rather than work, the norms for the ideal leader, in society, add to women's challenge (Williams, 2010). While discussing women leaders in the higher education system, Nguyen (2012) claimed that society requires a good leader to work full-time or even overtime. This requirement results in a heavy workload and time constraints for women leaders which, ultimately, obstruct their path to top managerial levels. Therefore, while women leaders struggle to respond to high family expectations, they are also expected to conform to a male-normed professional life to be the 'ideal worker/ leader', which exacerbates the difficulty of balancing career and family (Acker, 1990; Bajdo and Dickson, 2001; Wentling and Palma-Rivas, 2000).

Additionally, the identities that women define are also often related to the work-family conflict. According to Stets and Burke (2000), people define their identity by asking themselves 'Who am I' and they generate different identities from the various roles that they enact in life. For example, people continually construct a professional identity that satisfies their occupational expectations in the organisation and they construct a parental identity that fits the requirements of society (Smith and Hatmaker, 2017). A similar situation exists in China. Zhao and Jones (2017) interviewed women leaders working in universities about how they define and rank their identities. They found that women participants usually defined three identities: mother, teacher and leader. Each identity appears to be distinctive from the others, yet there is an apparent interplay between each of these identities (Zhao and Jones, 2017). The identities appear in sequential order within a particular temporal structure, that mother is the first while leader is the last, and this ranking of identities can transfer into another conflict, namely the work-family conflict (Zhao and Jones, 2017). The process of generating, and switching between, identities is complex, as women attempt to balance meeting the

expectations of being an ideal worker/mother with the worker/mother they would prefer themselves to become (Reid, 2015).

While the previous section has reviewed individuals' conflict experience, this section focuses on discussing the practice of work-life measurement in organisations. An increasing number of organisations publish policies and strategies to support women in balancing work and family, such as flexible working time, telecommuting, maternity leave and pay, leave for caregiving and so on (Galinsky *et al*., 2008). These measures do not, however, significantly diminish work-family conflict, because women who want to take advantage of these policies are anxious that they may damage their career, fall behind their competitors or be replaced by new appointees in the workplace (Williams *et al.*, 2013). Smith and Hatmaker (2017, p.307) concluded that the practice of flexibility policies that aim to relieve work-family conflict constitute 'one step forward', but that 'the negative effects to reputation and career may actually result in two steps back for professional women'. Moreover, in order to avoid the conflict and stigma that result from the utilisation of flexible working measures, individuals may pretend to be an 'ideal worker' in the workplace by covering up issues like work-family conflict (Yoshino, 2007). This strategy may work in the short term but it brings more pressures for individuals (Yoshino, 2007).

Such flexible working policies have been evaluated as being ineffective, because the measures continue to reflect and reinforce gendered expectations regarding women's work and family life (Williams *et al.*, 2013). Ultimately, the responsibility for any unequal outcome is placed on the individual, meaning that the individual is seen as being incapable or less competent if they fail to balance their work and family (Eagly and Carli, 2007). For example, 'working mums' feel guilty about neglecting their children when they spend time on their work, while they also feel guilty about neglecting their work if they focus on caring for their children (Blair-Loy, 2003). As a result, women may blame themselves, which damages their aspirations and negatively influences their career advancement (Eagly and Carli, 2007). In conclusion, work-

family conflict continues to impede women's advancement in their career and currently popular solutions continue to have adverse effects (Padavic *et al.*, 2020).

2.3.5 Networks (Guanxi)

Women's lack of access to networks has been proposed to be a barrier that prevents them from reaching leadership positions (Eagly and Carli, 2007). There is a classic distinction between formal and informal networking in organisational research, where formal networks refer to the formal relationship between supervisors and subordinates that are assigned by organisations, and informal networks refer to the relationship between individuals that are built through their interactions inside or outside the workplace (Ibarra, 1992). Compared with formal networks, informal networks are viewed as being more important for individuals, since guidance and support from informal networks are often more effective and successful (Kaplan and Niederman, 2006). Networking is vital for career advancement, since it helps individuals to gain access to resources such as professional advice, knowledge sharing, valuable insights and emotional support (Casciaro *et al.*, 2014). Those benefits also depend, however, on the types of relationships, the motivation for establishing relationships, the willingness to provide help and the ability to make contacts (Suseno, 2008). Moreover, there is a gender difference in the size and quality of networks (Hanson, 2000), since women have smaller and lower-level networks than men (Aaltio and Huang, 2018).

Continually being less integrated into key networks remains an issue that impedes women's career advancement worldwide, and this includes China. Professional networking is defined as 'individuals' attempts to develop and maintain relationships with others who have the potential to assist them in their work or career' (Forret and Dougherty, 2004, p.420). In China, there is a more comprehensive term, '*guanxi*', which represents the meaning of relationships, networks or socialising (Huang and Aaltio, 2014). *Guanxi* is more complex than individual relationships, since it also implies a social structural practice that includes trust and mutual obligations between

individuals (Bedford, 2011). Moreover, *guanxi* is an instrument that involves the rule of reciprocity; both *guanxi* seekers and *guanxi* givers should provide feedback to each other (Barbalet, 2021; Tang, 2020). As such, *guanxi* is a paradoxical term that involves both positive and negative features, as it conveys the interchange of positive attributes but also may lead to negative influences, such as unfairness and bribery (Han and Altman, 2009). The reason is that *guanxi* implies the exchange of favours that may cause people to acquire unwarranted benefits through inappropriate *guanxi* (Qi, 2013). Aaltio and Huang (2018) defined four categories of *guanxi*: power ties (*e.g.* leaders and followers), workflow ties (*e.g.* colleagues), strategic information ties (*e.g.* mentors or guides) and social support ties (*e.g.* family members and friends). Therefore, *guanxi*, in this thesis is defined as the informal networks that individuals perpetuate. Additionally, each type of *guanxi* is closely related with individuals' career development, but women are always excluded by the powerful networks (Ibarra *et al.*, 2010). As Liu (2007, p.54) argued, '*Guanxi* is a male network, a gendered social resource'.

Building and maintaining informal networks relies on socialising activities, but those activities are usually held in the evening, in after-work time, which is at odds with women's expected family commitments (Greguletz *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, women value *guanxi* with their family first and foremost, based on the traditional Chinese, family-centred culture (Aaltio and Huang, 2018). Apart from satisfying the stereotype of being a good mother, women are also required to behave appropriately, as 'good women', in China. Specifically, a good Chinese woman should keep her distance from other men, to avoid sex-related gossip, and she should also refuse to participate in activities such as drinking and smoking, which are only open to men (Tang, 2020). Thus, women are limited in establishing *guanxi* with men, given that a close working relationship between a woman and a man may attract suspicions and rumours, which can damage a woman's reputation (Woodhams *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, similar to the importance of engaging in sports activities and parties with alcohol in Western societies (Harris and Ogbonna, 2006), drinking and smoking are the main social activities in China, and men establishing *guanxi* through those actives remains the norm

(Cooke and Xiao, 2014). In the context of gender stereotypes, drinking and smoking are both gendered behaviours that just men are allowed to do; women are less able to establish *guanxi* through these activities (Zhu *et al.*, 2015) and they are not welcomed into men's networks. Men's networking also exhibits similarity attraction, with the typical network being the 'boys' club' (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Greguletz *et al.* (2019) found no official discrimination against women who aspired to participate in these powerful networks, (which are usually dominated by men), but pointed out that there were more subtle mechanisms for exclusion, such as networks' activities, including drinking and smoking, which reflect masculine, rather than feminine, traits.

Women are socialised to remain modest (Janoff-Bulman and Wade, 1996), which may lead them to devalue themselves and lose the confidence to develop networks (Sandberg, 2013). They neither believe they offer the same value to others during the networking, nor have the aspiration of proving their worth (Barron, 2003). With reference to gendered modesty, there is evidence that, even though women know that networking is important for career building, they may still be reluctant to do so, in order to avoid experiencing 'moral dirtiness' (Casciaro *et al.*, 2014). Specifically, women worry that their behaviour, in developing networks, may appear to be unfair or to have insincere intentions if they make friends with others with the aim of using them rather than for the sake of true friendship (Kuwabara *et al.*, 2018).

This does not, however, mean that women have no *guanxi* at all, as they instead prefer to maintain *guanxi* with other women and with individuals of low-level status (Cooke, 2005; Rothstein *et al.*, 2001). Socialising with other women can mitigate women's sense of isolation, to a degree, since they may gain emotional support and role modelling, and share experiences of overcoming barriers (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Wellington, 2001). Women-only networks are, however, less likely to generate career-related resources, such as sponsorship, to improve their career, because men remain dominant in the influential networks in China (Ng and Chow, 2009; Zhu *et al.*, 2015). As a consequence, women take the risk of being excluded from powerful informal

networks, due to their preference for socialising with other women (Ibarra *et al.*, 2010). In order to foster leadership and career advancement, women are advised that they need to develop networks proactively with men and other individuals from different levels, which facilitates the establishment and maintenance of their social capital (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Ozkazanc-Pan and Clark Muntean, 2018). In particular, there is a suggestion that women should not self-segregate from men, given that establishing relationships with men rather than with women can bring more career benefits (Ibarra, 1992). From another perspective, Greguletz *et al.* (2019) advised that powerful individuals should instigate the establishment of networks with women to support them, which not only facilitates the identification of potential women leaders, but also brings benefits for the initiators and the social environment.

In summary, this section mainly focuses on discussing women's leadership within organisations, with a particular emphasis on the influencing factors of women's leadership: the discourses and practices of masculinity, gender stereotypes, work-family conflicts and networks (*guanxi*). These influencing factors operate through both gendered organisations and gendered individual daily interactions; they are also interrelated. Therefore, women's leadership way becomes twist and turns, but, as Eagly and Carli (2007) suggested, recognising the influencing factors can help people to better understand the leadership experiences of women. In the next section, two concepts will be used to examine how these influencing factors comprehensively shape women's leadership path.

2.4 Conceptualising women and leadership

Based on the overarching theoretical perspective on individuals and gendered organisations described above, and after discussing the factors that influence women's leadership in organisations, this thesis moves on to constructing a conceptual framework for examining women's leadership trajectory. This section focuses on the concept of the leadership labyrinth (Eagly and Carli, 2007) and the concept of the

leadership web (Stead and Elliott, 2009), which both concentrate on women's leadership pathway. These two separate concepts are combined into one framework to conceptualise women's challenges and opportunities on their journey towards leadership.

2.4.1 The leadership labyrinth

Commencing with the question of why women are usually excluded from leadership, Eagly and Carli (2007) explored the relationship between gender and leadership using a labyrinth metaphor for the journey that women experience on their way to becoming a leader. The leadership labyrinth conveys how women's path towards leadership is full of challenges, but the goal of gaining a leadership position is ultimately attainable (Carli and Eagly, 2016). For this thesis, the concept of the leadership labyrinth is an appropriate metaphor to enable an exploration of the numerous complex situations that Chinese women academics face on their leadership trajectory. Conceptually, the challenges that women encounter within the labyrinth described by Eagly and Carli (2007) provide a basis, for this thesis, from which to explore the obstacles that Chinese women academics confront. The leadership labyrinth is reviewed in this section as a key conceptual framework for the thesis.

Metaphors for women's leadership

Since the 1970s, researchers have been increasingly concerned about the paucity of women leaders, because, prior to this, leadership had been assumed to be the domain of men, while women had been largely neglected in this topic (Eagly and Carli, 2007). As gender has been brought into the discussion of leadership, women's circumstances have been examined and the numerous obstacles they face have been illustrated. Various metaphors, therefore, have been developed to describe women's circumstances in their career development (Smith *et al*., 2012). This is because metaphors can capture, describe and explain women's circumstances, through linking abstract concepts with specific phenomena (Clouse *et al*., 2013). Metaphors also offer new insights into

women's experiences in organisations (Weick, 1995).

For example, the 'glass ceiling' is a popular term for describing an invisible obstruction that is encountered when women attempt to advance to elite leadership positions (Smith *et al.*, 2012). It is interpreted to mean that a ceiling exists between the penultimate level and the highest level in organisations, and women have to break through the invisible obstacle in order to reach the highest level (Cotter *et al.*, 2001). Meanwhile, the 'glass cliff' (Ryan and Haslam, 2005) has been used to describe the situation in which women are promoted to precarious leadership positions during a period of organisational crisis. The intention behind the promotion is that the organisation is more willing to sacrifice its female executives. Therefore, this kind of promotion increases the risk of failure for women leaders (Smith *et al.*, 2012). However, as Santovec (2010) stated, the obstacles that women face do not only exist at the top level. Taking a different viewpoint, the 'sticky floor' (Kee, 2006) metaphor focuses more on implying that there are barriers that women confront earlier in their career development, emphasising that women as a group do not even have the chance to encounter the glass ceiling, but are confined to lower levels in the organisation. A common interpretation of the sticky floor is that women create self-imposed barriers, such as avoidance of leadership and poor career planning, to prevent their career progression. Therefore, a frequent trend in popular management books is to encourage women to change their career strategy and manipulate power like men (Smith *et al.*, 2012); an example is Evan's (2001) book: *Play like a man, win like a woman: what men know about success that women need to learn*. As Barnett and Rivers (2004) stated, metaphors that explore the relationship between individual behaviours and women's scarcity in leadership positions take a 'blame the victim' perspective. Furthermore, the continuing emphasis on strategies for how to 'blame and fix' women reinforces gender inequality issues in society (Mavin, 2006).

The metaphor of the leadership labyrinth

There is a question as to whether there is a metaphor that can reflect women's dilemmas

without blaming them. Eagly and Carli (2007) addressed this question through presenting a labyrinth as being a more appropriate metaphor to reflect the contemporary issue of women's lack of access to leadership. This differs from the glass ceiling metaphor at the penultimate, or the highest stage, of a career. Firstly, women enter a labyrinth as soon as they chart a course towards leadership, no matter which career stage they currently occupy, until they reach their goal (Carli and Eagly, 2016). Secondly, Eagly and Carli (2007) emphasised the optimistic characteristics of the labyrinth metaphor; contrary to the other metaphors, it implies that goals are attainable, with some women achieving the highest levels of leadership. Thirdly, the labyrinth both acknowledges that women can be successful, and reflects the uncertainty of success (Carli and Eagly, 2016). Its aim is to portray contemporary leadership situations for women and, as such, it neither blames women nor blames the situation (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Consequently, the labyrinth is a more appropriate metaphor than the glass ceiling or the sticky floor metaphors, because it is more subtle and complex that can portray the women's leadership journey, through viewing leadership as a process that this thesis agreed with. Women need to be 'smart' in their use of strategies to negotiate the labyrinth, recognising situations and improving skills to meet the various challenges (Carli and Eagly, 2016; Randell and Yerbury, 2020).

In terms of its structure, the leadership labyrinth (see Figure 1) contains multiple paths, with some leading to a dead end. Some paths are more winding than others and some seem to have a direct route to the centre of the labyrinth (Eagly and Carli, 2007). The walls which structure the labyrinth represent the challenges that women encounter, making their path towards leadership a very sinuous one (Carli and Eagly, 2016). Compared with men's path to promotion, women face a more difficult approach, which requires more time and energy to navigate, and has a greater risk of failure (Eagly and Carli, 2007). In a follow-up study, Bruckmuller *et al.* (2013) proposed that, men can quickly and more easily, identify a more direct route, with fewer obstacles. Although global advances have been made to enable an increasing number of women to occupy leadership positions, much evidence has been provided to prove that there are various

obstacles that inhibit women's progression to high levels of authority (Samuelson *et al*., 2019). Even today, women have to carefully navigate a way around obstacles in the labyrinth (Eagly and Carli, 2007). In particular, women need to rely on their 'persistence, awareness of one's progress, and a careful analysis of the puzzles that lie ahead' to pass through the labyrinth (Eagly and Carli, 2007, p.63). This also implies that, based on different contexts, different understandings and different judgements of obstacles within the leadership labyrinth, every woman has a unique journey to the centre (Wyatt and Silvester, 2015).

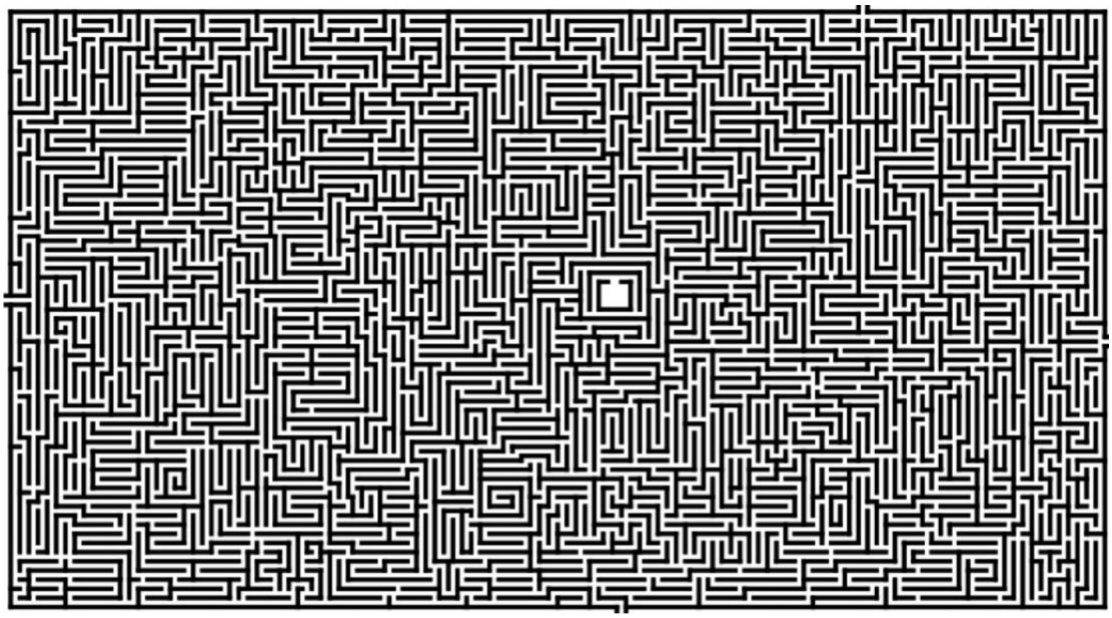

Figure 1. The leadership labyrinth

Source: Carli and Eagly (2016, p.518)

Three categories of challenge within the leadership labyrinth

The leadership labyrinth concerns the exploration of the factors that inhibit women's path to leadership (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Based on an understanding of the leadership labyrinth, Simon and Hoyt's (2021) comprehensive review concluded that there were three main types of explanation as to why women were under-represented in high-level leadership positions: human capital, gender differences and prejudice. Their summary further reorganised the arguments about the challenges discussed by Eagly and Carli (2007). These three types of explanation have guided this thesis in understanding the

debate around the challenges women encounter within the leadership labyrinth, and they are discussed in detail in subsequent sections.

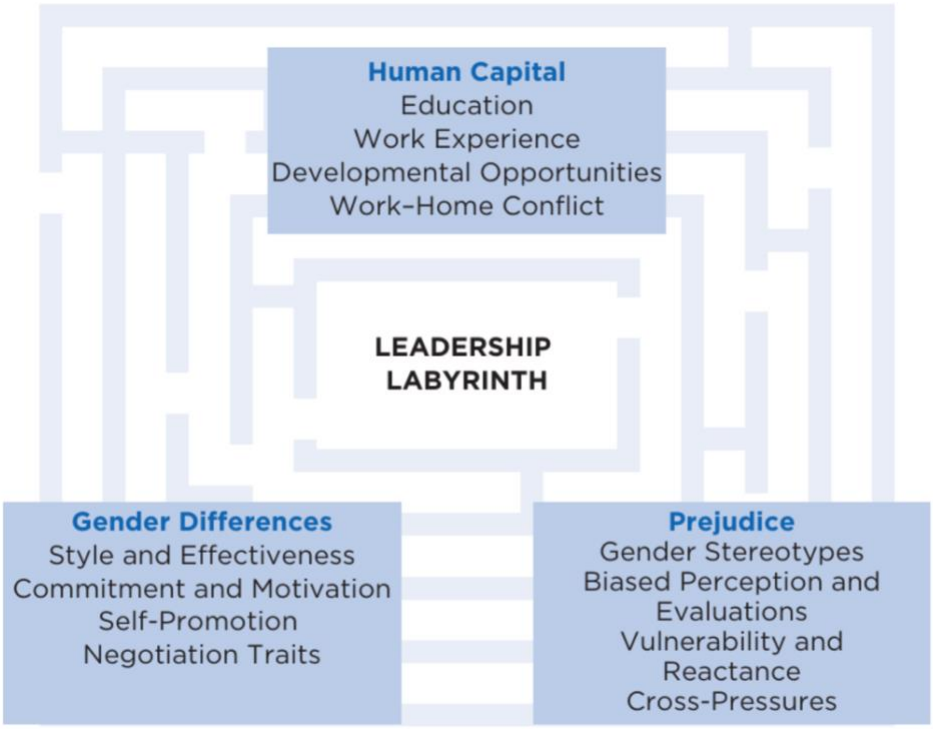

Figure 2. Understanding the leadership labyrinth

Source: Simon and Hoyt (2021, p.396)

Firstly, as the figure illustrates, men commonly accumulate more human capital than women; this is comprised of aspects of education, skills training and work experience (Eagly and Carli, 2003; 2007). When discussing the low proportion of women in high leadership positions, the pipeline problem is usually mentioned as a reason; it refers to a lack of qualified women available to be promoted to the higher positions (Helfat *et al.*, 2006). However, because of the sharp contrast between the increase in the number of women achieving high academic qualifications and the continuing low percentage of leadership positions that are occupied by women, in recent years, it has been argued that the 'pipeline' is leaking, with there being no explanation of the dearth of women in authority (Simon and Hoyt, 2021). It is result from women's lack of human capital

investment, that women usually have have fewer opportunities to be included in key networks and to receive encouragement and guidance, since it is more difficult for women than men to build an informal mentor relationship (Powell and Graves, 2003).

Work-home conflict is deemed to be the primary reason, with women undertaking more domestic duties, especially childcare, which interrupts the process of gaining work experience and building informal networks (Bowles and McGinn, 2005). Another explanation for the gender gap in leadership is that women self-select themselves from the path to leadership by choosing the 'mommy' path (Belkin, 2003). Williams (2004), however, disagreed with this argument, pointing out that all women, whether or not they are a mother, are disadvantaged in the workplace. To summarise, Eagly and Carli (2007) criticised arguments that claim that women are less educated than men, that women more frequently decide to leave their job than men and that women often choose the 'mommy' track rather than the leadership track. At the same time, Eagly and Carli (2007) supported the viewpoint that women take on more family duties, meaning that they have less work experience and fewer professional opportunities. Women lack sufficient human capital to help them to increase their work experience and gain development opportunities, which are both vital when aspiring to leadership. The main factors are the lack of an effective network and the work-family conflict, and it is these two factors that will be the focus of the analysis of participants' leadership experiences in this thesis.

Secondly, there is a school of thought that revolves around gender differences in leadership. A typical argument is that women and men have very different leadership styles and levels of effectiveness, so that women's leadership is usually undervalued (Book, 2000). Conversely, some meta-analyses have found that women and men differ little in terms of their leadership style and effectiveness, and that this difference is not sufficient to explain the gender gap in leadership positions (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Van Engen and Willemsen, 2004). In particular, women are more likely to use democratic and transformational leadership styles, which are recognised as being closely related to

contemporary effective leadership; however, when they lead in a masculine manner or assume a typically masculine leadership role, they are seen as being less effective than men (Eagly *et al.*, 1992; Eagly and Carli, 2003). Gender differences in leadership style and effectiveness cannot, therefore, explain why there are few women leaders; instead, these differences cause researchers to become more confused (Simon and Hyot, 2021). An alternative view is that having personal traits that are correlated with leadership, such as aggressiveness and competitiveness, is the main indicator of success in becoming a good leader (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Related to this argument, a gender difference concerning motivation to become a leader has been suggested by Eagly and Carli (2007), since men are more likely to self-promote for leadership positions and pay more attention to power-related goals (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Conversely, women are less likely to self-promote, considering that they face more gender bias relating to overcoming stereotypes and prejudice in society (Fletcher, 2001; Gino *et al.*, 2015). In conclusion, gender has a limited correlation with leadership style and effectiveness, but gender differences exist in relation to self-promotion and negotiation within an organisation, and these differences have been identified as factors that inhibit women's advancement (Kaiser and Wallace, 2016; Hoyt, 2010). Therefore, the current study concentrates on investigating women's self-promotion and negotiation behaviour in relation to their leadership experiences, rather than on analysing their leadership style and effectiveness.

The third explanation for the gender gap in leadership positions is gender prejudice and discrimination against women. Eagly and Carli (2003) described prejudice as being the evaluation of people according to stereotypical standards set by society. Those stereotypical beliefs are well documented, are hard to break and have infiltrated into every aspect of human life, establishing a requirement for how to be socially acceptable, for women and men (Glick and Fiske, 1999; Heilman, 2001). Generally, men are stereotyped as showing confidence, rationality and competitiveness, while women are stereotyped as displaying sensitivity, emotionality and helpfulness; because leaders are stereotyped as being aggressive, this perception corresponds closely with the image of

the ‘ideal man’ (Deaux and Kite, 1993). The conflicting stereotypes relating to women and leadership roles mean that women face a dilemma and are confronted with ‘cross pressures’ (Eagly and Karau, 2002). Specifically, women are required to be more masculine and tough as leaders, whereas, at the same time, they will be criticised as not being female enough if they fail to satisfy the social expectations of the ‘acceptable woman’ (Simon and Hoyt, 2021). This prejudice against women leaders has been suggested as an explanation for why women find it harder to attain leadership roles than men (Eagly and Karau, 2002). This prejudice not only devalues women leaders, but also damages their aspiration to lead (Schein, 2001; Hoyt, 2010). Recent research in this area has criticised the approach of only focusing on the perception of white men and women, ignoring people of colour. As this thesis concentrates on Chinese women in leadership positions, it contributes to the diversity of knowledge on gender stereotypes and prejudice.

This review of the three categories of barrier that women face in the leadership labyrinth has facilitated an understanding of which issues the thesis should highlight in relation to the research participants’ leadership trajectory. In particular, it is work-family conflicts and the lack of access to networks that inhibit women’s construction of their human capital. Gender differences in terms of leadership style and effectiveness have a slight impact, but the lack of self-promotion and differences in approach to negotiation certainly impede women’s prospects of attaining a leadership position, and so should be considered. Gender stereotypes and prejudice against women result in reducing their aspiration to lead and increase the pressure on women leaders. As Eagly and Carli (2007) stated, understanding the barriers within the labyrinth makes it easier to navigate, and these authors provided women with strategies for doing so.

Navigating the labyrinth

Within the labyrinth, there are many ways that lead to the centre, *i.e.* to leadership positions. Women have to stay patient, motivated and smart enough to reach the centre (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Even though Eagly and Carli (2007) claimed that they avoid

blaming women, this suggestion nevertheless appears to refer to 'fixing women'; this will be discussed in detail later. It is also possible for women who have already succeeded in reaching the centre to guide women who have encountered dead-ends and taken wrong turnings (Eagly and Carli, 2007). This is because the person who reaches the centre has the ability to 'see the whole of the puzzle from above' (Eagly and Carli, 2007, p.70). The barriers and opportunities they came across are clear and this information can be shared with the women who follow them (Wyatt and Silvester, 2015).

Eagly and Carli (2007, p.253) suggested two principles to help women to navigate the labyrinth: 'blending agency with communion and building social capital'. The suggestion that women combine their agency with communion is so that they can demonstrate that they can be both assertive, to be a good leader, and show warmth, to be a good woman as expected (Eagly and Carli, 2007). They argued that it is easier for women who successfully combine assertiveness and sociability to proceed to the second principle: building social capital. This is because leaders who simultaneously possess the qualities of friendliness and assertiveness are more appreciated by others in the workplace and are more welcome to join networks that foster career advancement (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Eagly and Carli (2007) also reflected on the limitations of this advice; for example, they pointed out that the approach is not appropriate in an extreme masculine environment, since friendliness and warmth may undermine women leaders' authority to some extent.

While it is important for women to develop their individual agency within the labyrinth, Eagly and Carli's (2007) logic nevertheless relates to 'fixing women', in that they are advising women to adjust themselves to satisfy the social expectations of the ideal woman and the ideal leader. Their advice, however, is insufficient to guide women through the labyrinth, since the main aim of their study was to discuss the challenges faced by women in order to portray a vivid labyrinth.

The sharing of successful experiences in this way can help more women to choose the

right route through the labyrinth (Simon and Hoyt, 2021). There are, however, limitations, which should be considered. The first of these limitations is the uniqueness of each woman's journey through the labyrinth, so that the solutions used by one woman to overcome barriers may not be relevant, or successful, for another woman. Secondly, the way in which external conditions constantly change should be considered. The pattern of manifestation, and influencing power of the same obstacle change with time, location and context. Depending on the situation, stories about previously successful women may lose their potency or mislead new generations of women. Furthermore, old barriers may be replaced by new barriers with the development of social structures and culture. For example, the previously held viewpoint that women should stay at home and undertake household responsibilities has gradually receded, enabling more women to pursue a career. In spite of this trend, without help through social security measures, or the support provided by an employer (*e.g.* child-friendly policies in the workplace), women still face the heavy work-family conflict.

In conclusion, compared with the glass ceiling and sticky floor metaphors, the metaphor of the labyrinth portrays the complexity and uniqueness of the barriers that each individual woman confronts, while encouraging women with the assertion that the goal of leadership is achievable through effort and careful navigation (Carli and Eagly, 2016). Carli and Eagly (2016) claimed that an exploration of the various challenges that constitute the labyrinth, and of the strategies that women can use to address those challenges, can improve understanding of women's experiences on their leadership journey and improve their situation in the future (Eagly and Carli, 2007). This concept is valuable to this thesis in facilitating an understanding of women's leadership trajectory in Chinese academia.

The value of the leadership labyrinth

The concept of the leadership labyrinth is valuable for this thesis. Firstly, it emphasises using individual experiences as a resource, at different levels and in different contexts (Eagly and Carli, 2007), which brings to light a diverse range of experiences. Many

researchers have used this concept to discuss the relationship between women and leadership, in different research areas and contexts. For example, Wyatt and Silvester (2015) used this metaphor to explore black and ethnic minority employees' leadership journey, identifying the facilitators and barriers for those employees' career progression. For the purpose of this thesis, the concept is used to explore the leadership trajectory of Chinese women academics. This concept can be used to describe the challenges women face during their leadership journey, that viewing the leadership as a process of navigating labyrinth. The labyrinth conveys the complexity of situations, where women encounter both opportunities and challenges during their pursuit of leadership. The concept also enables an analysis of the opportunities that women encounter in the labyrinth, emphasising that women are not simply trapped in the labyrinth, but have the possibility of arriving at the centre. As Moratti (2020) stated, the labyrinth is an innovative conceptualisation of women who pursue leadership within organisations. Neither the glass ceiling nor the sticky floor enables the same degree of nuance as the labyrinth, which enables an investigation of both negative and positive influencing factors on women's leadership trajectory.

There are some aspects of the leadership labyrinth that are worth exploring further. Firstly, Eagly and Carli (2007) claimed that women who arrive at the centre of the labyrinth can see the whole labyrinth from above. The journey within the labyrinth has a clear ending, based on this understanding, and there is no further discussion of women's potential subsequent paths, as they leave the centre and sometimes leave the labyrinth altogether. This thesis argues that women's journey through the labyrinth is far from over once they reach the centre. Because of the structure of the labyrinth, women who arrive at the centre are still enmeshed in the labyrinth, and their paths to finding an exit, should they want to, remain difficult. Women who arrive at the centre of the labyrinth continue to be 'pathfinders', to find ways either to higher-level leadership positions, or to exit the labyrinth. During this process, women still encounter various challenges and opportunities, and there is a possibility that they will come across the similar barriers as before, but they may choose a different way to deal with

them.

Secondly, Eagly and Carli (2007) did not consider how the leadership labyrinth might change, portraying it as a stable structure. This limitation is demonstrated by Eagly and Carli's (2007) suggestion that the women who arrive at the centre of the labyrinth are able to guide women who come after them. It cannot be denied that guidance is useful, but the timeliness and feasibility of any guidance should also be considered. In other words, the challenges that previous cohorts of women encountered may be different from those faced by later cohorts, so that the strategies previously employed may no longer be effective. Furthermore, with changing times and contexts, the challenges and opportunities of the labyrinth are also changing. Regarding context, since this study has been conducted in China, the application of the leadership labyrinth concept takes into consideration the specific social context, such as the influence of traditional culture.

Finally, the concept of the leadership labyrinth does not consider women's agency (Moratti, 2020). Eagly and Carli (2007, p.253) advised women on 'blending agency with communion and building social capital', but they described agency in the context of women understanding the structure of the labyrinth to enable them to adapt to it, satisfying the expectations of both the ideal leader and the ideal woman. Moreover, there is a clear order between the two principles, as Eagly and Carli (2007) suggested that women should first combine agency with communion to become a leader, and then start to establish social capital. This ordering is unnecessary, as it is possible for women to adopt these two actions simultaneously, or women's early establishment of social capital can facilitate their advancement towards leadership. Their suggestion nevertheless follows the logic of 'fixing women' and their definition of the individual agency of women is narrow. This thesis argues instead for the need for a complementary metaphor that does not portray women as being passive, but acknowledges that women have the agency to resist and change practices, and organisations (Moratti, 2020). Therefore, a concept that considers the support that women have on their leadership path is now introduced, namely the leadership web (Stead and Elliott, 2009), which will

be discussed in the next section.

2.4.2 The leadership web

For a better understanding of how women construct and maintain their leadership successfully, Stead and Elliott (2009) introduced the concept of the leadership web. They emphasised that the leadership role is a social construct, describing the factors that shape a leader through narrating individuals' stories (Elliott and Stead, 2008). When women leaders reflect on, and make sense of, their stories, their understanding of leadership and the process of constructing leadership can be analysed (Shamir *et al.*, 2005). In their investigation of women's experiences of achieving a leadership position, Stead and Elliott (2009) drew on in-depth interviews with nine women leaders, in different contexts. Through exploring interviewees' route to leadership, the authors concluded that it was the negotiation approach to gaining support from both public and private aspects of their life that enabled women to establish a leadership web. The leadership web (see Figure 3) portrays how women are continually being leaders. Leadership is viewed, here, as a consequence of the interaction of relationships, including women leaders' relationships with other individuals, place and work. These relationships are dynamic in that they are continually shifting and overlapping with changes in individuals' roles and development (Stead and Elliott, 2009).

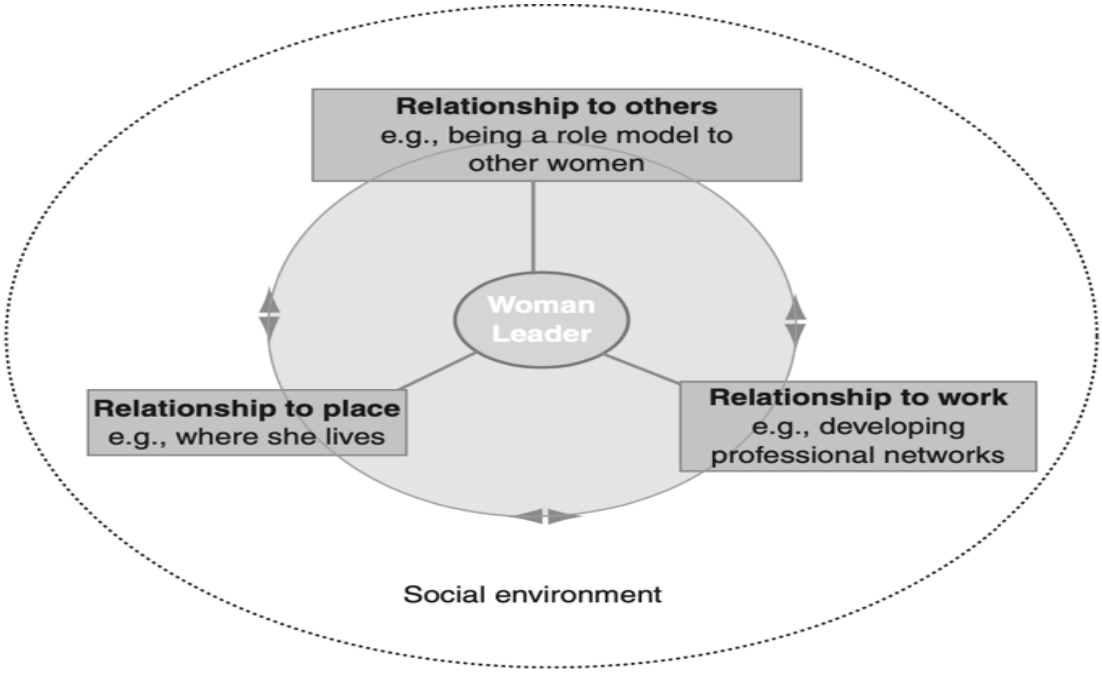

Figure 3. Women's leadership web

Source: Stead and Elliott (2009, p.67)

These three relationships and their interactions will now be described in detail. Firstly, "relationship to *others*" refers to women leaders' relationships with other people, including any role they have as a daughter or a mother in their family, a learner or a mentor in their career, and a friend in their social networks (Stead and Elliott, 2009). Support, encouragement, education and criticism are identified as uniquely impactful early growing experiences for women leaders, having far-reaching consequences in terms of shaping women's future roles and leadership experiences (Madsen, 2008). The advantages of a role model are also discussed, in that observing and emulating other women leaders helps women to gain useful insights, and overcome barriers, on their path towards leadership (Kellerman and Rhode, 2007). Although lacking access to role models is a common issue, it nevertheless creates a different opportunity for women, through liberating them in a way that makes them freer to break traditional rules and adopt their own approach to obtaining a leadership position (Stead and Elliott, 2009). Moreover, the absence of role models cannot prevent women from becoming a role model to other women, if they are willing to provide encouragement and guidance to those who need it (Stead and Elliott, 2009). The importance of support from social

networks and alliances, on the path to leadership, is emphasised, with female members of social networks playing an especially vital role in experience sharing, emotional caring and pressure releasing (Stead and Elliott, 2009). Women usually lack access to key social networks, the typical example being the 'old boys club' in an organisation: men are the gatekeepers, while women are gatecrashers (Heffernan, 2004; Ozkazanc-Pan and Clark Muntean, 2018). The reason is that women are less likely to spend time on developing social networks, due to family commitments and criticisms based on gender stereotypes (Eagly and Carli, 2007).

Secondly, the construction process connected with women's leadership also relates to *place*, which refers to physical geographical location, the historical, political, cultural and social context, and women's social position as women (Stead and Elliott, 2009). Investigating the place where women live ensures that context is no longer ignored, but is recognised as a crucial factor in developing leadership theory, as discussed above. It is argued that particular locations have different social and cultural values for women, which has implications for their leadership aspirations, beliefs and understanding of leadership (Devnew *et al.*, 2017). For example, a participant in Stead and Elliot's (2009) study explained how her country attitude encouraged her to be brave in order to gain success. Moreover, aside from the positive influence of the places where women live, a harsh environment might increase women's determination to construct a better place (Stead and Elliott, 2009). For example, some women leaders have observed that women are devalued and discriminated against in society, which strengthens their career ambition and determination to make changes to women's living conditions through leading a community or even society as a whole (Stead and Elliott, 2009). Their determination to create better places might also motivate them to maintain their leadership position (Stead and Elliott, 2009).

Thirdly, the relationship between women leaders and *work* is portrayed as being vital to their construction of leadership. This aspect relates to the barriers that women encounter at work, and to the 'ways in which they manoeuvre and negotiate such

barriers', such as developing professional networks and alliances (Stead and Elliott, 2009, p.8). Women leaders' early working experiences and work environment were identified as factors influencing their relationship with work, especially the barriers they encountered as women workers lower in the hierarchy of the workplace (Elliott and Stead, 2008). It has been argued that, while those barriers inhibit women's progress towards higher leadership positions (Eagly and Carli, 2007), they also enhance women's skill at negotiating and developing leadership in practice (Stead and Elliott, 2009). These perceived barriers encourage women to develop strategies to address them, through incremental and practical steps (Mabey, 2013). Developing professional networks and alliances at work has been suggested as being a main strategy for maintaining women's career focus and determination (Stead and Elliott, 2009). The networks and alliances that benefit women include personal and professional networks, cross-organisational networks and women-only networks (Stead and Elliot, 2009). These formal and informal networks establish a knowledge-sharing platform, trust and cooperation between individuals, and strong support, which are all crucial for enabling women to make progress towards leadership (Ozkazanc-Pan and Clark Muntean, 2018). However, as discussed previously, the lack of access to developing networks remains a key obstacle for women's career advancement (Powell, 2000). Similar conditions can be observed in China, where Chinese women have limited opportunities to build close working relationships in the workplace, because this may generate suspicions of inappropriate intimacy (Woodhams *et al.*, 2015).

The interactions between the three relationships described in this dynamic construction of leadership are also highlighted. The boundaries of these spheres of influence are ambiguous, since they overlap and interweave. For example, relationships with other people also include relationships with colleagues, which are also included in the relationship with the workplace. Stead and Elliott (2009) emphasised that these three relationships are not mutually exclusive and separate; they rather interact with one another in women leaders' stories of constructing leadership. The concept of the leadership web provides a framework for this thesis to identify the opportunities women

encounter on their path towards achieving, and then maintaining, a leadership position. The dimension of relationship with place points to the important role of the specific social and organisational context. Since the research for the thesis was conducted in China, its historical, cultural and structural contexts may provide new insights for women's leadership theory. For example, the mainstream approach to leadership in China is that of servant leadership; as President Mao famously said in 1944, '[leaders should] serve the people'. Servant leadership has been practised, and highly praised, for many years, and this influences women's view of leadership, their beliefs, their behaviours as leaders and their future career goals. Additionally, there needs to be an awareness that Chinese servant leadership may be different from Western servant leadership, because of the different context. This emphasises why context needs to be taken into account when exploring Chinese women academics' leadership experiences.

The value of the leadership web concept is that Stead and Elliott (2009, p.87) have provided a 'relational' approach to conceptualising leadership, meaning that leadership can be understood through relationships at different levels, from a micro-level (individual) interactional perspective, or from a macro-level (organisational or societal) interaction perspective. For the purpose of this thesis, Stead and Elliot's relational approach to conceptualising leadership has made it possible to conceptualise women's leadership as the interplay of relationships between individuals and organisations. In other words, women can use their individual agency to manage their relationships in order to construct and maintain leadership. This concept does, however, focus on discussing the factors that help women to construct leadership, and barely considers the challenges women may face on their leadership journeys (Stead and Elliott, 2009). This concept therefore needs to be combined with that of the leadership labyrinth, to describe a holistic landscape of women's leadership.

The two concepts have been chosen because they both posit that women are able to attain high leadership positions, and they provide approaches to examining the factors that influence women's path towards leadership. The difference between the two

concepts is that the leadership labyrinth focuses more on investigating negative factors (*i.e.* barriers) that inhibit women in attaining a leadership position, while the concept of the leadership web emphasises positive factors (*i.e.* forms of support) that facilitate women on their leadership journey. Combining the two concepts provides a conceptual framework to examining women's leadership experiences in this thesis, that women encounter various challenges in their leadership way, but still can gain support and encouragement during this process. Referring back to the theories of 'doing gender' and 'gendered organisations', this conceptual framework uses the theoretical lens that individuals' gendered practices of leadership are guided and limited by gendered organisational structures and cultures, while they also have the agency to do gender in a multiplicity of ways, to challenge and change the gendered organisation and so construct leadership. Therefore, two research questions for this thesis can be identified:

1. How do women academics make sense of their leadership trajectory in Chinese higher education?
2. How can the gendered interplay between individuals and organisations be conceptualised in the context of women's leadership experiences?

The first research question aims to explore the influencing factors that women perceive on their leadership journey, including the challenges that are structured by gendered organisations and the support that is derived from individual agency. It is worth noting the interplay between individuals and organisations, on women's journey towards leadership, since not only is their path shaped by gendered structures and culture, but they may also challenge and change gendered organisations.

Following this explanation of the study's research questions, the next section will explore the context of women academics; as mentioned above, context is vital to the exploration of women's leadership experiences.

2.5 Women's careers in academia

It has been argued that women's academic careers are less successful than those of their male colleagues (Le Feuvre, 2009). Success as an academic is usually linked to discourses of academic excellence (Bristow *et al.*, 2017), which enable researchers who obey the 'rule of play' to advance in academia (Butler and Spoelstra, 2014). Therefore, this section starts by introducing the rule of play in academia. This relates to the concept of the academic 'prestige economy', to explain the contemporary situation whereby higher education establishments worldwide increasingly rely on the use of quantitative data to evaluate academic excellence (Howson *et al.*, 2018). Women academics are particularly disadvantaged in the context of the prestige economy.

The two most important activities of academics in universities, research and teaching, will be explored separately. First, there will be a discussion of meritocracy being the main criterion for the promotion of research staff. This will be followed by an examination of the issue of balancing teaching and research. It will be argued, in this section, that these are the two tasks that determine women academics' prospects of leadership. Finally, in the light of the perspectives described above, there will be a discussion of the reasons for the paucity of women leaders in academia.

2.5.1 Women academics in the academic prestige economy

It has been argued that contemporary academics face great pressures when working in higher education (Ratle *et al.*, 2020). A key reason for this great pressure is the universities' adoption of a structure that is very much like that of a corporate administration, with an emphasis on efficiency and competition, while still aiming to achieve academic excellence (Butler and Spoelstra, 2014). This shift has brought with it new approaches to measuring academic performance, such as a reliance on 'external indicators', which 'include journal rankings and citation indices' (Butler and Spoelstra, 2014, p.538). Therefore, in order to satisfy the requirements of higher education,

academics have had to change their approach to their academic activities (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016). A remarkable form is, more academics and universities pursue the academic prestige (Howson *et al.*, 2018). This section introduces the academic prestige economy, to describe the contemporary context of academia and to explain how this trend has become gendered, favouring men academics over their women counterparts.

Academic prestige is a social phenomenon whereby academia endows academics, institutions and journals with value and prestige (Blackmore and Kandiko, 2011). The academic prestige economy refers to the culture that rewards prestige and continually influences personal beliefs and behaviour (Howson *et al.*, 2018; Peterson, 2017). It has been argued that academic careers have become quantifiable under the academic prestige economy, with many higher education institutions requiring academics to provide details of their research output and other indicators of esteem (Howson *et al.*, 2018). Indicators of esteem include editorships of journals, grant income, the number of PhD graduates, international keynote invitations, membership of review panels and engagement with the media (Coate and Howson, 2016). The number of citations of papers is also viewed as a demonstration of the value of research (David, 2008). These required indicators are provided by academics to prove their ability in research; the indicators are used by higher education institutions in job applications and promotions processes. Academics are becoming increasingly governed by numbers and many struggle to satisfy the demands of research output, even though such requirements have been written into their employment contract (Howson *et al.*, 2018). The change has resulted in a great shift of attitude among academics, and has affected their practice, their relationship with their university, and even knowledge, as they have become 'specialists without spirit' (Ball, 2012, p.19). Pursuing the academic prestige economy facilitates the management and development of a university, by helping a university to identify talent quickly, enabling administrators to manage academics' abilities using quantitative information on academic output and improving a university's ranking, with consequent financial benefits (Howson *et al*., 2018; Morley, 2014).

The academic prestige economy is considered to be gendered, in that women find it more difficult than men to gain recognition (Peterson, 2017). Women academics' work and contributions are deemed not to be as excellent as those of men (Van den Brink and Benschop, 2012). Specifically, women academics' publications are cited less frequently, women have fewer seats on editorial boards and women are less likely to be invited to make keynote presentations at conferences (Haslanger, 2008; Maliniak *et al.*, 2013). Additionally, based on the notion of the 'ideal worker' (Acker, 1990), the prestigious 'ideal academic' spends all their time on research work, owning rich academic capital and having a high quantity and quality of publications in top journals (Lund, 2012; Manky and Saravia, 2022). These characteristics of ideal academics tend towards a masculine image of scientific excellence and this image becomes reinforced in a masculine gendered culture (Benschop and Brouns, 2003). Moreover, even though academic prestige is more associated with research than teaching, it can nevertheless devalue women academics' teaching contribution. For example, a study has shown a gender bias in students' evaluations of lecturers' teaching performance, with lectures by men being rated higher than those by women (MacNeil *et al.*, 2015). In conclusion, the pursuit of academic prestige continually advantages male academics over their female counterparts. In spite of substantive measures being implemented in support of women academics' careers (such as all-women academic conferences), gender inequality in academia persists all over the world, and has become more pronounced due to the popularity of the academic prestige economy (Howson *et al.*, 2018). In addition to the prestige economy, another key aspect that underpins the principles of work in academia is the notion of 'meritocracy'.

2.5.2 Meritocracy in academia

Meritocracy is explained by Davis and Moore (1945, p.242) as being a system that gives the greatest reward and the highest rank to those who 'are most important to society and require the greatest training or talent', and it is operated widely as a measure, in societies and institutions, as a means of finding 'merit' people. Meritocracy

emphasises individual ability and effort, which implies that leaders are viewed as having sufficient merit to be selected (Scully, 2002). Sliwa and Johansson (2014) posited meritocracy as being the key paradigm for the organisation of academia. Academic practices, including teaching, research, public engagement and leadership, are all evaluated using the meritocratic paradigm. As Van den Brink and Benschop (2011) stated, using meritocracy in academia has facilitated labelling scholars with the greatest merit as being excellent. Jackson (2007) agreed that the advantage of meritocracy is that it enables the efficient allocation of occupational positions. However, meritocracy has also been contested, (see, for example, Sliwa and Johansson, 2014), on the grounds of encouraging inequality while purporting that observed inequality is the result of fair competition and a necessary basis for progress (Allen, 2011).

Nevertheless, the value of meritocracy is commonly recognised. The vital principle of meritocracy is measurement. Individuals are separated into different levels based on evaluations of their personal abilities (Knights and Richards, 2003). Meritocracy is supported because people value its assumed just principle of measuring individuals to assign positions and distribute rewards based on their merit or talent (Scully, 2002). A meritocracy of managerialism and centralisation is pursued in the university sector and is claimed to be potentially more transparent, with uniform procedures and monitoring across institutions (Ledwith and Manfredi, 2000). Similarly, Knights and Richards (2003) acknowledged the value of the meritocratic model, arguing that it is the most efficient and acceptable approach for women who struggle to have equal opportunities in universities. For example, the women interviewees in Ledwith and Manfredi's (2000) research praised the meritocratic system of the university, and the younger generation took a meritocratic approach to their career based on their academic achievements. The practice of meritocracy is, however, usually different from its principle, in that, apart from professional ability, there are other influencing factors which have a role in the acquisition of leadership, one of them being gender (Nielsen, 2015).

While meritocracy encourages more women to strive for higher positions, the problems

that come with it should not be ignored or treated lightly. It has been argued that meritocracy is a key reason for gender inequality persisting in academia (Powell, 2016). For example, men are more likely to take advantage by gaining scarce merit-based rewards, due to women disproportionately taking on family responsibilities, such as childcare (Knights and Richards, 2003). Women academics find it comparatively more difficult to spend time and energy on producing research output, which means it is harder for them to be recognised as having merit or talent by the meritocratic system. It is difficult, however, for individuals to question the fairness of meritocratic systems when they have been socialised into believing in them. As Allen (2011) argued, the principle of meritocracy is internalized by women. Sliwa and Johansson (2014) added that it becomes a belief held by individuals and so maintains the dominance of meritocracy. This is especially true for women who, having derived real benefits from this system, show strong commitment to meritocracy (Sealy, 2010). This is because the meritocracy recognises their professional abilities and efforts, and helps to construct their individual identity as potential achievers (Sliwa and Johansson, 2014). During this process, individual ability is highlighted again, while other influencing factors, such as support from networks, are ignored (Fletcher *et al.*, 2007).

Based on Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organisations, universities are also gendered (Martin, 1994), as are meritocracy and its argument for merit and talent (Allen, 2011). Masculinity is the cornerstone of meritocracy (Knights and Richards, 2003) because the norms and practices of meritocracy are formed from men's experiences rather than women's, which makes masculinity as the norm in academia (Bailyn, 2003). Specifically, in a meritocratic system, men usually take on the role of evaluator as to whether people should be rewarded for merit, which means they may make their judgment from a masculine perspective (Trevino *et al.*, 2018). Through being internalised by individuals, meritocracy transfers the responsibility for unequal outcomes onto individuals, explaining any failure as being due to that individual being less competent or incapable (Powell *et al*., 2018). As a result, women usually accept these explanations and may become self-abasing and less ambitious, which negatively

influences their future career path (Lawton, 2000). Therefore, employees should be aware that meritocracy is a reflection of gendered power relations in organisations, even though it also has some positive consequences (Ledwith and Manfredi, 2000).

In conclusion, although the ideology of meritocracy is attractive, as it seemingly allows everyone to compete for high rewards, everyday reality dictates that it does not reward individuals solely based on merit or talent (Sealy, 2010). Maintaining an ambivalent lens to view meritocracy is important; it has been argued that meritocracy deserves to be supported because it helps women challenge some forms of discrimination (Knights and Richards, 2003). At the same time, it should be critically analysed as a product of masculinity and there must be an awareness that it can reinforce masculine practices in academia (Van den Brink and Benschop, 2012). Meritocracy is an important factor influencing academics' leadership and career development (Powell *et al.*, 2018). Since this thesis focuses on academics' leadership experiences, the discussion of meritocracy enables a critical examination of the meritocracy in Chinese academia, especially through the gender lens. Meritocracy is closely related to research achievements in academia, but, as mentioned before, the teaching task of academics is also influenced by gender.

2.5.3 Balancing teaching and research

Balancing teaching and research is a common issue faced by academics in higher education, where spending long hours on research and teaching is the norm (Van den Brink *et al.*, 2010). It has been argued that, compared with men academics, women academics usually undertake more teaching, supportive and administrative tasks (Peetz *et al.*, 2014). These tasks are less valued in the meritocratic system, since research output is the most important measure in gaining academic prestige (Howson *et al.*, 2018). Heavy teaching workloads and insufficient time to do research have increasingly become barriers to women academics gaining promotion (Peetz *et al.*, 2014).

There are two explanations for this. Firstly, universities still maintain a traditional gendered division of labour, which allocates teaching, rather than research, tasks to women (Jones *et al.*, 2012). This is related to the stereotypical feminine view of women academics, whereby women are viewed as 'mothers' who are more suitable to teaching, and caring for, students, as well as being good housekeepers, who are good at doing supportive work (Ashencaen and Shiel, 2019). Another explanation has been proposed by studies of Chinese women academics that have found that some women academics have expressed a preference for teaching over research (Gaskell *et al.*, 2004). Chinese women academics have also been found to be resistant to doing administrative work (Gaskell *et al.*, 2004). A similar finding emerged from research carried out in 2017, with Chinese women academics being seen to be more heavily involved in teaching than in research-related leadership roles (Aiston and Yang, 2017). Furthermore, Chinese women academics have been shown to deny their 'leader' identity, preferring to show their 'teacher' identity (Zhao and Jones, 2017). Another study of Chinese women academics concluded that they spend more time on teaching than on research or administrative tasks, which may decrease their output of publications, and this is a key criterion for promotion (Aiston, 2014).

It is interesting to note that Chinese women academics know that doing research is vital for promotion, rather than teaching (Gaskell *et al.*, 2004), but some of them nevertheless choose to take on more teaching tasks. The first reason given by those Chinese women academics was that they thought women and men were suited to doing different tasks at work, based on biological differences (Gaskell *et al*., 2004). In particular, they believed that men could conduct more research because they had stronger physical characteristics and intelligence than women, while women were better at giving pastoral care to students (Gaskell *et al.*, 2004; Aiston, 2014). This was explained as reflecting the gender stereotypes of Chinese society, with women being expected to show care and kindness to others; furthermore, because Chinese women are encouraged to obey socially embedded expectations, (such as their perceived suitability to be teachers, for example), they internalise this kind of stereotype as their individual

preference (Aiston, 2014). This gender stereotype relates to the reason why some women academics prefer the teacher identity to the leader identity (Zhao and Jones, 2017). Since leader roles are stereotypically men's roles, in that they are related to masculine characteristics, women academics internalise the viewpoint that leadership should be pursued by men, while teacher roles should be pursued by women (Zhao and Jones, 2017).

The second reason relates to the gendered structures and culture of academia. Because meritocracy as an approach to research promotion is structured and dominated by men, it is hard for women to participate and win with this approach (Zhao and Jones, 2017). As said above, universities tend to assign more teaching tasks to women academics, which limits the time and energy they have available for carrying out research (Aiston, 2014). Therefore, women's preference for teaching over research seems to not be entirely their own choice, but rather the result of gendered stereotypes and a gendered division of labour within organisations. In conclusion, as Gaskell *et al.* (2004) stated, women academics face a dilemma: they realise that the volume of research output is the key criterion for promotion, but they nevertheless tend to undertake more teaching tasks. This makes it challenging for them to balance teaching and research, and this affects women academics' path towards leadership, and this will be taken into account in this thesis when women academics' leadership experiences are investigated.

2.5.4 The paucity of women leaders in academia

There are two types of leadership in academia: administrative leadership (*e.g.* Vice-Chancellors) and research leadership (*e.g.* Professors) (Braun *et al.*, 2016). Rehbock *et al.* (2021) defined research leadership as the provision of intellectual guidance and inspiration for followers, while also taking on general leadership tasks such as creating a common vision, managing and coordinating teamwork and organising resources and projects. A noticeable difference between administrative leadership and research leadership is that research leadership places a greater emphasis on intellectual

leadership and mentoring (Evans *et al*., 2013). Women are found less frequently in both administrative leadership positions and research leadership positions in academia (Eggins, 2017).

The debate on the lack of women leaders in academia is ongoing (Morley, 2014). Based on the focus of this thesis, this debate is viewed from two perspectives: the lack of individual agency and the lack of organisational agency. Firstly, the absence of women leaders is viewed as being women academics' responsibility. Academics are under pressure to manage and advance their own career and the academic prestige economy reinforces the belief that it is individual incompetence that causes failure to gain promotion (Coate *et al.*, 2015). This lack of agency may take the form of a perceived lack of self-confidence or ambition, causing women to proactively resist applying for leadership positions (Howe-Walsh and Turnbull, 2016). For example, Chesterman *et al.* (2005) found that many senior female academics were wary of applying for leadership roles without specific encouragement, or endorsement of their credentials, from others. Similarly, Zhao and Jones (2017) observed that some Chinese women academics tended to reject the leader identity because of the incongruity between women's roles and leaders' roles. Conversely, Shepherd (2017) found that women were no less likely than men to aspire to 'the top job', which implies that women's lack of agency is not an adequate explanation for their continued underrepresentation in academia. Strategic agency has been demonstrated with some women leaders (*e.g.* women presidents); these women show a high level of self-confidence in leadership positions (Shepherd, 2017). This finding may not represent all women academics, but nevertheless represents a proportion of them, meaning that the paucity of women leaders cannot merely be attributed to women's individual issues.

On the other hand, organisations and society have been criticised for lacking the agency to change gendered structural and cultural issues for women academics (Morley, 2014). Further exploration of the reasons why women lose motivation in the pursuit of leadership has revealed numerous explanations, which are ultimately linked to the

gendered organisational structures and cultures in academia (O'Connor, 2014). As Morley (1994, p.202) emphasised, the university is a 'source of oppression and a location for exploring liberation and empowerment', which means that, even though the gendered discourses and practices of universities oppress women's leadership ambitions, universities can change to become places that empower women academics. Indeed, there have been higher education institutions that have taken measures to change women academics' circumstances, but equality checklists and action plans have been evaluated as having been ineffective in relieving the pressure on women academics (Ledwith and Manfredi, 2000). For instance, 'women-friendly' working arrangements and training, which seem likely to help women to integrate into organisations, are ultimately still a manifestation of 'fixing' women academics (Eagly and Carli, 2007). This is because such measures imply that women should comply with existing institutional requirements, rather than organisations reflecting on how they might improve (Toffoletti and Starr, 2016). Given the ascent of the academic prestige economy in recent decades, universities have gradually become 'greedier' in their acquisition of academics' time and energy (Howson *et al.*, 2018). This results in work-family conflicts intensifying, especially for those women academics who shoulder the main family commitments, since escalating workloads continually push research tasks into private time (Baker, 2012; Rolfe, 2013). This thesis considers that, due to the combination of the gendered norms of the academic prestige economy, the meritocracy and the distribution of teaching tasks, the gendered culture and structures are the main reasons for there being few women leaders in academia, so that the processes by which gendered academia influences women should be explored further.

To summarise, this section has narrowed the focus on women academics. Higher education institutions and academics both currently adopt the academic prestige economy, which is primarily concerned with quantitative data relating to academic achievements, which advantages men rather than women; this is because women academics find it more difficult to achieve recognition for excellence, due to the influence of gender bias. Meritocracy, a masculine approach to research promotion, is

widely accepted, and research and teaching tasks are allocated according to gender stereotypes and bias. The factors mentioned above indicate that women's paucity in leadership positions is not just due to individuals' issues, but also to organisational issues, and that gender inequality is constructed through the gendered interplay between individuals and organisations.

2.6 Chapter summary

This chapter has provided a comprehensive examination of the relationships between gender, organisations and leadership. Through critically reviewing the literature on gender and organisations, this chapter has constructed a theoretical lens to show that individuals do gendered practices in a multiplicity of ways, based on the influences of gendered organisations, while organisational structures and culture are constructed by individuals' behaviours. This theoretical lens has made it possible to demonstrate that gender inequality is constructed by both individuals and organisations. Based on this understanding, the factors that affect women's leadership have been examined in the context of the interactions between individuals and organisations. A conceptual framework has been built to show that women navigate the leadership labyrinth but they also can construct their leadership web, meaning that, in spite of the various challenges encountered by women during their leadership journey, they nevertheless have the agency to gain support. Two research questions have been developed for this thesis: the first relates to identifying the perceptions of women academics during their leadership journey, particularly their perceptions of negative and positive influences; the second conceptualises the gendered interplay between individuals and organisations, since the issue of women's underrepresentation in leadership positions is constructed by both women and Chinese higher education institutions. The next section will focus on the development of a methodology, and the design of a specific plan, for addressing these research questions.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the research philosophy adopted for the study, including the method used, to explain how the research was undertaken. A social constructionist and a feminist stance were taken in terms of the ontology and epistemology for the thesis. Narrative inquiry was the qualitative research approach used to explore the leadership experience of women in Chinese academia. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling and snowball sampling strategies. A semi-structured interview technique was used for collecting data and a combined narrative method was applied for the analysis. In each section of the thesis, a detailed justification for why and how a particular method was used will be provided. The position of the researcher, ethical considerations for the research and the trustworthiness of the findings will be discussed at the end of this chapter.

3.2 Research philosophy

Ontological stance

The thesis adopts social constructionism as its ontology, addressing questions about the nature of the social world, as asked by Mason (2017, p.4):

'What is the nature of the phenomena, or entities, or social world that I wish to investigate?'

The thesis follows the principle that reality is socially constructed by individuals through interactions, where the interaction process is entwined with individuals' contexts. Social constructionism posits that people attach subjective meaning to the world by interacting with contextual, linguistic and political factors; there is an

emphasis on the influence of history and culture (Guterman, 2006). This thesis adopts the social constructionist position that focuses on how women's perceptions of leadership are shaped by their interactions with organisations, and explores the factors that affect their attitudes and behaviour in respect to leadership. The thesis also argues that women's experiences continually change their understanding of the challenges they face. This suggests that reality is constructed and reconstructed socially by individuals based on their context, rather than on objective exterior factors (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, the current study uses a social constructionist ontology to explore how female academics in Chinese academia construct the meaning of their leadership experiences; the factors that influence individuals' interpretation of what they experience are also considered.

Crotty (1998) discussed three key arguments related to social constructionism, which are used here to critically discuss how social constructionism underpins this thesis. Firstly, human beings construct meaning from reality as they engage with the world they are interpreting (Crotty, 1998). The importance of the individual is highlighted, since meaning is constructed from interactions between human beings and the world (Crotty, 1998). Unlike objectivism, social constructionism encourages people to challenge accepted knowledge, based on their construction of meaning within the social world (Cohen *et al.*, 2004). Secondly, people engage with, and make sense of, the world based on social, historical and cultural perspectives (Crotty, 1998). The influence of social factors and the way in which meaning is created are emphasised in social constructionism, which rejects resorting to subjectivism (Crotty, 1998). Taking the meaning of 'gender' as an example, this thesis recognises gender as a social construct (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Individuals continually adopt and express their gender in daily interactions, and this is strongly influenced by socially guided perceptual, cultural, political and historical factors. Moreover, as the social world changes, individuals' gender roles are also changing. This is reflected in this thesis through the development of insights into women's stories, to identify how their attitudes and behaviour are shaped by the changing context in which they live. Thirdly,

constructionist researchers also revise I and reinterpret the materials they have (Crotty, 1998). The conventional meanings that are attributed to the social world should be enriched and renewed by researchers' imagination and creativity (Crotty, 1998). It inspires me, as a researcher, to constantly reflect on the process of interpreting participants' stories to produce new insights into women's leadership.

Epistemological stance

Epistemology considers the nature of knowledge, how researchers understand social phenomena and how knowledge is demonstrated and validated (Mason, 2017). Hence, the second question asked by Mason (2017, p.7) is:

'What might represent knowledge or evidence of the entities or social world that I wish to investigate?'

Considering that the research aim is to explore women's experiences during their path to leadership, this thesis adopts a feminist epistemological position to investigate the social phenomenon and specifically aims to amplify female voices by exploring women's experiences. Anderson (1995) defined feminist epistemology in general in terms of an explanation of the relationship between gender and knowledge. Grasswick (2011) was more specific, stating that feminist epistemology examined how the gendered power structures of society influence the shape of knowledge. Feminism emphasises how women's experiences are undervalued by science and society, taking the epistemological stance that denounces the way in which women's perspective is ignored during the process of knowledge generation (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2015). Feminist epistemology contributes to an exploration of how women are disadvantaged in the course of knowledge attribution, generation and justification, and it attempts to reform these processes (Anderson, 2011). Adopting a feminist epistemology places value on the importance of gender, making gender the focus of analysis when discussing and revising epistemic concepts and practice (Janack, 2004).

Giving a voice to women was one of the earliest important goals of the feminist movement (DeVault, 1999). Bogdan and Biklen (1998) defined the concept of 'giving a voice' as being about empowering people to speak and be heard, rather than remain silent or be silenced by others. More specifically, 'giving women a voice' aims to make their experiences and perspectives available to others, by reflecting how women participate in self-construction and represent themselves (Britzman, 1989). In the context of this thesis, a feminist position acknowledges that social power structures are dominated by men, who oppress and exploit women to create a system of patriarchy (Walby, 1990). Feminist epistemology enables a critical investigation of women's experiences, described through women's eyes and voices, which is consistent with social constructionism (Leavy, 2007). As Roets and Goedgeluck (2007) stated, feminist epistemology helps researchers to discover the secrets of oppression and resistance. It also helps this thesis to explore how gender shapes women's attitudes and behaviour in relation to leadership and career development.

3.3 Narrative inquiry

The art of narrative has existed since human beings have been able to talk and record life stories. It exists in various forms, such as myths, literature and poetry (Clandinin, 2007). The appearance of narrative methodologies in sociological research has increasingly attracted practitioners to stories about daily life and their role in society (Clandinin, 2007). Specifically, there is interest in the origin of these stories, their influence on people's lives and their effect on people's behaviour and decision making. With the growth in interest in applying narrative methodologies to explore peoples' life, variations in approach have emerged in terms of the data collected, the theoretical lens used, ontological and epistemological positions, research questions and definitions of narrative (Riessman, 2008). Such variation enables and encourages researchers to use different ways to engage with the narrative properties of their data (Elliott, 2005), although it also requires researchers to reflect on the philosophical precision of their use of narrative inquiry and acknowledge the diversity of the narrative approach

(Clandinin, 2007). This section describes narrative inquiry from a philosophical perspective and relates it to social constructionism and feminism. There is also an explanation of why narratology has been applied in the research.

Narrative is embedded in every aspect of human life. It not only describes and reflects the detail of a person's life, but also helps people to understand, and construct, meaning. To understand the basis of narrative, Czarniawska (1998, p.vii) defined it as: 'texts that present events developing in time according to (impersonal) causes or (human) intentions'. Czarniawska (1998) also stated that narratives are the main carriers of knowledge in modern societies. There are three key points that should be noted in this definition: narrative can be texts that collect, record and analyse people's daily life events; narrative develops dynamically with changes in time and context; and narrative can be an approach that allows people to gain and reconstruct various items of knowledge. These key points provide a basis for explaining the reasons for applying narrative inquiry and how it will be applied in this thesis.

Firstly, narrative is a medium that revolves around individuals' experiences. An individual is, in this context, understood to be 'a self-narrating organism' that is able to tell his or her life stories (Maines, 1993, p.23). A person's life stories are listened to, recorded, analysed and discussed by researchers, based on their research objectives (Gabriel, 1998). Here, narrative is recognised as being an encapsulation of experiences over time from an individual's perspective, which always includes interaction with an historical, political and cultural context (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Therefore, narrative inquiry is well suited to research that focuses on exploring the perceived, subjective experiences and life events of individuals (Floyd, 2012). Because this thesis attempts to investigate women's attainment of leadership positions, narrative can be applied as a methodology for collecting and presenting women's experiences of pursuing leadership roles. It is worth noting that, according to social constructionism, individuals can create a different understanding, and several interpretations, of the same events, because they have a different understanding of these events (Guterman, 2006).

Therefore, in an organisational context, researchers should pay attention to both individuals' experiences of organisations, and the potential relationships between interrelated narratives that exist across organisations; this is known as the 'pluralistic construction of a multiplicity of stories' (Boje, 1995, p.1,000). Linking different narratives helps researchers to understand multiple views of organisational events, and to explore people's different ways of sharing stories (Rhodes, 2000).

Secondly, narrative research is developing dynamically in response to changes in time and context. An indispensable element of the narrative approach is that individuals need to provide timelines and a background to a story (Boje, 2001). This enables narrative to describe the events of people's life over time in a way that is flexible and detailed (Czarniawska, 1997). The narrative methodology encourages the researcher to analyse human behaviour in specific situations and cultural contexts (Czarniawska, 2011). Individuals' perspectives of their experiences can be transformed as a result of changes in time and context (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). This is particularly relevant in the context of organisational studies, enabling researchers to focus on an organisation's processes, rather than viewing it as a static entity (Czarniawska, 1998). Therefore, during the collection and analysis phases of this thesis, the situations and contexts of stories and storytellers were noted, to enable an exploration of how contributors' attitudes and behaviour in relation to leadership changed in response to changes in time and context.

Finally, narrative is an approach that people use to understand and reconstruct realities, including organisational realities. Narrative is not expressed by individuals alone, since it is co-written by researchers, participants and readers (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). The narrative approach encourages participants to reflectively understand their life through reviewing stories from the past, to develop different interpretations as their circumstances are changed (Rhodes, 2001). The narrative approach helps researchers to collect stories from different participants, enabling them to focus on diverse realties, rather than a singular reality (Rhodes and Brown, 2005). After collecting stories from

participants, researchers need to find ways to present those stories in the context of their research focus (Rhodes, 2001). During this process, researchers should be aware that they are selecting and reconstructing narratives, so they should adhere to the requirement for reflexivity and avoid using a single authoritative account to describe a number of diverse stories (Hatch, 1996; Rhodes, 2001). Applying a narrative methodology to gain insights into individual life experiences is valuable to both the individuals themselves, and the wider field of social science (Clandinin, 2007). As Chase (2005, p.651) concluded, narrative researchers make a contribution to social science knowledge by using 'an amalgam of interdisciplinary analytic lenses, diverse disciplinary approaches and both traditional and innovative methods' to investigate individuals' narrative. This thesis explores the issue of women's underrepresentation in leadership positions, adopting a combined feminist and narrative lens to focus on women's daily events. This both encourages a nuanced understanding of participants' experiences, and leads to new insights into the relationship between gender, leadership and organisations.

Researchers can also achieve new sensemaking through interlinking participants' stories, especially in organisational studies (Czarniawska, 1998). This thesis adopts Weick's (1995, p.61) suggestion:

'Something that preserves plausibility and coherence, something that is reasonable and memorable, something that embodies experience and expectations, something which resonates with other people, something that can be constructed retrospectively but also can be used prospectively, something that captures both feeling and thought'.

Weick (1995) drew conclusions on the factors that are necessary in organisational sensemaking, and the current thesis will use these to reconstruct narrative. Weick's conclusions aid identification of what should be included in the reconstructed narrative: for example, the common viewpoints of participants; differing, or even contrary, viewpoints; participants' experiences, but also their expectations of the future;

participants' attitudes, actions and feelings. The reconstructed narrative can help researchers to achieve sensemaking, as the process of storytelling involves the continual construction of meaning in organisational life (Czaniawska, 1998). Moreover, organisations are also reconstructed when the narrative approach is used, since both participants and researchers are actively involved in the narrative reconstitution of organisations (Rhodes and Brown, 2005). Narrative research views the organisation as a continually changing entity that people construct subjectively and inter-subjectively, according to their experiences and events that affect the organisation (Rhodes and Brown, 2005).

Narrative inquiry can, however, be criticised for being too reliant on individuals' stories, which is regarded as being a departure from the traditional view of science (Rhodes and Brown, 2005). This is because mainstream research methodologies emphasise facts and logic, while the metaphor and stories are categorised as literature (Czarniawska, 1998). Narrative researchers argue that stories and facts are not mutually exclusive (Gabriel, 1998). Stories can reveal the precise details of individuals' life, facilitating the identification of patterns that deviate from what positivist researchers define as 'the norm' (Bruner, 1991). Specifically, narrative inquiry can provide empirical material that 'normal scientific method' may ignore, and a more effective approach to research communication and representation, and clearer analytical tools (Rhodes and Brown, 2005). In organisational studies in particular, narrative inquiry is important for examining how people in organisations construct their life (Zald, 1996). The use of narrative inquiry for the current thesis enables an exploration of how women develop an understanding of their relationship with organisations and with society (Ludvig, 2006). Science and stories are both important in organisational studies, as Rhodes and Brown (2005) have pointed out, and focusing on one of them does not necessarily reject an understanding of the another. Narrative provides a methodological position for the researcher to enable engagement in the complex 'lived' world, instead of the 'real' world presumed by science (Rhodes and Brown, 2005).

Narrative inquiry has been adopted for this thesis, because it can provide rich data in the form of texts, a dynamic lens for capturing changes over time and in different contexts, and an approach to understanding individuals' life stories and reconstructed sensemaking. Narrative, as a medium, is dynamically co-created by participants and researchers (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003), which encourages researchers to not only understand humans' life events based on existing knowledge, but also reconstruct narrative to achieve sensemaking in organisational reality. As Rhodes and Brown (2005) concluded, narrative enables researchers to be involved in the lived realities of organisations through observing what people at work live through in their daily life, and this provides a different and valuable form of knowledge.

3.4 Research design

Qualitative research is defined as a 'situated activity that locates the observer in the world', using an interpretive and naturalistic approach to interpret the phenomena of the world (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p.3). Qualitative research design involves collecting data on people and places, and analysing data to establish patterns or themes, and researcher should present both voices of participants, complex descriptions of the problem, as well develop the existing literature (Creswell, 2017). Evolving definitions imply that a qualitative approach is appropriate for research that aims to: explore a social phenomenon, obtain a complex and detailed understanding of participants within their context, and contribute to the literature and social change. This thesis adopts a qualitative approach to the design of the research process and includes data collection and analysis. It strives for a deep understanding of women academics' leadership trajectories and contributes to the literature on women's leadership.

This thesis uses a qualitative research approach, because of its research aims and research questions, its philosophical stance and the importance of narrative inquiry. The qualitative research design process begins with the research topic, aims and questions (Ravitch, 2020). This thesis starts with the phenomenon that there are few women

academics who can attain a leadership position in a Chinese university, and aims to explore women academics' leadership trajectories. A qualitative study is an appropriate means of gaining a complex and detailed understanding of the issue (Creswell, 2017). Specifically, this work will explore how women academics understand their leadership trajectory and how they interact with higher education establishments during that process. The qualitative approach is suitable for researchers who seek to understand the way in which participants rationalise their socially constructed world, through enhancing their understanding of organisational life (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). The interactions between people can be captured through the application of a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2017). This is because a qualitative approach empowers participants to tell their stories and requires researchers to concentrate on participants' experiences, going beyond statistics and numbers, to collect and analyse rich, holistic data (Creswell, 2017).

Adopting a qualitative approach also follows the social constructionist and feminist positions of this thesis. From a social constructionist stance, the qualitative approach enables researchers to investigate the factors that might influence people's construction of reality (Creswell, 2017). One of the characteristics of qualitative research is the provision of a holistic account of data, which qualitative researchers need to be able to identify multiple facets of a situation and to reflect how multiple factors interact, to enable the construction of a situation (Creswell, 2017). During this process, the social, historical and cultural factors that influence individuals' construction of reality can be identified and interlinked (Crotty, 1998). A qualitative approach has been the preferred choice in feminist research (McHugh, 2014). Since individuals' perspectives are central to the qualitative approach, the perspectives of women can attract more attention (Taylor *et al.*, 2016). A qualitative approach is particularly well suited to the collection and presentation of daily experiences, including emotions, events and other, less tangible, aspects of women's experiences (Spencer *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, the qualitative approach allows feminist researchers to participate in the process of construction, rather than being separated from the research, which enables new insights

and understanding of phenomena (Brooks and Hesse-Biber, 2007).

Narrative inquiry emphasises humans' lived experiences and stories, while a qualitative approach is well suited to the exploration of the meanings human make from the experiences and events and how those meanings connect with the social world (Miles *et al.*, 2020). Qualitative data can provide a rich and in-depth description of people's experiences, through taking into account the social and cultural context in which people live (Miles *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, applying a qualitative approach aligns with the process of co-constructing the narrative (Czarniawska, 1998). The rich and detailed data that a qualitative approach provides not only assist researchers in analysing the underlying issues of a phenomenon and reconstructing narratives, but also help readers to reach their own understanding of the narrative through engaging with holistic information (Myers, 2019).

Even though the qualitative approach is well suited for this thesis, its limitations nevertheless need to be considered. The qualitative approach is criticised as not being refined and standardised in the same way as other research approaches, but this is a fundamental characteristic of this method, which is an evolving design (Willig and Stainton, 2008). As for qualitative researchers, there are guidelines for them to follow, rather than rules, which allows them to remain flexible when conducting research as the 'craftsperson' (Willig and Stainton, 2008). This thesis will be guided by the definition of qualitative research presented by Creswell (2017), as stated above, and will include: rigorous data collection and analysis; the use of narrative inquiry; a specific research focus; ethical practices, which will be discussed later. The time-consuming process of qualitative data collection and analysis is another feature of a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2017). Qualitative researchers usually spend considerable time gathering individuals' stories, finding meaning from multiple perspectives, especially those who use narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). In order to estimate this potential risk, an approach combining a sampling strategy and semi-structured interviews were chosen, to save time spent on data collection; this

approach will be discussed in detail later.

3.5 Sampling strategy

The research combined purposive sampling and snowball sampling to recruit participants. Purposive sampling is an approach where the researcher knows clearly which sample units should be recruited, based on the purpose of the study, followed by the recruitment of participants according to certain criteria (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2019). Snowball sampling begins with participants who satisfy given criteria and are willing to name other potentially eligible participants (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2019). In this thesis, a purposive sampling strategy was used to initially identify participants, based on the purposes of the thesis, with snowball sampling then used to expand the number of participants. Because the research aims to explore female academics' leadership experiences in Chinese academia, the criteria for recruiting participants included: female academics working full-time in comprehensive universities in China, with leadership experience. As stated previously, there are three types of leadership role in Chinese universities, namely party leadership, academic leadership and administrative leadership (Liu, 2016). For the purposes of the thesis, those three types of leadership roles were included, given that women may transfer through those three leadership roles to achieve promotion in Chinese higher education (Lin and Zhang, 2021).

Recruitment began with a review of Chinese university websites, with women academics assessed in terms of whether they were suitable participants. Such websites include academics' educational background, their research titles and administrative titles and their personal achievements, as well as their contact details. An invitation email was sent to potential participants, which included an introduction to the research, issues relating to research ethics and the researcher's profile. The email explained to the invitees why they were particularly qualified to contribute to the research, to persuade them to take part in an interview (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2019). Participants who were willing to accept the invitation mostly responded quickly, enabling a location

and time for an interview to be scheduled.

Because the thesis relates to some sensitive topics, such as an individual's privacy and their views of organisations, *etc*., and because of the time-consuming nature of recruitment, it is difficult to use purposive sampling alone to achieve the required sample size. Therefore, after completing interviews with participants who had been recruited using a purposive sampling strategy, snowball sampling was used to increase the size of the sample without spending excessive time on recruitment. Difficulties with recruitment were shared with participants, who were asked politely whether they could recommend other potential participants from their profession (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2019). The participants were usually willing to use their personal networks to help with recruitment, emphasising to their colleagues that the research was both meaningful and interesting. Once the additional potential participants identified had given their permission, their personal contact details were passed on to the researcher, and contact was made. Participants' recommendations enabled access to a wider purposive population (Atkinson and Flint, 2004).

There is, however, an ethical issue when applying a snowball sampling strategy, relating to the question of whether additional participants are voluntary, or compromised by the people who referred them (Mason, 2010). As mentioned in the literature review chapter, the *Guanxi* network in China is a complicating factor (Huang and Alatio, 2014), with the early participants using their own personal guanxi. This is because of the possibility of those contacted in this way fearing damage to their own guanxi if they refuse to cooperate. For this reason, I checked with each individual identified by interviewees that they were indeed willing to accept the invitation to be interviewed, regardless of any pressure of guanxi. Each individual was assured that they had the right to withdraw from the research process at any time and was promised that their referrer would be informed of their decision.

The combination of purposive and snowball sampling facilitated the acquisition of a

target group of participants efficiently and effectively. The sample consisted of 38 participants. A qualitative sample is usually small, due to consideration of costs and time; it is not necessary to use a large sample, because the generation of knowledge does not rely on enumerative principles (Mason, 2010). Instead, as the research aim was to investigate the specific experiences of women academics, in order to theorise, rather than to generalise to a wider population, the key issue of concern related to whether the sample offered sufficient information of relevance to the research focus (Mason, 2010; Pinnegar and Daynes, 2007). Saturation is an important criterion when evaluating the quality of data, with checks being made for scope (the comprehensiveness of the data) and replication (common characteristics within the data) (Morse, 2015). Through continual review of the data during the data collection phase, it was possible for similar and contrasting stories relating to navigating the 'leadership labyrinth' to be identified across the interviews. This helped to indicate when enough qualitative data had been collected.

The sample of 38 participants included women aged between 36 and 59, who were academics with leadership experience (see Table 1). Most of them were Associate Professors or Professors with experience of holding leadership positions such as Head of School and Director of Research. Among these participants, 33 agreed to a face-to-face interview, while two agreed to a telephone interview and three sent their responses by email. Telephone interviews and responses sent by email were the result of a mismatch of geographical locations, or of issues relating to time availability. These types of interviews offered greater flexibility, but did not benefit the research, considering the lack of in-depth communication in comparison with face-to-face interviews (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2019). Face-to-face interviews were the most effective of the three methods used, since participants were able to spend one to two hours discussing their stories in detail, giving in-depth reasons for their behaviour and allowing their feelings to be expressed. The telephone interviews also yielded rich and detailed data, with each interview lasting at least an hour, similar to the face-to-face interviews. The email responses, however, were very short and not representative of

stories, with participants answering the interview questions with one or two sentences, with no related explanations. Therefore, the decision was taken to not use the data collected by email (the last three participants listed in Table 1), meaning that the final sample size was 35.

Pseudonym	Age	Number of children	Academic title	Administrative title (formerly or currently)
Xiwen	51	1	Professor	Director of research centre
Hanmei	38	2	Associate Professor	Secretary of research centre
Jingman	38	1	Associate Professor	Party Branch secretary of school
Luqi	35	1	Associate Professor	Deputy director of research centre
Jieying	42	2	Professor	Head of subject
Ailian	56	2	Professor	Deputy Head of subject
Anping	40	1	Associate Professor	Null
Xiatong	48	1	Professor	Assistant of Head of school
Helei	46	1	Professor	Head of subject
Shiyun	41	1	Associate Professor	Assistant of Party
Yaqin	58	2	Professor	Director of research centre
Congrong	50	1	Professor	Deputy director
Hanyu	47	0	Professor	Deputy director
Xueqing	39	1	Associate Professor	Deputy Head of school
Fanxiang	53	1	Associate Professor	Null
Shuyao	46	1	Associate Professor	Director of research centre
Baiwei	51	1	Associate Professor	Director of research centre
Pingchun	59	1	Professor	Deputy Head of subject
Yinan	58	1	Professor	Deputy Head of school
Ruizhen	54	1	Associate Professor	Director of research centre
Meigui	55	1	Professor	Head of School
Haiqing	47	1	Professor	Head of School
Zhaoni	55	1	Professor	Head of School
Qiuxiang	55	2	Associate Professor	Deputy Head of school
Letian	50	1	Lecturer	Deputy Secretary of CPC of School
Xiahe	50	1	Professor	Head of School
Anxin	55	1	Professor	Secretary of CPC of School
Guling	43	1	Professor	Head of School
Jingzhu	52	1	Professor	Director of research centre
Qiaoyue	58	1	Professor	Director of research centre
Huiya	38	1	Professor	Director of department
Jiashan	45	2	Professor	Director of research centre
Yunqing	48	1	Associate Professor	Deputy Head of School
Langyue	49	1	Professor	Leader of the government department
Yingzhen	49	2	Professor	Director of research centre
Huawan	55	1	Professor	Head of subject
Wanying	36	1	Associate Professor	null
Yuxiao	44	1	Professor	Deputy head of school

Table 1. Basic participant information

3.6 Data collection

Semi-structured interviews

Interviews were used for data collection, because of the ontological and epistemological positioning of the thesis, and to enable the research questions to be addressed (Mason, 2010). Firstly, interviewing is a form of conversation, with a shared purpose to generate knowledge, involving a two-way learning process of collecting data and creating meaning (Shah, 2004). It should be noted that, during the interview process, knowledge is constructed by participants, rather than being excavated as if it already exists, according to social constructionism (Mason, 2010). The researcher is viewed as the 'gardener', nurturing knowledge with participants through interviews (Salmons, 2017). Furthermore, with reference to feminism, qualitative interviews ask about, and listen to, participants' experiences, to explore a previously 'ignored, misrepresented or suppressed voice' (Byrne, 2004, p.182). Interviews also allow researchers the flexibility and sensitivity to be able to react to women's experiences when they are talking, and ask probing questions in order to gain new understandings (Yost and Chmielewski, 2013). Moreover, since this thesis is based on a narrative methodology, material revolving around individuals' experiences is needed, and this can be obtained through conducting interviews. Participants have the freedom to tell their stories during an interview and understanding is co-created by the participant and the interviewer during this interaction (Mason, 2010).

Specifically, the method of face-to-face, semi-structured interviews was adopted, because it allowed the necessary flexibility, yet also provided guidelines for both the researcher and the participants. In a typical semi-structured interview, an interview guide covering a list of topics related to the research questions is used, but the approach, and time allowed, for discussing these topics is flexible (Edwards and Holland, 2013). In other words, the interview guide lists questions that need to be discussed, but the

interviewer has flexibility regarding the order in which questions are asked. Participants can provide more open-ended answers, linked to events, context and feelings that enrich the narrative (Denscombe, 2010). The researchers can strive to have further in-depth discussions on particular topics (Edwards and Holland, 2013). Compared with structured interviews, semi-structured interviews offer more space for interviewees to tell their stories in their own way. Compared with unstructured interviews, the existence of an interview guide in a semi-structured interview ensures the conversation is directed towards the focus of the study, and 'interviewees and interviewers [are] always actively engaged in constructing meaning', which also saves time (Silverman, 2006, p.116).

Additionally, one-to-one interviews are convenient in terms of scheduling, since only two people (the researcher and the participant) need to fix a date in their diary (Denscombe, 2010). A one-to-one interview also guarantees the privacy of the conversation; acquiring the trust of an interviewee is an important element in obtaining relevant data (Goodson and Sikes, 2001). An interview also implies the issue of sensitivity, since participants may feel awkward or defensive when answering a question (Denscombe, 2010). To address this, the researcher can inform participants as to the nature of the interview questions and research topics in advance; they might also pay attention to how a participant is feeling during an interview, and this will be expanded upon in detail in the section that deals with ethical considerations.

Interview guidelines

The research was based on six key questions (Mason, 2010), and the interviews for the research were conducted on the basis of these questions. In addition, use was made of techniques such as 'laddering up' (ask 'why' questions) and 'laddering down' (ask 'how' questions and ask for *examples*), in order to obtain further information in response to each key question (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2019).

1. *How do you understand leadership?*

Since this thesis focuses on women's experiences within the leadership labyrinth, in

Chinese higher education, the understanding of leadership was used as a starting topic, to set the tone of the conversation. As Northouse (2021) argued, everyone has a moment when they are asked to show leadership in their life, and how people understand leadership influences the way in which they approach, display and practise leadership (Northouse, 2021). When responding to this question, participants were able to describe their views of leadership, ideal leaders and attitudes to leadership, and to reflect on leadership on the basis of their own experiences. According to narrative inquiry, participants' understanding of leadership reflects organisational and social culture and structures (Czarniawska, 2011). Therefore, a discussion of the understanding of leadership is meaningful. Furthermore, compared with a Western discussion of leadership, interviewees may have had a different understanding of leadership and leaders based on the uniqueness of Chinese traditional culture and the contemporary political system.

2. *When did you enter this university?*

It is common in China for people to remain in the university where they start their career. This interview question aimed to inspire interviewees to remember their career starting point, then to talk further about the developmental process of their career. As narrative consists of related events which develop dynamically over time, making clear the timeline of the narrative is crucial (Rhodes and Brown, 2005). Through evoking memories of their career trajectory, a participant can remember the key events that have made a great impression in their career, and this helps the researcher to capture the key research-relevant aspects of the conversation. This question leads to the subject of the starting points in the pursuit of leadership, guiding interviewees towards talking about the process of passing through the leadership labyrinth (Eagly and Carli, 2007).

3. *What kind of challenges and support did you face on the path towards research / administrative leadership positions?*

This question is the main question of the thesis, since it relates to the barriers women face, and the support they receive, on their journey towards leadership. As there are

multiple factors that influence their navigation of the leadership labyrinth, the collection of stories provides rich narrative material. This question directly links to the first research question, which explores women's understanding of their leadership trajectory. Their answers to this question, however, might not have been detailed enough, so follow-up questions such as 'Why did you react in this way?', 'How does this influence you?', 'How did it make you feel?' *etc*. were asked (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2019). Follow-up questions starting with the word "why" are designed to elicit information about participants' value bases, elaborating on mere statements of experiences (Wansink, 2003). Questions starting with "how" can help researchers to explore participants' specific understanding of a particular construction. Follow-up questions such as these, concerning women's feelings and reflections on events in the past, lead to consideration of the second research question, which is about the interactions between the participants and organisations.

4. *To what extent do you feel your gender has affected your progression?*

After the collection of basic stories, this question was designed to highlight the influence of gender on individuals, organisations and the process of progression. The question was seen by interviewees as providing the opportunity for a 'self-summary' and a chance to reflect on how they were 'doing gender' (West and Zimmerman, 1987) within 'gendered organisations' (Acker, 1990). The question also directly addressed the gender inequality issue in leadership, through women participants' voices, exploring which themes were mentioned frequently. The researcher was also open to receiving answers regarding how gender had potentially promoted career progression, to assess the extent to which 'female privilege' (Campbell, 2004) exists in reality and to explore how women view female privilege.

5. *Do you see any measures that organisations take to help women to reach leadership positions?*

This question focused on changes within an organisation and country, and on any policies / practices that were in place. It explored the extent to which any such strategies

exacerbated or resolved the issues that women face. The objective was to explore the changing process of how organisations treated women academics over time, compared with past years. This entailed an investigation of how contemporary social factors, including economy, culture, politics and (especially) the Chinese women's emancipation movement (Qin, 2020) were influencing the processes of organisations. Any researcher who adopts narrative inquiry needs to use a 'dynamic lens', to capture changes over time and in different contexts (Czarniawska, 2011). The questions drafted to guide the discussions helped to explore not only the interactions between participants and their organisation, but also the changes that were occurring at a national, organisational and individual level.

6. *What are your future plans?*

This question aimed to investigate women's plans regarding leadership, but also to explore the impacts of women's career on their life in general. It allowed each interviewee to articulate her perspectives as a leader, worker, teacher, mother and wife, or just as a woman and a human being, based on stories. This open question encouraged participants to mention anything else they felt was important. The question also gave the interviewer the flexibility to probe further in directions that were felt to be most interesting.

Interview process

Participants were interviewed in four cities in China. Prior to each interview, the participant was provided with a consent form, participant information in compliance with the requirements of the University of Glasgow and the interviewer's CV. An introduction was provided about the research and the rights of the participants as interviewees. The core theory and the beneficial outcomes of the thesis were also explained, if the participants wished. Data confidentiality was the most important issue for participants, so the interview was conducted on a one-to-one basis and the venue was decided upon by each interviewee. Most of the meetings took place in the participant's own office, to ensure their comfort (Creswell, 2017). The interviewer was

prepared for the possibility of using both audio-recordings and handwritten notes for interviews; interviewees' preference was asked in advance. There were 26 participants who refused to be audio-recorded, due to the private nature of the data, and this was fully respected (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2019). This issue resonated with the cultural context in China, as most Chinese people do not like to be audio-recorded, because of the risk of revealing their opinions (Zhou and Nunes, 2013). Even though an audio-recording is more reliable and complete than handwritten notes, the interviewer nevertheless manually recorded the key words of each conversation; no attempt was made to record the interviews verbatim. A transcript was made of the whole of each conversation as soon as possible after each interview (Denscombe, 2010). The use of handwritten notes enabled participants to feel safe and relaxed enough to express themself, which was beneficial in gaining more personal opinions and evaluations (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2019).

Using the interview guide, each conversation usually started with the participant talking about their first position at the university. They then went on to describe their development in leadership, including academic and administrative promotions, and the challenges and support they encountered from colleagues, families, organisations and society. They also clarified their understanding of leadership and how gender affected their pursuit of leadership roles. Some follow-up questions were asked, to elicit more detailed information; these questions usually began with 'why' or 'how', with the interviewer being flexible and proactive during the interview, and sensitive to the stories that emerged (Mason, 2010). Open questions were also often asked at the end of an interview; for example, the participant might be asked how she felt the interview had gone, and what kind of thoughts the interviews had triggered. Participants indicated that, through remembering past experiences, they were able to reflect on leadership development and life priorities in ways they had not considered previously. Since all the interviews were conducted in Chinese, it took a long time for all transcripts to be prepared in English. During the process of translating and transcribing the interviews into idiomatic English, the researcher gradually became familiar with each individual's

life story, which helped with the later data analysis.

3.7 Data analysis

This thesis has employed a narrative approach to analysing data, since it is concerned with how people create and use stories in order to understand the world (Rhodes and Brown, 2005). Specifically, narrative analysis enables the researcher to discover how people understand and construct their organisational lives at a particular time and place (Boje, 2001). The research questions of this thesis related to exploring women's perception of leadership experiences and their interactions with organisations, suggesting the suitability of narrative analysis. The analysis was based on the general procedure for narrative analysis described by Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2019). It included three main steps: 1) analysis of the narrative, 2) recontextualisation, 3) interpretation and evaluation. This general procedure was chosen because it provided a guiding principle of how to practise narrative analysis that was especially convenient for a new researcher. The actual process followed is described in detail below.

3.7.1 Applying the general procedure of narrative analysis

A bottom-up approach was used to analyse the data (McNabb, 2002), grouping material into units to construct a structure. This approach facilitated the generation of narrative structures and was consistent with social constructionism, given that the narrative was created from told experiences (Miles *et al.*, 2020). It is, however, difficult for the researcher to build the specific framework in which narrative analysis is conducted (Webster and Mertova, 2007). Therefore, Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2019) have provided the simple steps of analysis of narrative, recontextualisation, interpretation and evaluation. Specifically, analysis of the narrative aims to make a detailed examination of narrative materials. Researchers need to concentrate on analysing the main plot, actors, activities and function or purpose of the stories. Because stories are not always told chronologically by participants, researchers need to deconstruct and reorganise

those stories into episodes (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2019). Recontextualisation implies that researchers should re-examine stories specifically on the basis of context. Context relates to the historical and cultural background when stories happened, the position of the storyteller at the time and the material's context in relation to the research aims (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2019). As Rhodes (2001) emphasised, context is important in the analysis of narrative material, crucially influencing the process of understanding and reconstructing narratives. Researchers also interpret and evaluate the meaning of stories by considering the aims of stories, the influences of stories, the links between stories and, most importantly, how those stories contribute to the research (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2019).

Although this general procedure merely offers some simple steps in narrative analysis, it nevertheless provided clear guidance for the current study on how to conduct narrative analysis based on the research aims and questions. Following this procedure, the first step was to analyse the narrative material in detail to identify the main actors and activities of each story; then, the stories' context was considered, to enable them to be reorganised; finally, there was an interpretation of the meaning of the stories and they were linked in order to generate narratives. In the general procedure, Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2019) referred to all narrative materials by the term "story". For the purpose of this thesis, however, narrative material was divided into three categories: an "event" referred to the most basic form of narrative (Czaniawska, 1998); a "story" referred to a collection, or series, of events (Rhodes, 2001); "narrative" referred to a combination of material from various stories to present a holistic picture of different participants' experiences (Rhodes and Brown, 2005). This structure was used for the process of construction from events to stories, to narratives. Participants' experiences were deconstructed and reconstructed to create narratives based on the research questions. The three stages of data analysis were: 1) organising data as events tables, which included various events that participants experienced as part of their leadership trajectory, and which helped in the reorganisation of the stories; 2) organising events into stories, which consisted of reorganising events into collective stories, based on

their context and the position of the storyteller, which enabled the subsequent generation of narratives; 3) generating and analysing narratives, during which the meaning, interrelationships and contributions of stories were identified, to facilitate the construction of overarching narratives and the in-depth analysis of narratives in the context of related theories (Figure 4).

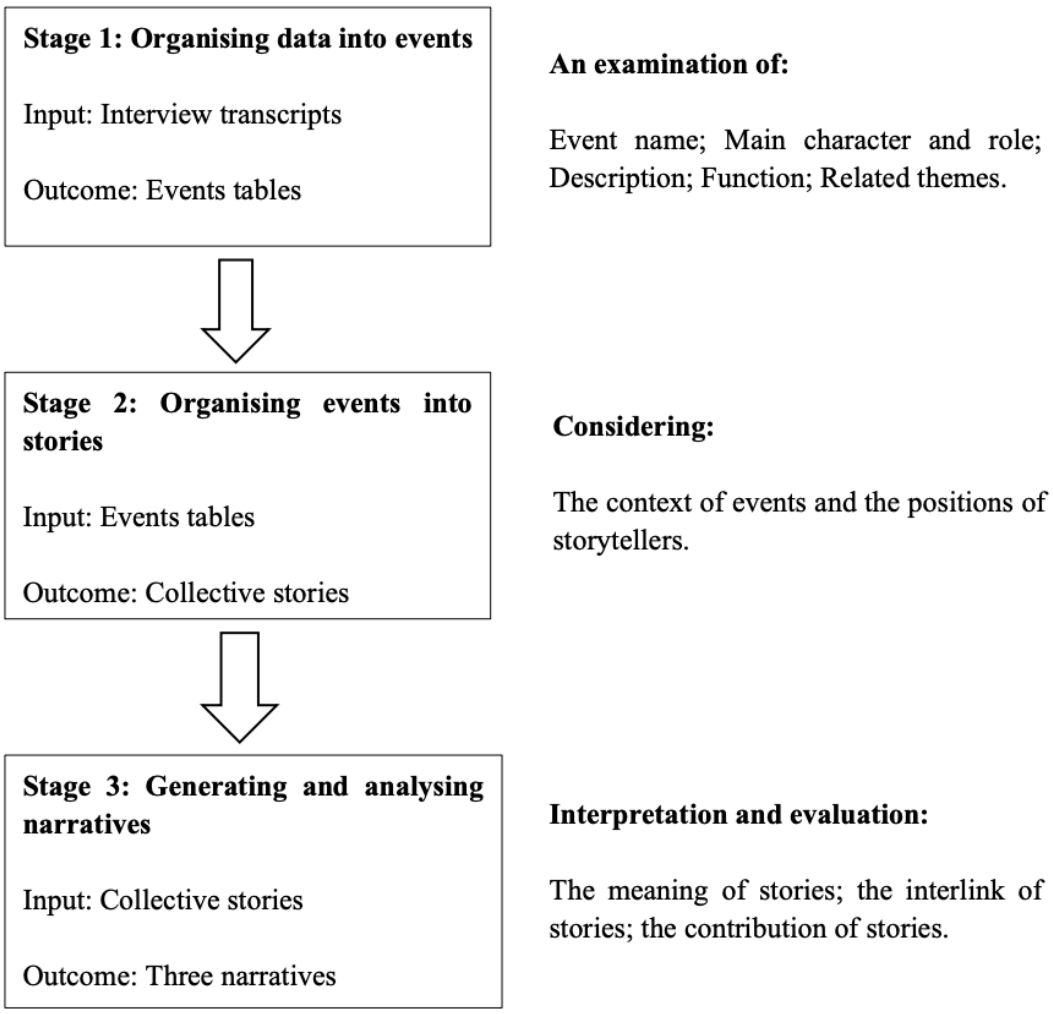

Figure 4. Overview of the process of data analysis

3.7.2 The process of analysing the data

First stage: Organising the data into events tables

The first stage was to organise the data as distinct events. Here, events were defined as describing 'who did what'. Each event had five elements: event name; main character

and role; description; function; related themes. Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2019) argued that the main actors, activities and purpose or function of activities should be examined in detail, while 'related themes' were included by me to make notes for further analysis. Each participant's transcript was separated into various events, which were then presented in a table, (an example is provided in Table 2). Moreover, the events from each transcript were organised to provide a temporal perspective, in order to understand the links between different events (Miles *et al.*, 2020).

Event name	Main character and role	Description	Function	Related themes
Women leaders are troublemakers.	Storyteller-woman leader. Storyteller's male leaders-evaluator.	I discussed the topic of 'women leaders' with my male leader. He said women leaders are troublemakers. Women will create many contradictions - 'three women could play a drama'. Also, women may refuse some business trip tasks, considering safety issues and family issues, while men won't refuse.	Women were evaluated as troublemakers in the workplace. However, the reasons given have nothing to do with knowledge or skill, but instead are all about women's stereotypical characteristics.	Gender stereotypes

Table 2. An example of an events table

Second stage: Organising events into stories

In the second stage, the events of each interview transcript were reorganised as eight categories of stories, based on the context of each event and the position of the storyteller. Context related to the historical, cultural and political background of events, and the position of the storyteller and her role in the event. The identification and categorisation of events led to the definition of eight stories, on the basis of context and the position of the storyteller. For example, when a participant told a story about research promotion, their position was defined as being a candidate for a research

position and the context of the story was organisational promotion policies at that time; when a participant told a story about work-family conflict, her position was defined as "working mum", and the context of the story was childbearing policies. The method of composite sequence analysis was applied at this step (Miles *et al.*, 2020), in that events were extracted from multiple individual cases through open coding, and then categorised based on the context of events and the position of the storyteller, to create a collective story (see Table 3). This method helped to construct multiple participants' journeys, charting their experiences in certain contexts and when in a certain position. The events described by participants reflected the inconsistencies and contradictions of stories, which contributed to the further interpretation and evaluation of stories in stage three.

Events	Story
1. The research promotion system is fair for women (3, 8, 10, 34) 2. Research promotion: requirements, selection and committee (3, 18, 22, 28, 32) 3. Promotion depends on two questions (5) 4. The standard is hard to meet for women (8, 10, 16, 28) 5. Childcare impedes research promotion (3,4, 10) 6. The criteria sometimes are raised unexpectedly (4, 5, 14, 16, 22, 26, 28, 32) 7. I tried three times to gain research promotion (22) 8. Surprise at research promotion (5) 9. But job seniority and guanxi influence the fairness (2, 7, 8) 10. I believe working harder can gain promotion (8, 10) 11. My supervisor guides me on how to get research titles (1, 4, 11, 26, 35) 12. My family supports me to gain research titles (1, 4, 10, 13, 17). 13. The adjustment of the age limitation for women in research fund projects (3, 10, 14, 31)	Story of research promotion: Main scenarios: 1. The research promotion system is fair, because…… 2. But the influencing factors …… decrease the fairness. 3. My supervisor/family/colleagues/organisation helped me to gain research promotion. 4. I want more support from organisations, such as ……

14. The organisation should consider women's multiple roles in society (8, 10) 15. The research promotion system should be changed (4, 5, 12, 14, 28, 31, 32)	

Table 3. An example of a collective story

Third stage: Generating and analysing narratives

Finally, the stories were organised into three overarching narratives, through considering the meaning of stories, the links between stories and the contribution of stories to this thesis. The meaning of stories included participants' perception of any key factors that positively or negatively influenced their leadership trajectory. The link of stories was identified that there was a clear sequence of those stories, that most participants started by telling of their experience of pursuing leadership, then their experiences as women leaders, ending with their experience of leaving a leadership position. This sequence also related to the conceptual framework of this thesis, the leadership labyrinth (Eagly and Carli, 2007), since it described the women's leadership journey. These stories benefitted this thesis by portraying the leadership labyrinth for women academics in Chinese higher education. Three narratives have been defined: navigating the winding path towards leadership; learning while in the centre of the leadership labyrinth; leaving the centre of the leadership labyrinth (Figure 5). These three overarching narratives reflect participants' leadership trajectory, including how they have struggled when pursuing leadership opportunities, how they have practised leadership and how they have left leadership positions in the labyrinth.

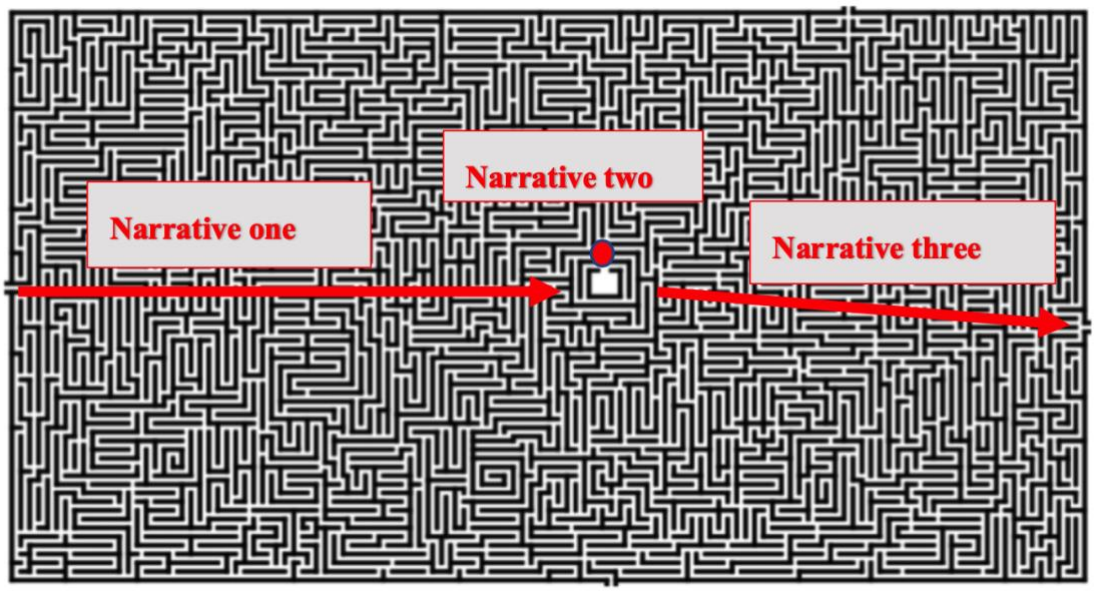

Figure 5. Three narratives of the leadership labyrinth

Analysing the narratives

The overarching narratives were analysed, to investigate what participants faced during their leadership trajectory, with the help of relevant literature. During this process, participants' experiences were interpreted using the key concepts discussed in the literature review chapter, and in the light of the historical, cultural and political context of Chinese universities and society. The first narrative related to how women academics rationalised their journey towards leadership. Participants talked about their experiences of entering the workplace, gaining promotions, building networks, facing work-family conflicts, encountering gender stereotypes, refusing to pursue leadership and balancing teaching and research. The second narrative focused on how women academics viewed being a leader and developing their understanding of leadership. A difference from the first narrative was that the participants had, at this stage, already learnt from previous experiences of their journey towards leadership, which meant they proactively mobilised resources and power to construct their leadership. Nevertheless, they still faced issues such as gender discrimination and a failure to become a role model. The third narrative related to some participants choosing to leave a leadership position. For some, leaving the leadership track was temporary, whereas others decided to opt out altogether. And participants' information will be provided selectively based

on the context of each story, during the analysing process. In the sections above, I have discussed the co-constructive nature of the data analysis process, indicating my own active role in the process. In what follows I reflect on my position as the researcher in more detail.

3.8 The position of the researcher

As the author of this qualitative research, I bring my own insight into the process of conducting the research, which has helped me to develop a richer understanding of a complex phenomenon (Malterud, 2001). I am female, Chinese, 27 years old, with an undergraduate degree from a Chinese university and a postgraduate education at a UK university. Following social constructionism, which argues that the researcher should be engaged in the research, I need to 're-vision' the materials collected to understand the process of how women rationalise their leadership journey (Butler-Kisber, 2018). From a feminist position, I aimed to provide opportunities to convey Chinese women academics' voice, in the hope of making changes to their lived experience (Leavy, 2007). Moreover, as qualitative research is interpretive research, I was involved in close communication with participants (Locke *et al*., 2013), with the aim of understanding their attitudes and behaviour (Creswell, 2017). Furthermore, as a researcher adopting narrative inquiry, I situated myself in this work as a co-constructor, interacting with the participants to explore related stories and creating a revised narrative of those stories by combining evidence from different organisations in order to achieve a new understanding of organisational life (Crotty, 1998).

It is important to state, however, that, as the researcher, I have not intended to distort the participants' construction of reality based on my own reality (Young and Collin, 2004). A researcher should avoid actively searching for evidence to support their own thinking because they hold certain opinions (Creswell, 2017). All findings should be developed based on the participants' stories and be situated in their personal social and cultural context, and this should be reflected throughout the process of the research

design. During the research process, I generally found my youth and lack of work experience to be a 'double-edged sword', since the participants were all older than me and had much working experience. The advantage was that I was younger than the participants, which balanced the power relations between us, creating a relaxed atmosphere that facilitated the collection of rich data (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2019). Considering I had no working experience in Chinese universities, I had to avoid becoming biased and imposing my own opinions on participants during the interviews (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2019). There was also the disadvantage, from the participants' perspective, of whether I was able to completely understand their interpretations and represent their voice fairly. This concern was alleviated by the posing of follow-up questions starting with "how" and "why", as mentioned previously, to strive for a more detailed, and clearer, understanding of participants' stories (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2019).

3.9 Ethical considerations

Ethical issues are of key concern when undertaking qualitative research (Cohen *et al.*, 2011) and they occur throughout all phases of the research process, from research design, data collection and data analysis, to publication of the study's findings (Creswell, 2013). To mitigate against any harm to research participants, the ethical guidelines of the University of Glasgow were adhered to, and these included caring for interviewees' feelings, obtaining informed consent, anonymisation and confidentiality. These measures aim to decrease potential risks, gain the participants' trust and protect data privacy.

After receiving review comments from the Ethical Review Committee, some adjustments were made to ensure compliance with all ethical rules. Firstly, interview questions were modified to avoid asking sensitive questions and making judgements, in order to reduce the risk of causing distress to the participants (Mason, 2010). Furthermore, I continually observed the participants' posture and reactions during the interview process, allowing me to provide immediate care and concern when required

(Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2019). Secondly, all participants were provided with an informed consent form prior to the interviews, both accompanying the email with the invitation letter, and at the start of each face-to-face interview. Participants' right to refuse to answer questions, to withdraw from the interview and to expect anonymity were all emphasised (Silverman, 2000). To show my full respect for participants, I was careful to use an appropriate attitude and appropriate language during the interview. In addition, contact information for complaints was included on the consent form.

Anonymity and confidentiality are of the highest concern when undertaking qualitative in-depth interviews. Participants received a guarantee that their name, university and location would not be divulged, with all such data being treated as confidential. This was achieved by using pseudonyms for participants, which is the primary means by which anonymisation is achieved (Wiles, 2013). Chinese names were randomly selected for each participant, with no influence from their personal character or the information that they provided, to further reduce the risk of breaching confidentiality for participants (Iphofen, 2009). Comments made by participants about their individual story, or comments about their workplace or society, which might have revealed their identity, might have exposed them to reputational harm, potentially even having a negative influence on their career development.

The interviews were conducted in Chinese, so the need for translation and transcription might have posed problems in terms of data confidentiality. For this reason, I chose to transcribe and translate the interviews myself, rather than use a commercial firm. Participants were given the option of checking the recording and transcription of their interview. Once transcribed, all data were stored in password-protected files that only I could access and they were only used for the purpose for which they were intended. These measures were explained to participants as part of the process of obtaining informed consent, in compliance with the ethical requirements of the University of Glasgow. The potential advantages for participants of taking part in the research were presented, *i.e.* that it could be beneficial for them to review and reflect on the career

development process, that they could gain insights into the challenges met and the support they had received, and that they could inspire a new generation of women to pass through the leadership labyrinth. Given the above, this thesis adhered to an ethical framework throughout the research process.

3.10 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness relates to the ability of the qualitative researcher to convince others that conclusions from the research are rigorous and worthy (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). It refers to the quality of the research in terms of confidence in the data, the interpretation processes and the frameworks used (Polit and Beck, 2014). Trustworthiness can be measured by the credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability of the research, which demonstrate its value (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Since each method of research requires a different approach, however, different criteria should be used to judge the quality of research (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2019). I will now focus on discussing credibility and confirmability, to argue for the trustworthiness of the current research.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that credibility and confirmability refer to the degree of truth and neutrality of findings. I contend that the scope of the discussion should be expanded to the whole research design process, to include the underlying theories, the interviewing process, data analysis and presentation. Firstly, the theories on which this thesis draws are explained in detail, including the theories of gender and gendered organisation. There has also been a discussion of the conceptual framework that women navigate the leadership labyrinth and they can construct the leadership web. The theory base allows the reader to better understand the context of the data and to make a confident judgement as to confirmability. Secondly, credibility is achieved by: drawing on an appropriate and aligned research philosophy; constructing interview guidelines and ensuring questions are asked in a way which avoids over-influence by the researcher; recording interviewees' experiences in as much detail as possible; inviting

participants to check the records made of their interview, to reduce bias; my reflecting on, and continually improving, my ability to conduct interviews.

The whole process of conducting the research is transparent, including how the research questions were formed, how participants were selected, how the data were collected and analysed, and the researcher's reflections on each step (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2019). These aspects all aim to increase the credibility of the research. This thesis also uses devices such as a career stories table, to increase the transparency of the data collection and analysis process. The use of tables facilitates the presentation of theoretical insights and research findings in a clear and convincing way (Cloutier and Ravasi, 2021).

3.11 Chapter summary

This chapter has outlined the research philosophy, and the design, of the thesis. A detailed explanation has been given of the procedures of data collection and analysis in a narrative approach. The semi-structured interview method was adopted for the collection of participants' leadership stories in the context of Chinese universities, providing a means to obtain holistic and detailed narrative material. The resulting qualitative data were analysed, before the research process followed the general procedure of narrative analysis described by Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2019). This led to the data being organised as a number of 'events', then as 'stories', and then in the form of three overarching 'narratives'. The whole process reflected the researcher's position in this thesis as a co-constructor of narrative, through exploring women academics' leadership trajectory through dynamic and feminist perspectives, in order to rationalise their organisational life.

The following chapter presents and interprets the findings of the research, based on the research questions. Drawing on the metaphor of the leadership labyrinth discussed during the theoretical framing of the thesis, the findings are presented in three chapters, which provide a narrative of participants' experiences: navigating the winding path

towards leadership, learning while in the centre of the labyrinth and leaving a leadership position.

Chapter Four: Narrative one: Navigating the winding path towards leadership

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the women's journeys towards the centre of the leadership labyrinth through a composition of seven stories. Participants start their academic careers because, as the first story conveys, 1) 'the university is a good workplace for women'. However, they gradually realize that the career path is full of twists and turns. Secondly, they believe the 2) 'research promotion system is fair' for women, however, there is also often a 'but' to express some reservations. Additionally, find themselves excluded from informal social networking, because they 3) 'have no chance to establish guanxi (a Chinese term) in the workplace'. During their daily life, they are 4) 'exhausted to make choices between work and family', as the support policies by universities do not work well. They also face gendered stereotypes and discrimination on this journey, as they are told that 5) 'women's tears' is helpful at work, and as they are evaluated as 'beautiful or not' in the workplace, in other words, being judged by feminine behaviour and appearance rather than professional ability. Based on their views of leadership and barriers they faced, some of them lose the motivation of continually navigating the labyrinth and therefore choose to 6) 'give up the path to leadership'. They assert that there is something more important than pursuing leadership, such as 7) 'teaching students to achieve self-worth'. Each section that follows discusses one of these stories; and in each story, the participants' information will be provided differently based on context of story.

4.2 'The university is a good workplace for women': Gendered characteristics of work in higher educations

When talking about the reasons for working in higher educations, some participants

said they were influenced by their parents who were also academics, while other participants said research was their interest, or they enjoyed teaching and helping students. Despite those reasons that related with individual interests, while some participants who considered the job suitable for women because it allowed them to care for their family:

> *I think the university is a good place to work for women, because we can have time to take care of families, it is not as busy as working in a company. (Fanxiang, 53, 32-year career)*

> *I think a university is a good place to work for women compared with other industries. For example, if a woman worker wants to ask for leave if a child is sick, the university will be more understanding and allow them to leave. (Yunqing, 48, 27-year career)*

As further accounts by research participants demonstrated, the flexible working time and the friendly working environment in universities was seen as allowing women to spend more time caring for family, which was the most important reason they chose to work in universities. The participants were primarily concerned about whether they would have time to take care of the family when they considered if the job was suitable/unsuitable for them. This is a consequence of a gendered division of labor, that leaves it to women to take greater responsibility for family duties even when they have a professional identity (Acker, 1990). For those participants, academia was favourable for women because of an 'understanding' that women need to care for their family.

However, as demonstrated by Hanmei below, women could also be discriminated against in this workplace because of caring for children:

> *There is a woman professor in our sector who likes posting her cooking photos on a social networking site, and therefore was being called 'Professor mum' by male colleagues. I remember on one occasion when we held a meeting and all people had to hand over their phones, that the professor called her son and said: 'Mum cannot get back home to cook lunch today, you can go and buy something to eat.' Then all the male colleagues laughed because they thought that the woman*

professor was not as professional as them. (Hanmei, 38, 11-year career)

This story challenged the wholesale argument that university are good workplaces to work for women, through pointing out an example of biased perceptions and evaluations received by a female professor when she demonstrated caring behaviour for her family in the workplace. This points to a tension in this story, namely that although the job was perceived as suitable for women in that it offers opportunities for spending more time on childcare than other professions, there was also the possibility of being punished or being discriminated against for doing so. The women faced the contradiction that the gender they 'do' is a mismatch with the job. According to West and Zimmerman (1987), individuals are doing gender when they express and act their gender during the process of interactions, which are affected by cultural norms. In this story, the behaviour of caring for children is a form of women 'doing gender' in the workplace. And, jobs can be confirmed as gendered through scrutinizing job expectations (Nentwich and Kelan, 2014). The ideal worker in academia is still expected to be a male employee who focuses solely on producing research outcomes without interruptions to take care of family matters (Ollilainen, 2019). Thus, as the participants observed, because the job provided the convenience for women to do gender as a wife and mum due to being flexible, the job was understood as having feminine characteristics. Nevertheless, the implication was still that the job expectations related to masculine characteristics. Therefore, when women 'do gender' as a wife/mum there is a mismatch with the job expectation of 'doing gender' as a man, with possible ridicule as the result, such as the male colleagues' laughter in Hanmei's story.

This mismatch also challenged women at work, resulting in participants starting to question or disregard their gender:

> *In terms of gender, there are mostly men in my subject, which will cause some difficulties in informal communication with them. For example, there was one occasion when I went to a meeting hoping to learn more from other academics'*

experiences. But several of the female leaders disbanded after the end of the meeting and there was no way to gather a women's group. But men are different, they drink and eat after the meeting to develop their individual networking. At that time, I thought it would be nice if I were a man. (Pingchun, 59, 30-year career)

At work, I never treat myself as a woman but as a man; I cannot accept that other people place lighter demands of me because of my gender! (Jingzhu, 52, 28-year career)

What the references to 'being a man' in the workplace in these stories means should be considered. For Pingchun, 'being a man' meant having the freedom of developing networking, without worrying about whether people would criticise her for not being a decent woman when drinking and socializing with men. Meanwhile for Jingzhu, doing gender as a woman and being treated as a woman at work equaled suspicions about her limited ability;. It was common to refuse differential treatment when women were acting as conceptual men, in an attempt to prove that their gender identity was irrelevant to their professional abilities (Jorgenson, 2002). The findings showed that the women themselves were complicit in devaluing their gender at work, since the ideal worker is continually constructed in the image of 'competitive men' (Eagly and Carli, 2007). In sum, the job in universities did provide some opportunities that let women satisfy the social expectation of sacrificing their individual careers for the family as a wife/mum. Nevertheless, women were still required to satisfy the job expectation of 'working like a man', and therefore they attempted to disregard gender and avoided doing gender with feminine characteristics in the workplace. However, this kind of behaviour is not as effective as the women wished, as Xiwen pointed out:

Society doesn't evaluate women from a job perspectives but judges us first by our gender, such as saying 'women's character is ..... (Xiwen,51, 28-year career)

Consequently, even though the women tried to avoid doing gender as women in the workplace, their gender identity still overshadowed their professional identity. These stories illustrate that women in the workplace are still primarily defined and evaluated by their gender identity rather than their professional identity (Hatmaker, 2013). In sum,

participants believed that a university is a good workplace for women since it allows women to care for their family. But when women really do that, they are labeled as unprofessional in the workplace, and run the risk of discrimination. Therefore, the argument that the university is a good workplace for women should be examined critically, since there is a contradiction between their gender identity and professional identity. The reason is that women are required to 'do gender' based on the influence of social expectations as the ideal family carer, but this is mismatched with the job expectation of the ideal academic. It is difficult, often impossible, for them to coordinate these requirements, which complicates their path to leadership.

4.3 'The research promotion system is fair, but…': The perceived meritocracy of Chinese academia

As research ability is viewed as the most important skill for academics, research promotion that represents the level of academics' research ability is intensely competitive within universities. Additionally, a research title is closely related with further promotions to leadership positions (Jie, 2021). There are stated criteria which should be achieved to gain different levels of research titles, including research outputs, teaching performance, overseas exchange experiences, and administrative performance (Ye, 2021). Among those criteria, participants said that research outputs and teaching performance were the determining factors for career progression. After preparing enough research outputs and passing the teaching assessment based on the requirements of higher educations, the candidates can apply for research career progression. Applicants are submitted to an academic committee to be evaluated, and those who pass through this meritocratic model successfully can gain research titles. Most of the participants agreed that the research promotion system was fair for women, as exemplified by Langyue and Jingman:

> *I think China is a country with a relatively high level of gender equality. Our country's laws and the mainstream media are emphasising gender equality*

throughout the whole of society. And I think the research promotion process is fair, the universities won't judge academics' gender but focus more on research outputs and teaching performance. Both men and women can be promoted, there's no such issue as gender inequality thanks to this fair system (Langyue, Professor).

The research promotion system is relatively fair in the university. The requirements for promotion are public and are updated by the university every year; academics who have enough research outputs and suitable teaching performance can apply for promotion. And the selection process is transparent, academics give a presentation to report their achievements in front of academic committees at school-level and university-level. The academic committees consist of academics from different subjects, and the committee members are changed every four years (Jingman, Associate Professor).

Based on the quotes, two reasons for why the research promotion system was fair for women were presented. Firstly, women workers were protected by law, meaning academia could not use a discriminatory policy to limit women's advancement. Secondly, during the process of research promotion, the requirements were public, the process was transparent, and the members within the academic committee were randomly selected and rotating. The academic committee was composed of at least fifteen academic members with senior research titles drawn from various subjects and various universities, and the members were usually changed every four years (Ministry of Education, 2018). Therefore, the research promotion system is perceived as a meritocracy that enables the maintenance of transparency, uniform procedures, and monitoring across academia (Ledwith and Manfredi, 2000). Participants praised this meritocracy because they believed its only focus was evaluating academics' professional ability, which seemed to open up equal opportunities for women.

However, after participants praised the promotion system as fair, they often followed with a '*but*' to mention influencing factors that contradicted the supposed fairness of a meritocratic system. The issues raised revolved around public criteria, and the supposedly transparent process of selection and the academic committee, which illustrated that the research promotion system was not actually as fair as assumed.

The issue of public criteria of the research promotion system

Firstly, the participants queried the public requirements of research promotion, and argued that their gender did have a negative influence on reaching those requirements:

> *The requirement of the university is that all academics should aim to produce more academic research, the research outputs are the evidence of research abilities and a determining factor of research progression. The standards for research outputs for research promotion are the same for both men and women, but women always play multiple roles in reality, so it may be more difficult for us to advance. (Ailian, Professor)*

> *I think whether it is possible to get promoted depends on two questions: 1. Do women have the time and energy to do so many things to reach the criteria? 2. Do women want to do these things? (Jieying, Professor)*

Ailian emphasised women's multiple identities, that women were not only academics who focused on producing research outputs, but also mothers/wives/daughters with family obligations. As Jieying asked, women were faced with two issues related to research progression, they did not have enough time and energy to be perfect in all identities, and the pressures of multiple identities also reduced women's aspiration of promotion. Utilizing the same promotion requirements to evaluate men and women for research progression was questioned as failing to take women's multiple identities into account, particularly their higher family commitments (Reid, 2015). More specifically, some participants pointed out that among the multiple identities they held, the greatest conflict arose from the tension between an academic identity and a maternal identity:

> *The main thing is that I have a child who is very young and taking care of him takes up a large part of my time and energy. It is difficult to balance childcare and do research. Researching requires a lot of time and energy, people must put in effort to produce results. Because the intelligence of everyone as a researcher is almost the same, it depends on who is more willing to put in all the effort and time in academic research. (Shiyun, Associate Professor)*

> *It is said that I can be promoted as associate professor after three years, but I gave birth to a child during this period resulting in a lack of required research outputs. So, I was promoted after four years. In terms of gender, the university*

expects men and women to do the same things at the same time, which is a bit unrealistic for women considering time allocation issues. (Luqi, Associate Professor)

As participants said, pregnancy and caring for children took their time and energy which could have been spent on achieving more research outputs to get research promotions. Instead, greater pressure built up when they found they did not have as much time as their competitors to produce research outputs. With the gender asymmetries in duties of caring for family, women have less chance to compete with their male peers, since the meritocratic model effectively reinforces the advantage that men have over women (Knights and Richards, 2003). As a consequence, what women could do was to slow down the speed of producing research outputs to care for their children, and accept the condition that they failed to meet the requirements of the research promotion system, which then delayed their research promotions. As Shiyun said, some women were viewed as 'unwilling' to devote the effort and time to work, even though they simply have less time due to family commitments. The failure to attain research promotion, although a systemic issue, therefore transferred responsibility onto the individuals, since they did not reach the required standards.

Additionally, women had to face the risk that requirements may suddenly change, which increased the difficulty in meeting them:

The university often adjust the research promotion criteria. It is the academic committee and the leadership group which make the decisions together; generally the adjustments are made every 3-5 years. In the year of my application for associate professor, the required number of publications was suddenly raised. Fortunately, I had accumulated a lot of academic achievements in the past few years, so I was finally successful in gaining the research title. But many old teachers failed to get promoted because of the reformed criteria. Originally, they met the requirements before the revision, but the criteria suddenly became more difficult to satisfy and the research title was then out of reach for them. (Luqi, Associate Professor)

I tried three times to finally gain the research promotion; it was very embarrassing because I have inadequate research outputs to match the suddenly changed

criteria. The journal where I published my articles was lower ranked compared with the suddenly increased requirements. But I was very optimistic having fully prepared at the third try and I finally got the title of professor. (Haiqing, Professor)

Although the promotion system has been structured based on a specific policy at a country level, the university still have the authority to adjust the actual practice, for example, the number and quality of research outputs, the quotas of research titles, and the relative weighting of research and teaching performance, which was unexpected for individuals who prepared for research promotion. Therefore, they had to produce as much as possible in terms of research and teaching outputs to deal with the suddenly changed requirements and to avoid the failure of not being promoted. It also reflects the increasing competition within the universities within the context of a prestige economy (Howson *et al.*, 2018) – that universities want to improve their rankings through raising qualitative and quantitative requirements of research outputs. The higher requirements are added into research promotion systems, so that women who fail to reach the revised standards are evaluated as lacking research abilities, again transferring the responsibility of failure to women as individuals. The meritocracy in academia is maintained and reinforced under this trend, it was more difficult for women to move forward within the 'meritocratic' leadership labyrinth, since the unexpectedly changing rules shifted the walls of the labyrinth and made the women face new, suddenly erected barriers.

However, there were some participants who benefited from the changed promotion requirements:

I had accumulated a lot of academic research outputs during my PhD and post-doctoral period. I also did the teaching curriculum reform before this, but I hadn't expected that this teaching performance would help me to gain the research promotion. But with the revised research promotion criteria, my research outputs plus this teaching performance helped me gain the title of professor. (Jieying, Professor)

Jieying said she gained research promotion because of revised requirements, which

demonstrated that policy adjustments were not always negative. It reflects the possibilities that sometimes the walls of the labyrinth can also move in some women's favor, helping them to walk towards the centre. And people who benefited from this meritocratic selection system would in turn reinforce the predominance of it, as their success 'proved' that once women worked hard to reach the requirements, they were promoted without any issue relating to their gender. Therefore, the belief individuals have in meritocracy strengthens the operation of this system and becomes a significant feature of it (Sliwa and Johansson, 2014). Moreover, the successful examples of some women in the promotion system would exacerbate the anxiety of and pressure on women who failed to cope with the changed situation, with most of them attributing the failure to themselves as incapable individuals rather than questioning the fairness of the meritocracy.

The issue of the selection process and the academic committee

Secondly, participants queried the transparency of the selection process and the impartiality of the academic committee, arguing that job seniority and guanxi decreased the fairness of the research promotion system:

> *I think the research promotion system is quite fair in universities, if you prepare enough outputs that meet with the requirements you can be promoted. But if there are two competitors who have the same outputs, job seniority and guanxi play an important role in the decision whether you can be promoted successfully. (Hanmei, Associate Professor)*

> *Generally, academics can apply for research promotion when they have worked five years. I failed to apply for promotion as associate professor the first time, because there were many old teachers who were queuing up to apply and they had longer job seniority than me. Considering the quota of research promotion is limited every year, universities would definitely give preference to those old teachers rather than me. (Xiatong, Professor)*

> *This is a society that advocates a culture of bureaucracy, the criteria for promotion are adjusted by the leaders, and the members of the academic committee are invited by the leaders. It is hard to say that members won't be influenced by opinions from the leaders. The leaders have the authority to promote*

the people they prefer, therefore, under the conditions where all else is equal, people who have developed a good guanxi with the leaders are more likely to be promoted successfully. Thus, what I can do is improve myself through working harder to meet the requirements. (Anping, Associate Professor)

As the quotes show, there were unwritten rules existing behind the ostensibly transparent and impartial research promotion system. As for job seniority, the participants explained that the Chinese traditional culture educates people to respect the older teachers with longer service periods than themselves, and this culture also reflected in the process of promotion. It showed that the research promotion system is not only dependent on professional ability as previous argued, but the limited quotas of promotions provided by higher educations resulted in academics having to queue up to take part in the competition. While waiting, they needed to face the risk of having to give way to academics who had longer job seniority, which is not written in the rules of the promotion system but is an attitude which is widely accepted in higher educations. Moreover, participants introduced guanxi as a derogatory term that decreased the fairness of promotion systems, since they used guanxi within the context of a 'conflict of interest' situation, saying that personal relationships between candidates for promotion and judges of the academic committee compromised the fairness of the competition. As participants pointed out, the members of the academic committee may have a preference, or they may obey their leaders' preferences, to promote people who maintain a good guanxi with them or leaders during the selection process. Even though the participants did not mention gender differences when telling stories of guanxi, it emerged that women have a limited guanxi web compared with men due to the structural and cultural context (Aaltio and Huang, 2018), which will be discussed in detail in section 4.4 on social networking.

In sum, even though most participants argued that the research promotion system is fair for women, the potential flaws were still shown in their follow-up stories as shown above. Therefore, the research promotion system as a meritocracy was not as fair as the participants initially argued, since it is not only dependent on professional ability but is

also influenced by other factors (Sealy, 2010). Nor is it gender neutral, but rather underpinned by masculinist principles to gaining promotion (Knights and Richards, 2003). Since the meritocracy is constructed based on the male definition of success, the competitive mechanism it values in turn reinforces the dominance of the masculine approach to career success (Knights and Richards, 2003). However, its universal acceptance by society makes women who fail in this meritocratic model transfer the responsibility to themselves, including making them believe that they are less competent.

Strategies to win in the research promotion system

In order to successfully gain research titles in the promotion process, participants utilized various strategies including working hard, gaining support both from within the workplace and outside it, and using supporting policies the country provided.

Firstly, most participants chose to work hard to meet the high requirements for promotion:

> *It is useless to envy or complain about people who use other methods rather than professional ability to achieve quick promotion. I believe that as long as you make research achievements by yourself you can also have the opportunity for promotion. So, I think we still need to look at the bright side of society; that is, I believe that as long as we work hard there are still opportunities. (Xiatong, Professor)*

Like Xiatong, many participants believed that working hard to reach the requirements had helped them advance through the research promotion system. There is something appealing about the meritocratic model, that individual ability and efforts are viewed as the key factors to be measured (Allen, 2011). Based on this perspective, the value of meritocracy cannot be ignored as it encourages women and motivates them to improve their professional abilities and strive for leadership.

Simultaneously, participants also talked about the formal and informal support gained

during applying for promotion. It included support from supervisors, colleagues, and families:

> *My research team and especially my supervisor helped me a lot in the process of research progression. My [male] supervisor guided me to complete the accumulation of academic achievements as soon as possible, for example, advising on the topic selection and how to prepare the research publications (Luqi, Associate Professor)*

> *What impressed me most was the help from my colleagues. They gave me a lot of advice based on their own experience of gaining research titles, such as how to build a research team and how to teach students. And my family helped me a lot, especially my husband. My husband always takes equal responsibility in looking after our child rather than disappearing, in order to let me concentrate on writing research papers. (Shiyun, Associate Professor)*

As previously mentioned, guanxi had been interpreted as a negative term that damaged the fairness of research progression, but here, in the discussion of winning strategies, perceptions changed and it became a positive factor that supported participants on their path to promotion. Participants' good relationships with supervisors, colleagues, and family members, facilitated them in preparing for research promotion. However, women mentioned less support from their upward networking – their relationships with key decision makers (for example members or leaders of the academic committee) in the research promotion system. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, women have less access to links with the decision makers (usually are men) since the members of the academic committee are selected randomly, to maintain the fairness of this meritocracy. The second reason is that upward networking is viewed as 'cheating' and this is when guanxi becomes a derogatory term, being seen to damage the meritocratic values of individual ability and effort.

Moreover, participants talked about the how to use supporting policies at both university and national level to win in the research promotion system:

> *...the help from national and higher educational research fund projects, there is*

an age limit for academics who apply for the research fund projects, but the age limit for women is higher than men. This supporting policy gives women scholars more opportunities. And this kind of research project is very helpful for research promotion. (Jingman, Associate Professor)

For example, the age limit of some youth research fund projects will be more beneficial to women. The age limit for women is 40 years old, and the age limit for men is under 35 years old, therefore women academics have more time and opportunities to apply for research fund projects. (Shiyun, Associate Professor)

As illustrated above, the national research fund projects were an important research achievement during research progression. Considering that women may get pregnant during the process of applying national research fund projects, the government raised the age limit for women to 40 years, while men's age limit remained under 35 years old. These kinds of support policies won high praise from all participants, since it considered the gender difference between men and women. This kind of attention to women and their circumstances immediately compensated in part for the disadvantage that meritocracy brings; however, it is not enough to ensure fairness.

Based on the effectiveness of the support policies from universities and at national level, participants also advocated for universities' need to adjust the system to become more women friendly:

I think the current promotion standards in universities are unreasonable. It seems unfair to use the same scale to measure women and men's ability, but in turn it seems unfair again to not use the same scale. (Luqi, Associate Professor)

I hope higher educations can reduce the requirements of work assessments when women are breastfeeding. In fact, when I consider it from the higher educations' perspective, I understand that universities also find it very hard to make decisions about establishing a fair and reasonable research promotion system. It is difficult to achieve gender equality, so women must learn to accept those requirements and change themselves. (Shiyun, Associate Professor)

I hope the universities perfect the promotion system and quarterly performance evaluation, so that women have less pressures from work and family. (Yaqin, Professor)

As demonstrated in the quotes, participants mainly hoped that the setting of requirements for promotion would take women's specific circumstances into account, but they also worried that it might damage the fairness of the meritocracy. Specifically, they wished higher educations to increase the flexibility of requirements based on people's different abilities and adjust the requirements with consideration to the work-family conflict that all women academics faced. Meanwhile, participants also evaluated their suggestions from the universities' perspective, and expressed their understanding that universities also face this dilemma of how to establish a fair research promotion system. Finally, they accepted the meritocratic model and pressured themselves to adapt or change, which again placed the responsibility on the individual.

In conclusion, even though most participants claimed that the research progression system in higher educations was quite fair, there were still influencing factors that challenged the perceptions of fairness. Through the querying of promotion requirements, the selection process and the academic committee, it has been found that women have to make more effort and experience more pressures than men to accelerate their research outputs to prove their working abilities. Even though the support from universities have significantly helped women academics, it is still not enough to solve the women's dilemma within the structure of the meritocracy. Moreover, it is difficult for women to reassess the 'fair' meritocracy, since it always emphasises using individual ability and efforts which seems like 'gender neutral' (Sliwa and Johansson, 2014). Thus, women usually take responsibility for their failure in research progression and blame themselves as being less competent and incapable, while the examples of success accelerate their belief in meritocratic model. The research promotion system as a meritocracy which claims to make the labyrinth clear, can however make things more difficult since the barriers in it are not necessarily visible. Finally, women who navigate the labyrinth find that while meritocracy seems to guide their path towards leadership it makes the walls more complex and deceptive, and makes it that much harder to identify the correct direction.

4.4 'Women have no chance to establish guanxi in the workplace': How women are excluded from informal social networking

When asked about how they develop social networking for career development, most participants argued they barely have access to develop social networking even though they knew it was a key factor for gaining promotion. The Chinese term '*guanxi*' was frequently mentioned by participants, a term which could be loosely translated as connection, social networking or special interpersonal relationship (Aaltio and Huang, 2018). As Barbalet (2021) argues, the meaning of guanxi should be interpreted based on the cultural context of China and the specific operating situation. So, in this section, based on participants' interpretations, guanxi mainly refers to informal social networking that people develop for getting promotion oppertunities.

Participants' perceptions of guanxi

When participants talked about how to establish guanxi the first thing on their mind was the way it was typically used by the 'old boys' club' between men, including drinking and eating:

> *I and my women colleagues find that women and men are different in developing guanxi. For example, when women get together, we usually chat and drink tea, while men prefer to drink, eat and go out to karaoke. To be honest, it is very painful for women to attend a men's drinking party. But sometimes I cannot refuse to attend if the leaders ask me to participate. I remember once the president joked that if he did not go to drinking with others to maintain guanxi there would be no research projects for our university at all. (Haiqing, 47, Professor)*

> *China is a society that is constructed by intricate guanxi, and the completion of many things depends on guanxi and exercising favors. But because I did not attend the entertainment such as drinking, eating, and playing poker, which are ways to establish guanxi, or what I call effective social networks, then I did not have the opportunity to access useful information or recommendations for promotion. (Xiwen, 51, Professor)*

According to the participants above guanxi was mainly established, maintained and enhanced by drinking, eating or other entertainment activities, and guanxi was important for acquiring professional information. It reveals that guanxi is male-centred (Tang, 2020), since effective informal networking is developed through those masculine activities. Drinking and eating are the traditional approaches to establish guanxi in China, and those who want to build guanxi participate in entertainment actives that take place outside the workplace to express the importance they attach to establishing relationships with favor providers (Cooke and Xiao, 2014). During eating and drinking, the distance between guanxi participants is generally smaller and the degree of trust is increased, meaning a personal relationship is established. For example, drinking alcohol is a typical ritual for maintaining guanxi at a dinner, where the 'guanxi seekers' frequently offer toasts to the 'guanxi providers' (Tang, 2020, p.191) to show their respect and appreciation. However, participants described their experiences of attending those informal networking activities as 'painful' and refused to join in again. The result was that women continually had fewer opportunities than men to establish guanxi, since they were excluded and self-excluded by the typical masculine actives of drinking and eating. There are gender differences in building guanxi as guanxi is a male-dominated social domain based on gendered social capital that fewer women can accumulate (Liu, 2007).

The importance of building guanxi

A participant explained reasons why establishing guanxi was important in the workplace:

> *For example, if you want to do well in an administrative job it is not enough to have working ability alone, you also need to have good communication skills and tacit cooperation with leaders. But how do you establish a closer guanxi with leaders? It is easier for men as they follow leaders and go outside the workplace to yingchou [work-related social activities], like eating or drinking. During this process men practise deep communication with leaders and leaders became more familiar with them, so then they have more opportunities to get promoted. However, women have no chance to establish guanxi like this in the workplace.*

(Fanxiang,53, Associate Professor)

Fanxiang emphasised that professional ability was not the only criterion for getting promoted in the workplace, as maintaining upward networking with leaders also mattered. She also pointed out that men found it easier than women to establish guanxi with their leaders, through accompanying leaders to attend social activities. Hence, guanxi is not just a personal relationship but also a vertical hierarchical relationship as guanxi seekers develop upward networking with providers at a higher level. This vertical hierarchical relationship is important in the workplace as it brings support, advice and key career-related information (Ozkazanc-Pan and Clark Muntean, 2018). However, as discussed above, since women resist attending these masculine activities, their approach to the development of upward networking is limited. Considering that most leadership positions are still occupied by men, women are harder to become familiar with leaders as men do, and therefore are less likely to make close guanxi with leaders (Barbalet, 2021). Therefore, they lose the opportunity to show personal ability and to do self-promotion.

Another participant, Jieying, illustrated how vertical hierarchical guanxi can be used inappropriately, thus undermining fairness in the workplace:

> *Once, I wanted to recruit an assistant to help me in writing reports and other things. I found an appropriate person, but my leader refused my proposal and arranged for an old male teacher who was almost retired to be my assistant. That old male teacher can not help me at all, he was there because he was a member of the leader's guanxi web, and the leader trusted him. So, I finally understood that when my leader selects people to promote, the most important criterion is whether this person is in his guanxi web in the workplace, rather than their professional ability. (Jieying, 42, Professor)*

Here, Jieying illustrated that guanxi supported unqualified people in getting opportunities and, at the same time, the leader as the favor provider also benefited from the guanxi-seeker's loyalty. Here, guanxi is not just a personal relationship but an exchange of favors with the expectation of a benefit in return (Barbalet, 2021). This

sheds light on why participants mentioned guanxi when questioning the fairness of the research promotion system in section 4.3. In most cases, the use of guanxi cannot disregard favor seekers' professional ability, because favor providers also take the risk of tarnishing their own reputation if the favor seekers they promote are incompetent (Wang, 2020). Under this condition, people who are insufficiently qualified for promotion may use the method of bribing to ask support from favor providers. Therefore, guanxi is interpreted as a derogatory term in in this case (Barbalet, 2021). This story implies that the phenomenon of relying on guanxi to be promoted still exists, and significantly damages the fairness of the promotion system. Moreover, it results in increased gender inequality in the workplace, since men rather than women have more opportunities to establish guanxi and use it. It is a telling example of how a seemingly meritocratic system silently works in favour of a particular group.

However, most participants highlighted that this unfair phenomenon had become less frequent since China published a policy that banned work-related social activities such as drinking or eating in order to fight corruption, bribery and malpractice:

> *But times have changed, and things like socializing, such as drinking or eating after work, are happening less than before, since the country implemented the policy 'Eight regulations in the workplace' in 2013. It is fairer for women now, with practices such as public recruitment, which allows women to have the same job opportunities as men. (Fanxiang, 53, Associate Professor)*

> *In terms of applying for research projects, I need to establish guanxi which means I need to go out to socialize with others, for example participating in drinking, eating or other entertainment activities. You know that socializing is the strength of men, so women are at a disadvantage in building guanxi. However, with the implementation of policies from the country's government to cancel yingchou in the workplace, research project applications have become much fairer than before and have been gradually standardised. (Shuyao, 46, Associate Professor)*

In 2013, the government issued 'Eight regulations' to combat corruption in the workplace, and one of these policies prohibited work-related social activities, which gave a direct and significant blow to the 'old boys' club'. Even now the establishment

and maintenance of guanxi still relies on masculine activities, but compared with previously the situation of women has improved. The old boys' club still exists but the size has become gradually smaller. Additionally, key information has become more public than previously as the promotion procedures are gradually becoming more transparent. All these changes provide a fairer workplace that offers more opportunities for women who cannot participate in masculine activities to establish guanxi. But it also means that the 'old boys' club' in the workplace has become more covert, and it is more difficult for women to get access to it.

Reasons for women rarely building guanxi

After identifying gender differences in building guanxi, the reasons why building guanxi was hard for women were illustrated by participants:

> *The heads of many departments are men. It is very convenient for them to go outside the workplace to eat, drink and play after work, but I never liked to do this kind of thing. I have to go home and take care of my children, so I don't have the time to do 'effective social networking' even though I know it would be good for my promotion prospects. (Xiwen, 51, Professor)*

> *How inappropriate if a woman is drinking! If a woman participates in men's entertainment activities, she will be criticised as an indecent woman who does not conform to women's morals as required by society, and there will be gossip attacking her endlessly. Especially when a woman goes to establish guanxi with someone who has more power to help her advance, then there will be rumors spread about her and this may make women give up their pursuit. (Fanxiang, 53, Associate Professor)*

Apart from the reason that participants were disgusted with the drinking and eating which are masculine activities, they also showed two other reasons why it was difficult for women to build guanxi: disproportionate domestic duties and gender stereotypes. The first reason was that women took more domestic responsibility in caring for their children after work. Networking events held after work prolonged the working day, which was at odds with the family and childcare obligations that women take on (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Greguletz *et al.*, 2019). Meanwhile, men can concentrate on

developing their guanxi through delegating domestic duties to their wives or other women in the family, which reinforces women's lack of access to guanxi relationships. The second reason participants stated was that women who attended networking activities and did upward networking would be criticised as violating the socially required 'women's morality'. In Chinese traditional culture, a woman should behave properly, which includes no smoking or drinking; therefore, women who do those things will not measure up to the social expectation of being a proper woman (Hermalin and Lowry, 2012). Attending those masculine activities puts women at risk of sexual gossip, attracting rumors and conjectures which might damage their reputations (Tang, 2020). It has been shown that when individuals fail to satisfy the social gender expectations, in other words, when they are not doing gender appropriately (West and Zimmerman, 1987), they will be punished by experiencing sanctioning, ostracism and harassment (Heilman *et al*., 2004). Additionally, related with the first reason above, there is a gender expectation on Chinese women that they have to spend their time and energy on family, which limits their ability to establish and maintain guanxi (Woodhams *et al.*, 2015).

Guanxi within women-only groups

Based on the above analysis, women found it was harder to build guanxi than men, but it does not mean that they did not build guanxi at all. Participants shared their ways to establish guanxi that were different from men's:

> *I think women's social networking is purer, that it focuses more on friendship rather than being driven by utilitarian motives. We [between women] also share and exchange information, but the relationship that is like brotherhood between men is rarely produced among women. I also usually communicate and build guanxi with women academics in other universities, because we have similar research interests and usually attend research activities together. Women's topics of communication are just limited in the research sphere and children, rather than promotion things in the workplace. But men group, they usually interests in exchanging information of promotion, which may be a huge difference between women's and men's ways in building guanxi. I observed that men like to expand their guanxi web through making more private relationships with other work*

partners with the utilitarian aims, which women rarely do. (Yingzhen, 49, Professor)

It is rare to see an official 'only women group' in the workplace, but we [women workers] do have workplace friendship networking. For example, women in the choir and Yoga association in our university usually have communal meals. But the topics of women's groups are restricted to life such as children and research interests, few people talk about workplace-related affairs. I remember there was an office where all the teachers were women, we sometimes also shared some information or chatted with others, but the communication was not about the workplace. (Letian, 50, Lecturer)

As seen above, women also developed social networking but mostly with other women rather than men, and women's networking usually talked about research interest and family things, but avoided talk about promotion affairs in the workplace. There was a key feature of women's social networking. They preferred to establish guanxi from a friendship perspective rather than as a utilitarian aim, which was showed from the topics they usually communicated with each other. Instead of mixing promotion and personal relationships like men usually did, these participants preferred to enjoy purer friendships in the workplace rather than include exchanging benefits into guanxi. These participants focused more on gaining a sense of emotional support in their relationship, rather than considering the instrumental worth of guanxi (Ibarra, 1992). Also, participants' resistance to bring ulterior aims into process of building guanxi, may result from that they avoid experiencing the sense of moral dirtiness (Casciaro *et al.*, 2014). Viewing guanxi as an instrument that uses others to get benefits rather than gaining true friendship may cause their behaviour to appear insincere and obnoxious (Kuwabara *et al.*, 2018). While those kinds of workplace friendships with other women may reduce feelings of isolation in a male-dominated workplace (Wellington, 2001), but they are less likely to generate opportunities for women to receive career-related information, resources, and sponsorships (Zhu *et al*., 2015).

Women's guanxi with men in the workplace

Despite women usually being excluded from the 'old boys' club', there is a particular

situation where ‘leakers’ may sometimes share information with women. Jingman told a story about her male colleague sharing information with her:

> *I have a male colleague and I think he is my friend; we are closer than others because we entered into this university in the same year. He participates in the men-only group and seems familiar with everyone, and I know they often go out to drink and eat, and also share information about the workplace such as promotion, salary or other things. He sometimes shares the key information and resources for making money with me, such as recommending me to go outside the workplace to give lectures or consultancy to companies. I really appreciate that he shares this information and resources with me, because my guanxi web is very small and without him I wouldn’t know how to gain that information. (Jingman, 38, Associate Professor)*

It was interesting to see that Jingman was not entirely excluded from the ‘old boys’ club’ because of the existence of a ‘leaker’ within the men-only group. As she described, she had a male friend who was a member of the boys’ club, and he also shared his information and resources with her. It implies that it is important for women to also develop guanxi with men colleagues in the workplace, since the more powerful networks are usually dominated by men (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Even though it is hard for women to join in the old boys’ club, maintaining guanxi with ‘leakers’ help them to gain key information, which is a useful strategy for women in navigating the leadership labyrinth. It illustrates that compared to building guanxi with women, women gain more career advancement through establishing guanxi with men (Zhu *et al.*, 2015). Establishing guanxi with men better connects women with the information and resources they need in order to pursue leadership in the future (Seibert *et al.*, 2001). However, considering the gender stereotype of Chinese women, that they may be criticised as ‘indecent’ if they frequently network with other men, women may hesitate or abandon proactively building guanxi with men, and are therefore less likely to gain information from ‘leakers’.

Approaches that help women build guanxi

Participants also mentioned some other approaches that facilitated their development

of guanxi, such as attending academic conferences or activities that were organised by higher educations:

> *Participating in academic conferences is good for my research and socializing and has a positive impact on my career development. At conferences I meet people and exchange research interests with other academics, which inspires more research ideas. Also, I may get to know reviewers who will review my projects and articles in the future. If I make friends with those potential reviewers they may give me more guidance and suggestions about my papers. These are both important things for my academic career. And I remember that there was a China Computer Women Committee CCF (IT Women Elite Conference). At this conference, there were women academics from various universities sharing their experiences and thinking about scientific research and how to balance family and work. We also have a WeChat group [a social network app in China], it is very convenient for us to connect with each other and share information at any time. (Xiatong, 48, Professor)*

> *There is a 'support group' activity that is done by the university, which is not just for women but for all new young teachers. The aim of this activity is to encourage the old teachers who have abundant experience to help new teachers quickly adapt to the workplace and pass on their teaching experience. But I think this activity has a special meaning for women, because, to be honest, it is difficult for women to make friends or find a mentor in the workplace. We cannot develop our network as men usually do, so the establishment of a 'support group' can actually help young women gain more advice and guidance form the old teachers in the workplace. The university also holds activities like a 'women professors' party' on 8th March every year, which aims to help women academics to share their experience of work, life, pressures and other things. I think those activities are really good and make women academics feel a sense of belonging. These are activities where the university shows humanistic care for us. (Hanyu, 47, Professor)*

Accounts such as these showed that the participants developed their social networks through attending academic conferences and activities hold by Chinese higher educations. They build guanxi with academics from various organisations at a conference, including potential reviewers of articles that can provide suggestions to participants in the future, which was significant to participants' career advancement considering that research outputs are a key factor of career progression. Also, Chinese academia have gradually focused more on all-women academic groups in recent years,

with various activities held for women academics. Examples were the conference and activities mentioned above – 'IT women elite conference', 'women professors' party' and 'support group' activity – which provide oppertunities for women academics to share experiences and information, and help women expand their guanxi web. Those activities are viewed as partially breaking the boundary between women and the 'old boys' club', as powerful people can take the first step to reach out to women who need support and establish a guanxi web (Greguletz *et al.*, 2019). As well as having a 'pull effect', those activities tailored towards women can create a 'push effect' encouraging women to maintain guanxi with mentors and other potential favor providers (Greguletz *et al.*, 2019). In summary, these approaches help women develop their social networks, and receive more encouragement, acceptance and guidance in the workplace. It illustrates that maintaining good guanxi relationships promises more confidence and speedier promotions for women, which is beneficial for them in passing through the labyrinth, as will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

However, there were some participants who pointed out the weaknesses of those approaches:

> *Yes, I admit that the 'support group 'activities in our university are very meaningful for new teachers, but the current method of performance appraisal limits the effectiveness of this activity. If the old teacher wants to help the new teacher, they have to spend lots of time and energy that could be used in their own research and teaching. The issue is the university is still focusing on research outputs and teaching performance when it evaluates academics' professional ability, rather than considering the sacrifice that the old teacher makes for helping new teachers. Without official encouragement and support, old teachers may lose their interest and motivation to help new teachers. (Qiaoyue, 58, Professor)*

> *I think the 'women professor party' is a formality, people were not really sincere in discussing the issues women academics face now, and some problems cannot be simply explained by gender discrimination or other reasons. And just discussing or sharing women's experiences is useless, because there is no change at all after those activities finish. (Jieying, 42, Professor)*

Differing from the praise above, participants here pointed out that those approaches are

not as effective as might be expected, due to how universities are structured, and what their performance criteria are. The 'support group' activities suggested that old teachers sacrifice their time and energy to help new teachers but ignored the already existing pressure on old teachers. Universities need to consider the old teachers' needs and offer appropriate awards to continually uphold those goodwill activities. As for the 'women professor party', a small number of participants argued it was useless since the condition of women academics do not improve through holding such an event. It is commendable that universities notice the issues of lacking connections of women academics and that they encourage women to share their experiences with each other by holding those activities. However, participants' critical comments of those activities reflect that higher educationss need to do more to support women through solving the systemic problems rather than offering piecemeal 'solutions' like events.

In conclusion, women find it harder to build guanxi in the workplace than men, which results in them having less access to the key information and resources related to career advancement. Under the masculine discourse and practice the main way of establishing guanxi was still a typical masculine approach such as drinking and eating, which continually excluded women. Even this situation have changed since the country applied the 'Eight regulations', which have a ban against the size of the boys' club thus facilitating women who have less guanxi. But participants' development of guanxi still were limited by domestic duties and gender stereotypes. Specifically, women were expected to be conscientious mothers/wives rather than drinkers or party goers that were keen on social networking. But women were not completely unsocialized at all, rather, they prefer to establish guanxi with other women to gain friendship, and sometimes they also gained key information and resources from the 'leakers' within the boys' club. Attending academic conferences and activities universities hold for women were also evaluated as efficiency but not enough. In sum, participants' establishment and development of guanxi help them gain guidance in how to navigate the labyrinth; however, they also need to be careful to control the utilization of guanxi to protect themselves and stay away from the traps within the labyrinth.

4.5 'I am exhausted choosing between work and family': Managing work-family tensions

It is widely identified that the most common obstacle that working women face is the conflict between family and work responsibilities (Padavic *et al.*, 2020). As regards family, there is a perception that women are required to spend more time than men to perform the role of good wives and mothers (Onsongo, 2006). Meanwhile in the workplace, women need to do long hours and always be available for work to perform the role of the ideal worker (Acker, 1990). Therefore, according to the research on work and family, conflict between work and family mainly centres on distributions of time and energy (Eagly and Carli, 2007). But behind the time and energy conflict, there is an increasing identity incongruity as workers and wives/mothers that women face (Smith and Hatmaker, 2017). Based on participants' experiences, I identified the following subthemes relating to work-family conflict: work-marital role conflict, work-reproduction conflict, and work-childcaring conflict. As well, the strategies participants used to relieve those conflicts were discussed in detail.

Work-marital role conflict

Some participants gave up better job opportunities and their own career advancement to support their husbands' careers, as they perceived that there was a gendered division of labor between women and men:

> *I have two children, and my husband is very busy at work. The traditional expectations of the Chinese women are that women should stay home to take care of the family to support their husbands. I think society is applying more pressure on contemporary women, by requiring us to both work and look after the home. My husband as a man has a promotion rate which is higher than me, which is in keeping with the society's expectations of him. I gradually chose to return to the family. The result is I have been on a "career plateau" for eight years and I have not been promoted. (Hanmei, 38, two children)*

> *In this society, men are praised for devoting themselves to work and don't need to*

take care of the family. But a woman's significant mission is taking care of the family, if a woman only pursues development of her career she may be criticised by other people. (Fanxiang, 53, one child)

Historically, men were expected to be breadwinners for the family, while women were required to take on housekeeping and childcare responsibilities (Yang, 1995). In contemporary Chinese society things have changed, in that women have gradually gained increasing authority to make decisions both in the workplace and family domains (Wong, 2011). However, the traditional image of women as subordinate has not disappeared. As participants stated, men were still primarily responsible for having a career while women have become doubly burdened by taking responsibility for both working (outside the home) and housekeeping, which leads to increasingly intensified work-family conflicts. And the result was, that wives' career development was delayed due to taking on more family obligations rather than their husbands within the families.

As an example, there was a participant, Jieying, who gave up a better job opportunity for her husband, insisting that it was her own choice:

When I graduated, I had a chance to work in a better university, and I even got opportunities to go abroad to study, but I gave these up for my husband. Because his family and his work are here [another city]. He has a traditional viewpoint concerning the family, he said if I cannot follow him, we need to break up. And I think I can do anything for him. No one forced me to make this choice, not society or my husband, that was my own choice. (Jieying, 42, two children)

This participant faced the conflict of a having better job or building a family, and she opted to follow her husband stating that it was her own choice. But the factors influencing her choice still should be considered, such as her husband transferring the pressure of 'traditional viewpoint of the family' to her. The traditional viewpoint of the family relates to the gendered expectations in society that a woman should be a good wife and mother (*Xian qi liang mu* in Chinese) within the family, and always put the family as the first (Yu, 2012). The consequence was she agreed to the expectation of being a good wife by abandoning better job prospects.

In contrast to the above, another participant refused to sacrifice her career for the family but took on the double responsibility of work and family, which is a typical daily reality for working women in this research. She was asked to interrupt her promotion rather than her husband's when facing family issues:

> *When I was doing my PhD program, my parents-in-law were ill, my child needed to be cared for, and my husband was going abroad as a visiting scholar. My husband tried to persuade me to give up advancing my Doctoral degree and focus on caring for the family, but I refused, I wanted to continue to study. Because I know it is the key point for promotion. (Haiqing, 47, one child)*

It is taken for granted that wives are asked to sacrifice their career development rather than their husbands' in order to take care of the family (Belkin, 2003). In the above story, the lack of a role of her husband in the family intensified the participant's burden of caring for the family and finishing her doctoral degree. The consequences of women who refuse to interrupt their careers is that they have to bear the greater workload and pressure both from family and work (Eagly and Carli, 2007). In sum, when a woman both displays the role of a worker and a wife, she may be requested to sacrifice her own career to support her husband. It results in women having less human capital, including losing a better job prospect and a higher degree.

Work-reproductive conflict

Apart from sacrificing themselves in supporting their husbands' careers, most women in this study mentioned the negative influence of pregnancy and childbirth on their work, particularly in terms of research outputs:

> *It was said that I can be promoted after three years as a lecturer, but I gave birth to a child during this period without producing any research outputs, so I was promoted after four years. I found that of all the female academics that entered this university in the same year as me, only I and one other female colleague have given birth. (Luqi, 35, one child)*

The reasons of conflict between reproduction and work were illustrated here. The optimum period of childbearing often overlapped with the period of career advancement for participants. But the production of research outputs relies on the continued learning towards a higher degree and more academic exchanges that require a great investment of time and energy. The contradiction of time and energy was highlighted for women who both plan to give a birth and develop their careers; it was hard for them to achieve both. Moreover, the conflict between pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood, and career development has grown in the past few years:

> *Especially for young women academics who have just started working, I think make a choice between future career and having a baby, is a great difficulty for them now. Because the running policy of 'publish or perish' requires them to complete the target set by universities within 3-5 years, or they may lose their jobs. I did not have the such greater pressure of this issue when I was pregnant decades ago. (Xiahe, 50, one child)*

> *The conflict between pregnancy and work is even more significant now because of changes in our major population policies. The one-child policy has now been changed to the two-child policy. I think the situation for young women now is worse than mine was. (Yingzhen, 49, two children)*

Participants claimed that the time and energy conflict between pregnancy and career advancement shaped more intensive reproductive issues for young women academics now. Specifically, as stated above, the reproductive issues have been more prominent than in past years with the application of the 'publish or perish' policy in academia and the 'two-child policy' in the whole country. The practice of 'publish and perish' is a typical indicator of the 'prestige economy' within universities – as explained previously, university focus more on the quantity of academic publications to increase their universities' rankings (Howson *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, in the contemporary academic landscape, women academics are faced with higher performance standards from universities that require them to produce more research outputs, with a greater workload and more pressure compared with past years. On the other hand, since 2015, due to the problem of the aging of the population in China, the government has promoted the 'two-

children in one family' policy nationwide to increase the reproduction rate (Xi, 2015). Women who are of childbearing age take the pressures of giving birth to a second child from their families and society, with the atmosphere of encouraging reproduction. The implementation of policies of 'publish or perish' in academia and 'two children' in the country, are significant factors that contribute to constructing a more complex work-family conflict.

Even if universities have taken some measures to ease this conflict such as offering maternity leave, it did not seem to work well according to participants' reflections, and even brought new working pressure for them. The participants said they have to make a choice between work and pregnancy:

> *Yes, our university does have maternity leave for female staff, I also applied for it. But the working tasks and working time limitations are still there, you know, the 'publish or perish' policy, the university push all the responsibility of allocating time to the individual. So, after I went back to the university, I had to work harder than before, teaching two semesters' workload within one semester. I had to catch up with the missed work tasks during the maternity leave and I cannot complain to the university, because they would say it was my own choice. (Luqi, 35, one child)*

> *The 'publish or perish' policy requires women to continue to work even when they have become pregnant, which was different from the previous policy that directly gave a half-year's maternity leave without pressure to work. But I think it's an individual's scheduling issue rather than the organisation's problem. (Shuyao, 46, one child)*

According to the published policy of the Chinese Ministry of Education, women academics are generally entitled to three to six months maternity leave, but universities are empowered to adjust the practice of the policy based on the specific context (Song and Zhou, 2016). However, from the participants' perspective, the maternity leave provided limited support and brought work pressures, since catch up. Therefore, participants hoped there would be more measures at an organisational and national level to solve the issue. Even given the evidence of how policy from universities and at a

national level have exacerbated the dilemmas of women, solving the conflict between work and reproductive activities were still viewed as an individual issue. Based on participants' arguments, not only do universities categorise it as an individual issue, but some of the women themselves agreed with this. Indeed, it is individuals' decision to have a child, but when women have to make a choice between work or having children it is already related to the workplace. Through providing measures of maternity leave and flexible working hours, universities seem to transfer the role of decision maker to individuals rather than taking joint responsibility. As a result, if women use those measures they will face more work pressures in the future, which makes it harder for them to choose.

Work-childcare conflict

Rearing children is mentioned frequently in the interviews as a main conflict that causes participants to interrupt their work. A participant described vividly her daily experiences as a working mum:

> *My child is very young, just 4 years old. I can tell you what my daily life is like: I wake up at 6am and do some work while waiting for my kid to get up, then when I have sent my kid to kindergarten I go back to work. I pick up my kid at 4pm and play with her until she falls asleep at night. Then I go back to work again at midnight and often stay up late. I don't have enough uninterrupted time to do research – that is the biggest issue that prevents my research development. (Luqi, 35, one child)*

Additionally, another participant talked about how she gave up the chance of attending conferences because of caring for children, even though she knew such work opportunities help to gain leadership positions:

> *My child is too young for me to leave him to attend e important conferences or activities, even though I know those activities are good for me to develop my networks, publish my research and get the opportunity for promotion. I dare not fight for those opportunities when I consider my little child, because I know even if I got the chance I cannot do it well. (Yingzhen, 49, two children)*

In above quotes, research productivity-related activities and caring for children tear women's time and energy apart. The conflict between women's parental identity and professional identity is illustrated as reason of work-family conflict. On the one hand, women academics seek to construct identities that fits social expectations of being good mother. On the other hand, women are also required to construct professional identities as the 'ideal academic', which emphasises spending more time and effort to publish research outputs and advancing their career (Lund, 2012).

As a result, having the double duties of work and childcare increased participants' workloads and pressure. A participant illustrated how her life was filled by children and research, and even having a rest made her feel guilty:

> *The way to accelerate research outputs is difficult, mainly due to the pressure of the family, especially as I have to take care of my children. I don't have rest time, and sometimes I feel that doing housework and shopping are a waste of the time which could better be used for researching. (Jingman, 38, one child)*

As the consequences of facing work-family conflict, some participants chose to interrupt their career advancement to concentrate more on their family. However, several participants regretted the decision of slowing down their career development for family reasons when they looked back. A participant reflected on her sacrifice for her family and started to think about an alternative possibility – that if she has managed work and family conflict rather than sacrificing her career, she would have had a better career now:

> *Faced with work-family conflict, I always chose to sacrifice my work rather than my husband's. Such as, in order to take care of my family, I gave up lots of opportunities to get promoted and had no time to do research. And now when I reflect on these experiences, I regret it and feel that I shouldn't have given up my chances to develop my career at all. If I do it again, I would choose to balance work and family rather than sacrifice my career. (Fanxiang, 53, one child)*

The husbands' refusal to do domestic duties was given as another reason of work-family

conflict by participants. A participant described her experience of caring for children as 'widowed parenting':

> *When my child was very young, I had to focus on my family because my husband was also a leader who worked too much – he completely ignored childcare so it was only me who take care of our child, like that popular saying described- 'widowed parenting'. After my kid grew up, I finally had time to consider my career development. (Letian, 50, one child)*

No matter if working mothers choose work or family they face significant stress and strains. The participants who choose to construct professional identities while also caring for children faced untenable workloads and lacked break time. Meanwhile, participants who choose to sacrifice their career for family, had lasting damage done to their professional development which later made them wonder if they have made the wrong decision. One of the main sources of stress was the absent role of the fathers within the families. The symbolic meaning behind of 'widowed parenting' was the husband's escape from childcare duties. It results from the traditional gender division of labor according to which the father is the breadwinner, while the mother is the carer who should sacrifice her career for children. However, as stated earlier, with increasing women entering the labor market to do paid work as breadwinners of the family, this traditional family structure still does not change, meaning women need to shoulder the double burden. Continually taking disproportionate responsibility of childcaring decrease women's time and energy spent on career development. Consequently, some of them interrupt their advancement in the leadership labyrinth.

Strategies of managing work-family conflict

In order to balance work and family, participants also attempt to use various strategies at the individual level, like time management (using time more efficiently) and finding helpers (including grandparents or the babysitter), which can relieve the work-family conflict to an extent:

I think time management is very important. How to manage time well and how to improve the efficiency of time utilization is what everyone who has work-family conflicts needs to learn. I concentrate on my work during daytime working hours, and the efficiency is very high. I accompany my children after getting off work on time, and I do not work overtime. Besides, I also hire a babysitter to help me. And my husband is very supportive of my career and takes on many family responsibilities such as taking care of children. But the mother is still very important to the child's education, and the child's childhood education will affect the rest of the child's life. (Shiyun, 41, one child)

In fact, gaining help from the children's grandparents is very important. I have no support from the children's grandparents and no one helps me to take care of my children. So, I cannot devote all of my time and energy to research and my competitiveness is greatly weakened. But for other women colleagues who find helpers to care children, their progression is easier than mine. (Hanmei, 38, two children)

It was noticed by participants that the foundation of managing time well was gaining external support from other helpers. Finding a helper to support the duty of caring for children was useful, as women then were able to use time more efficiently. As Shiyun said, she managed time well when concentrating on her work during the daytime and giving her child attention after work, but the premise was that there are helpers taking over childcare responsibilities during her working hours. And Hanmei observed her competitors solve work-family conflict issue easier than her, because of gaining help from children's grandparents.

Additionally, universities' flexible working time was also noted as relieving the work-family conflict to some extent, but using the flexibility made participants feel guilty sometimes:

Sometimes my leaders would send me on a three-day business trip, and I would refuse to go because I wanted to take care of my little child. I know they wouldn't force me if I use this reason, but I had to make up another excuse, because 'my kid needs her mum' sounds like an unreasonable reason. It is the truth in university, everyone has to accept that using childcare as excuse to refuse working tasks was a unprofessional behaviour. (Luqi, 35, one child)

Luqi revealed that she made up an excuse to refuse a business trip, since 'caring for children' was not an acceptable or professional reason for rejecting work. It demonstrates women's dilemma of balancing between a professional identity and a parental identity. When faced with work-family conflict women need to 'cover' (Yoshino, 2007) their parental identity to show their professionalism. In order to avoid the stigma related with using flexibility and to show they manage the tension of work and family well, women emulate accepted identities even if those are not authentic (Smith and Hatmaker, 2017). Within this story, Luqi reduced the conflict short term through 'making up another excuse', however this strategy will continually increase the pressure of feeling guilty and reinforce masculine ways of working. It also shows that within masculine organisations, women tend to adapt to the expectation of the 'ideal worker' (Acker, 1990), through pretending that they have no work-family conflict.

Some participants called for more supporting policies from employers and the government to relieve women from work-family conflict:

> *I think universities should publish more policy to support working mums, especially giving us more time or space. For example, universities can build more nurseries on campus, it is easy to achieve because I know lots of universities have their own kindergartens. After putting the children in nurseries, working mums can then focus more on their jobs. And if children have some accidents in the nursery, it is easy for mums to take care of them. So, it is necessary to have those infrastructures to support working mums. (Jiashan, 45, two children)*

> *I think this issue can only be solved by the country through providing policies to bear the cost of women's childbirth. I don't think this is just an individual issue because work and family issues are related to the long-term development of a country, including the development of the entire nation. If you think about this issue from a high level, it is the country and government that should undertake the responsibility to solve it, such as by establishing a better social welfare system, or well-managed childcare centres. (Yingzhen, 49, two children)*

Most universities in China have their own educational infrastructures including kindergartens, primary schools and high schools. But Jiashan pointed out that accessing

day care was still problematic for working mums who are breast feeding or have young children. It also reflects she saw herself as the primary person to undertake the duty of childcaring. Yingzhen's suggestion about managing the social welfare system from the country level to cope with work-family conflict, emphasised the responsibilities that organisations should take. Such forms of support help shape the labyrinth and help women navigate the labyrinth.

In sum, the analysis suggests that the work-family conflict was included the work-marital role, work-reproductive, and work-childcare conflicts. The gender division of labor caused those conflicts, as women are still viewed as the primary care providers while also being required to fulfil the 'ideal academic' role in academia, which results in a double burden. Both organisations and individuals tend to consider these as individual choices. However, it was not just an individual issue, organisations and society also have the responsibility to solve those contradictions.

4.6 'Her tears won the votes' and 'She is not beautiful as a professor': Gendered stereotypes and feminine behaviour and appearance

Throughout the interviews participants claimed that their behaviour and appearance were evaluated in the workplace based on gendered stereotypes. Their behaviours and appearance were evaluated, rather than their professional ability. This section explores the gendered stereotypes that the participants faced.

Feminine behaviour of the gendered stereotypes

It was argued by several participants that tears were a way to show women's weakness in order to gain sympathy. One participant, Haiqing, had had the suggestion that she use tears as weapons by her leaders, but she rejected that suggestion:

> *Sometimes when there are not enough funds, I will spend my own money first and then wait for the university to reimburse my costs. However, there was one occasion when I waited for a long time, but the university still did not reimburse*

me for the costs. So, I went to explain this to the leaders of the university. A [male] leader suggested: 'Why don't you cry and show weakness to solve this problem?'. I know that maybe he was just joking without intending any offence, but I would never do that kind of thing. I think that work is work, we should focus on how to solve the problems based on facts, rather than using emotion. (Haiqing, 47, Professor)

In this case Haiqing was encouraged to use tears to solve a problem in the workplace, rather than through a formal channel. The key point to be noted here is why she was advised to cry. The first reason is that a woman is usually stereotypically viewed as incapable of using her professional ability to solve the problem (Rhode, 2017), so crying to gain sympathy becomes a suggested efficacious way to achieve Haiqing's aim. The second reason is that crying is regarded as stereotypical female behaviour (Jones and Heesacker, 2012), since women are often labeled emotional and sensitive (Eagly and Carli, 2007). The stereotypical viewpoint that women use tears to gain sympathy, is both descriptive and prescriptive in shaping people's attitude to women. Ultimately, Haiqing resisted the stereotype and refused to take the advice to cry, and instead insisted on using a formal way to solve the problem.

In contrast, a participant shared a story of how her competitor cried to evoke sympathy from the judges during a research promotion selection process:

When I applied for the associate professor title in the second year, there was a teacher who was older than me. She spent all of her time on teaching but had almost no research outputs, which was not in accordance with the requirements for progression. According to the rules of the university, we need to give two presentations (debriefing reports) to gain one research title, with one presentation being held in our college and another in our university. After she finished her presentation, she suddenly started crying, telling the academic committee that if she fails to get the research title, she will lose her job. Her tears won the votes of the judges. In the first round of voting, we had the same number of votes, but in the second round of voting I won and finally got the only research title. (Xiatong, 48, Professor)

In this story, Xiatong described how her competitor intended to use tears to gain votes

during the competition of research promotion. Even though Xiatong ultimately won the promotion opportunity her competitor's tears still posed a threat. Tearful individuals are recognised as requiring help and support, which explains why people tend to be sympathetic when faced with tears (Vingerhoets *et al.*, 2016). As Xiatong explained, the tearful woman received the same number of votes as her in the first round without having sufficient research outputs, which demonstrated she benefited from crying. However, at the same time, people who shed tears, especially women, are also viewed as less competent in the workplace (Van de Ven *et al.*, 2017). A tearful woman stimulates others' inclination to provide emotional support but decreases their willingness to work with her (Van de ven *et al.*, 2017). Linking back to this story, it seemed that the competitor's tears worked against her, since she did not show her working ability as the participant did, which proved to be the key determining factor during the selection process. But Xiatong said tears did play a part as the tearful competitor won an equal number of the first round of votes.

When discussing her feelings after this occurrence, Xiatong expressed her complex emotions that consisted of both sympathy for and anger towards the tearful woman:

> *After that I don't know what to say. On the one hand, I sympathized with this competitor, maybe she was under a lot of pressure at that moment; on the other hand, I felt angry that she used her tears to compete for this promotion which was very unfair. She did not lose her job at the end of the day, because the university did not strictly enforce a 'publish or perish' policy considering so many people are involved in this transformation – the older teachers are especially opposed to this policy. In the end, the competitor still taught students in her original job position without any research promotion. (Xiatong, 48, Professor)*

On the one hand, Xiatong viewed her competitor's tears as an emotional release. The context of this story was highlighted, where the practice of the 'publish or perish' policy causes increasing working pressure for academics in universities with brutal competition, resulting in people being in fear of losing their jobs if they do not get promoted. Under the greater threat to job security, Xiatong understood that it was

possible for the woman to express vulnerable emotions of fear and sadness through tears (Sharman *et al.*, 2020) and utilize it as an attempt to solve the dilemma. On the other hand, Xiatong strongly viewed the tearful woman as taking advantage of the gendered stereotypical behaviour of crying, to evoke sympathy from the judges. She also claimed that she believed tears to be very useful and crying could have helped her competitor defeat her. Additionally, the idea that women use tears as a tool to gain sympathy to increase their prospects for advancement or other aims should be doubted, since tears have been demonstrated as not very effective in the workplace. However, the question is, why is the idea that 'women can use tears to get promotion' still spreading, and tears are described as a gender 'advantage' of women and are even encouraged.

Both of these stories started with the topic of women's tears in the workplace. The commonality between these two stories is that the participants both expressed their objection to 'women's tears' in the workplace. However, it is worth considering why when women know that behaviour such as 'shedding tears' will be unfavorable, some of them still do it. There are two reasons, Firstly, women internalize stereotypes into their process of constructing their own self-concept (Ibarra *et al.*, 2013), and they practise those stereotypical attitudes and behaviours (including crying) in the absence of intention (Kahneman, 2011). The second reason is that women are encouraged to play the role of being weaker in the workplace, while the stronger role is occupied by men that maintain the patriarchal structure (Walby, 1990). However, showing weakness cannot help women gain power or authority but, rather, reinforces the gender stereotype of women workers as less competent, since tears are intolerable in a masculine culture. The traditional stereotypical argument that women tend to cry as an emotional release, gradually evolves into women intending to cry to achieve their aims.

Feminine appearance and gendered stereotypes

Based on several participants' experiences, women also suffered evaluations of their appearance. Firstly, a participant, Hanmei, shared a story about how her competitor

(male) used her appearance to spread malicious rumors to damage her work reputation and career development:

> *My MBA students are generally older, and many of them are men of the same age as me. They sometimes call me 'that pretty teacher'. Although I know they were praising me without malice, this behaviour still had a negative impact on me. One of my competitors spread rumors and attacked me as "a woman who dressed up to please others" [an ancient proverb]. He said I dressed up nicely every day to let others praise my beauty and attract men. But they never thought that I may be dressing for myself rather than others. These rumors had a negative impact on my job evaluation and hurt my family, damaged my enthusiasm for work, made me lose confidence, and I started to constantly reflect on whether I had done something wrong. As a result, I changed the way I dress and the way I teach students, and I started to distance myself from students. This incident has added to my life experience and made me understand how to deal with these things next time. (Hanmei, 38, Associate Professor)*

According to this story, the praise of Hanmei's appearance from students became a weapon used by her competitor to damage her reputations. The rumors that her competitor spread revolves around Hanmei's appearance, dress style, and her way of teaching students, all of which were used to denigrate her working ability, discouraged her enthusiasm for work, and decreased her self-confidence at work. The negative evaluations she received related to traditional gender stereotypes for women, namely that women who dress up do so to attract and please men. Moreover, Hanmei illustrated that she was not the only victim:

> *There is also a kind of attack on female teachers: if the female teacher is more prominent, looks young and beautiful, or dresses in a fashionable manner, and she is popular among students, she will be criticised and attacked by the others. Such as saying she is not really good-looking or teaching well, but just know how to use her pretty appearance to please others. Those evaluations are not only from men but also from women. Those kinds of evaluations ignore women's job performances and exaggerate appearance. (Hanmei, 38, Associate Professor)*

Through this close attention to women's appearance, gender-related characteristics of women are emphasised rather than professional characteristics. Hanmei highlighted

that sometimes women also participate in maintaining and reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes.

However, can women who do not have a 'pretty appearance' successfully escape from evaluations of appearance? Another participant, Jiashan, shared a story of how a woman academic was evaluated as not beautiful enough to be promoted as professor during the research promotion process:

> *One thing that shook me deeply was that during the promotion process, there was a famous male professor with high morals and respect. He commented on a woman academic, "She is not very beautiful, so how did she become a professor?" This kind of lack of awareness and discriminatory speech happens all the time, not only in universities but also throughout society. (Jiashan, 45, Professor)*

In this story, a woman academic's promotion was questioned not on professional ability but on her appearance, by a male professor. It not only implies that women are evaluated by appearance in workplace, but also potentially implies that women are promoted because of their appearance rather than their professional ability. Both stories reveal the gender stereotypes and discrimination women suffer in the workplace. The reason why women's appearance rather than working ability are emphasised, is that women are being scrutinized by the male gaze, whereby women are in the passive position of being looked at by men (Korsmeyer, 2004). Appearance related to gender characteristics are primarily evaluated under the male gaze, which also affects women who have accepted and internalize it. It also indicates that professional women are still defined by gender identity rather than professional identity in the workplace.

In sum, based on the participants' stories in this section, women's feminine behaviour and appearance were compared with the gender stereotypes under the masculinity discourses and practice. Women's tears and looks were interpreted as tools to achieve certain aims (such as gaining promotions); however, their professional ability was ignored. Those evaluations revolve around women in the gendered workplace, and

makes women's progress towards leadership in the labyrinth more tortuous and full of traps, and they have to be careful in navigating the labyrinth to avoid the traps.

4.7 'I give up the path to leadership': Women lose motivation to pursue leadership

A trend amongst the participants was the claim from some that they lost the motivation to be a leader. In order to understand the reasons why they interrupted their path to leadership, their understanding of leadership should first be explored.

Views of leadership

The leadership structure of Chinese university consists of three parts: the Party leadership system, the administrative leadership system, and the research leadership system (Liu, 2016). However, with the reform of the university system the boundaries of these leadership systems are not separated clearly, hence people can concurrently hold more than one position within these systems once they satisfy the requirements. It was observed from several participants' career trajectories, that some of them originally were in administrative departments, but after getting a Doctoral degree and accelerating their research outputs and research funding they also successfully gained a research title. Some participants who entered university as researchers subsequently took on administration or Party duties. These three leadership systems link with different leadership titles in Chinese university. The Party leadership system has the title of 'Secretary of the Party committee'; the administrative leadership system has titles like 'President' and 'Head of School'; and the research leadership system has titles such as 'Professor' or 'Doctoral Supervisor'. Research leadership is defined as professors providing intellectual guidance and mentoring followers (students), through the establishment of a research vison and management of a research team (Rehbock *et al.*, 2021).

Most participants viewed Party and administrative leadership positions as 'real' leadership roles, and not research leadership:

I don't think being an associate professor or professor could be viewed as being leaders, a research title is just a recognition of an academic's research ability. The only group of people I can lead is my students. And doing research is a process that needs critical thinking. For example, there are a few co-authored papers which are published in journals in this research subject. If there are articles that are co-written by students and teachers, it will be judged as teachers appropriating students' research results, or students offering a bribe to teachers. Therefore, the relationship between teachers and students cannot be viewed as a leadership relationship. (Luqi, Associate Professor)

I think it is wrong to view a research title as a kind of leadership. Because doing research should have an innovative, open and harmonious atmosphere, and viewing oneself as a leader is not conducive to academic innovation. So, I do not view myself as a leader in front of my students, I also encourage them to find their own research interests. (Anping, Associate Professor)

Participants insisted that research leadership is not leadership, because they still believed that 'real' leadership has a traditional command and control style (Eagly and Carli, 2007) that links with masculinity characteristics. They did not view themselves as 'real' leaders, even though they did guide and mentor students. Neither did they view their behaviour as 'leadership' activities, since they preferred to concern themselves with students' needs and motives, which sounds more related to a democratic leadership style with feminine characteristics (Northhouse, 2021). This showed that, firstly, participants still understood leadership as a concept typical of business and management, rather than a concept for academia. Secondly, participants denied that their research leadership was leadership, since tough and domineering features were not present in the relationship with students. It seems participants viewed autocratic leadership, which involves command and control and is related with masculinity characteristics, as 'true' leadership in workplace. This view of leadership is also reported by those people who experienced administrative leadership, as will be discussed in narrative three later.

Additionally, working as a secretary in low-level administration was also not recognised as leadership but as service, because these low-level positions have no

sources of power and no authority. Two participants described their daily experiences of working in administration to prove this viewpoint:

> *After I graduated, I stayed at the university and became a lecturer. My main job is to take classes and apply for the National Natural Science Foundation of China (for academic research). I also hold some administrative positions in the research centre, basically it is to do some chores and write project applications. Because teaching and scientific research are the teacher's own business, but young people as the core workforce must always take on more administrative positions and do some service work. (Hanmei, formerly Secretary of research centre)*

> *I used to be the secretary of the Party branch of the college, but I never viewed myself as a leader, because I did not lead anyone, I just completed tasks. At the beginning, I did this position not voluntarily but it was my leader who asked me to help my colleagues by taking over this position, because I was young and able to do more work. The main task of this job was to serve as a communication link between the college and teachers and I was usually responsible for notifying teachers of meetings and filling in forms. To sum up, this was a service-type job, because this job has no authority, no constraints, and no competition. Basically, these administrative positions do not have any performance requirements, they just needed me to complete the tasks assigned. (Jingman, formerly Party Brach secretary of School)*

For Hanmei and Jingman, leadership was related to authority, power, and influence. However, as secretaries without empowerment, they had no authority to practise the behaviour of a leader. Their views of leadership aligned with Northhouse (2021), who defines leadership as a process that occurs between leaders and followers, achieving common goals by the power of influence. Without authority the participants cannot use their influence on others. However, even though these low-level administrative and Party positions were refused any recognition as leadership roles, they were still important factors in the participants' ascent to leadership positions as demonstrated by the stories of those who are Head of School, which will be discussed in narrative two later. In other words, having experience of low-level administrative and Party positions constitute key opportunities for women to construct their leadership web.

Individual preference on research rather than leadership

After discussing the participants' views of leadership, the reasons why they refused to pursue leadership can be understood better. The reasons given included: individual preference on research rather than leadership; participants' personality traits and skills were not suited to leadership positions; and personal life priorities. In addition, each reason given to explain why participants stopped pursuing leadership should be understood within their unique contexts.

Firstly, participants who had done low-level administrative jobs in the past gave the reason that enlargement of their role took up their research time:

> *Based on previous working experience as an administrator, I don't want to pursue leadership anymore, those tasks are a waste of my research time. I prefer to focus on my research and try to produce more academic outputs, which is the meaning of working in a university. (Jingman, formerly Party Branch secretary of School)*

> *In fact, many people in our university praised my working ability and the way I treat people. Some people also said that if I were ten years younger, I could definitely be promoted as a leader of the school. But I don't think I have to become a leader to show my worth. Because doing administrative work takes up a lot of my personal time, my time for research will be wasted, so not everyone wants to be a leader. (Langyue, formerly Leader of government)*

Participants refused to pursue leadership position because they preferred to spend time doing research rather than dealing with administrative affairs. Taking up leadership positions meant the enlargement of their role to include more administrative work, therefore reducing research time and outputs. Individuals had their own preferences for ways to show their value and being a leader was not very attractive to them. This was especially telling in the case of Langyue, who was evaluated by other colleagues as a 'capable' person but was still reluctant to pursue leadership. For individuals, reluctance in the pursuit of leadership is an individual choice; meanwhile, for organisations, it is losing potential leaders who could bring about development in the workplace.

Personality traits and skills

Some participants claimed that they never actively try to compete for leadership positions, except for the situation of being nominated certainly by organisations. Personality was highlighted here, but it was always related to other factors covering individual traits, leadership skills, teaching vocation, working pressure, and family. Firstly, there were the participants who said their personality was not suited to being 'leaders', but then related concerns with teaching vocation, working pressure, and family:

> *I don't want to be a leader because I have no interest in leadership positions. I am from a family of teachers; I think being a teacher is much more pleasing and valuable. And I don't think my personality and ability is good enough to lead others. I like to observe the leaders and analyse their personal traits, but I don't want to be a leader. (Hanmei, formerly Secretary of research centre)*

> *Of course, some people advised me to take some administrative positions as preparation for promotion in the future, but I think my personality is not suited to these positions. I prefer a relaxed working environment rather than one under great pressure. And I want to care for and protect my family, because you know that administrative positions require people to attend many meetings and business trips that are more suited to men. (Jingman, formerly Party Branch secretary of School)*

> *I don't have a very strong career ambition. I never pursued leadership promotion. It may be related to my personality. I pursue self-approval and I put my own preferences first, not the level of the position. And I think it is based on women's personal wishes, if you want to pursue leadership you can do, if you want to take care of the family you also can spend more time on family. As for me, I think the greatest success in my life is that I have educated my son very well. (Fanxiang, had/has no administrative title)*

These participants refused to pursue leadership because they believed that their personality did not satisfy the requirements of leaders. Hanmei described her personality as 'no motivation to pursue leadership', she refused leadership by placing a greater value on her teaching vocation with the influence of family members. As for Jingman, her personality was summed up by 'fewer working pressures', she refused leadership to enjoy more family time. As for Fanxiang, her personality was 'personal

wishes first', she refused leadership to achieve her preference of educating her child well. Accommodating domestic obligations was still highlighted as the main reason for refusing leadership. The gender difference was pointed out, that men were more suited to attending meetings and business trips, rather than women who were on the 'mommy track'. From the participants' descriptions, people who are suited for leadership positions should possess personality traits like confidence and conscientiousness (Judge *et al.*, 2002), and present skills such as a strong desire for leadership, the ability to withstand pressure, and a lighter family burden that would allow them to fully devote themselves to their work and career ambitions. The participants attributed those traits and skills as being the result of personality, rather than skills that are learned.

While others also mentioned personality, the specific explanations, however, were related to leadership skills such as competing for power and social networking:

> *I do not like, and I cannot participate in 'the game of power', I think it is because of my gentle and quiet personality. I refused people's invitations of administrative and Party jobs because I think it is meaningless to fight with others every day. But I know some women who very much enjoy the game of power. They attended the boys' club to drink and play, to develop networking, even ignoring their family, which results in rumors behind their backs. I am not judging, and I think it is an individual choice about how to get leadership positions. (Anping, had/has no administrative title)*

> *I don't enjoy the process of socializing with people, and I felt very uncomfortable every time I went out to socialize. But in China, this is an indispensable skill, and I just don't have this skill. (Yingzhen, formerly Director of research centre)*

As for Anping, her personality was summed up by 'gentle and quiet', and she refused to pursue leadership because she had no interests into competing with others for power, and did not want to take risk of being slander to join in boys' club. For Yingzhen, her personality made her 'bad at socializing with others', and she refused to pursue leadership as she viewed herself as having no social networking skills. Following from their descriptions, they thought people who are suited to the pursuit of leadership should have traits of extraversion and aggression (Judge *et al.*, 2002), in order to possess skills

such as competing for power and socializing with others in a masculine way. In sum, participants attributed sociability as a vital skill of gaining leadership, but they found it was difficult for them to master the skill that they had to practise more masculine behaviours and stimulatory be careful to obey the social-guided arrangements as women. Participants continually attributed the reasons of refusing leadership as their personality, since they believed this was an individual choice. However, after analyzing their explanations, it was clear to see the influence of gendered organisational viewpoint of leadership and stereotypes of women, on women's decision of refusing leadership.

To sum up, participants all collectively reflected on which leadership traits and skills they lacked, when they talked about reasons why they were reluctant to pursue leadership. What those participants had in common was that they assessed their own traits and skills first, placing them above the employer's assessment, and judging themselves to be a group of people who were not able to pursue leadership. What influenced their self-assessment process should be explored further. In doing so, there are two sources to be noted as providing benchmarks for individuals wishing to become leaders. Firstly, there are the various leadership models that list traits and skills that people who want to become leaders should have. The traits and skills participants described themselves as lacking can be found in typical leadership models such as the Big Five Traits model (Judge *et al.*, 2002) and the Leadership Skill Model (Mumford *et al.*, 2007). Even though those leadership models are designed to help train and educate potential leaders, the disadvantage is that people may be discouraged because they find they do not match the listed qualities. The second source is the masculine characteristics, such as aggression and dominance, which are associated with leaders recognised by organisations and society (Billington *et al.*, 1998). As most leadership positions are occupied by men, leadership with more masculinist characteristics would be recognised as an easier route to being admitted and promoted. The gendered organisational culture and structure affect the process of selecting leaders and shape the conceptual leaders as men.

Therefore, through comparison with the provided benchmarks from accepted models and images of a leader, women deny themselves as suited to the pursuit of leadership. However, when leadership is framed as skills, it is available to be learned and practised (Northouse, 2021). Instead of saying the participants were not good at competing for power and networking with others, it would be fairer to say that they resisted learning and practicing these traits and skills. Other issues that shaped their resistance to becoming leaders included domestic responsibility and the masculine way of socializing, which are related to the gendered difference in division of labor, and gendered stereotypes. For women, those barriers appear simultaneously rather than independently and they have to make a choice of how to tackle those walls within the labyrinth. Even they claimed that interrupting advancement of leadership was their own choice based on their self-evaluation of personality, however, when taking the leadership labyrinth into account, it can be seen that how their choices were shaped by the social and cultural forces that constitute its walls.

Life priorities

Thirdly, for a small number of participants there is a unique reason that leadership is not worth striving for, rather, it is quality of life that is their primary aim:

> *The death of my mother hit me hard. After that I started to think about the philosophy of life, when I was 30 years old. In the past, I used to think that I should publish more articles and get promoted quickly. Then, I began to think about the meaning and value of life, and I changed a lot of ideas. I doubted the value of hard work for people's lives. When people died there was nothing you can take with you, and that includes leadership positions. I began to pursue spiritual heights in the secular world. (Hanmei, formerly Secretary of research centre)*

> *My parents found that I stayed up all night to work so they castigated me. My father persuaded me by using his life experiences: 'After I retired, I finally understood that fame and fortune is nothing, and leadership and papers are useless! The difference between those who are leaders and not leaders is just whether their photos can be hung on the walls. But your body is the most important thing. If you don't care for your health and become ill, your children lose their mum, your husband loses his wife, your parents lose their daughter, all of which are the greatest possible disaster for your family!' (Luqi, Deputy Director*

of research centre)

Hanmei started to contemplate the relationship between leadership and life after her mothers's death, and her thinking was similar to the situation with Luqi's father. Luqi's father tried to stop her behaviour of staying up late and working overtime through comparing the relative values of promotion and life. What the participants have in common is the understanding that leadership, money and fame mean nothing compared to people's lives. As for these participants, finding one's own value and enjoying family time are the meaning of life, and this is more important than pursuing leadership. A cross pressure is identified here, that starting along the path of the leadership labyrinth made women feel greater stresses and strains. They intended to make the pressure disappear through weighing up leadership with living life, their life attitudes were similar with 'foxi' mentioned in narrative three. That some participants became more foxi (buddha-like) to concern more themselves that trying to find the meaning of life.

In conclusion, underlying the power structure context of Chinese university, research leadership positions and low-level positions without authority are not viewed as real leadership by participants, since those roles have less of a command-and-control style, participants constructed their views of leadership as related to significant masculine characteristics. Based on their view of leadership, the underlying reasons they refused to pursue leadership were explored. They judged themselves as lacking leadership traits and skills such as networking, fully focusing on work and great aspiration of leadership, which compared as the image of 'ideal leader' that constructed by gendered organisations (Acker, 1990). Even those reasons they argued were resulted from the gendered culture and structures, it was interesting that participants still attributed the act of refusing as individual choices. The universities again, escaped from taking responsibility of women's scarcity of leadership positions. However, interrupting the pursuit of leadership positions doesn't mean those participants have already left the labyrinth. It was noticed that from the moment they started their careers they had already entered the labyrinth and were under the influence of family, organisations and

society, which shaped their path through the labyrinth. So, it is not just down to individual choice to identify directions within the leadership labyrinth. However, the individual's preference is foregrounded, even though the preference is also socially constructed and influenced by gendered stereotypes (Rhode, 2017).

4.8 'Teaching helps me achieve self-worth': Managing the teaching and research tension

Differing from the previous viewpoints that teaching conflicts with doing research (Peetz *et al.*, 2014), the data also showed that doing research and teaching can complement each other. Most participants argued that teaching inspires research interests, and in turn research was conducive to teaching:

> *If teaching is done well, scientific research will also become better, but time to spend on both tasks must be guaranteed. I think teaching inspires research, and research helps improve teaching. The two are not in conflict but complement each other. Fortunately, we have enough teachers in our college so the level of teaching tasks assigned to individuals is reasonable, we can control the teaching hours by ourselves based on our own ability. And I can work overtime to finish both tasks, so I don't think there is any conflict. (Hanmei, Associate Professor)*

> *I think research improves the teaching that students receive. As a teacher in universities, I self-positioned myself as a teacher, my major job is teaching students and cultivating talents for future society. Research should be done around teaching, and teaching is a process of interpreting research. Sometimes when I teach students in class, I find that I may have misunderstood some key points of research, which helps me to reflect on how to do research. So, I don't think research and teaching conflict with each other. (Anping, Associate Professor)*

As the quotes show, participants did not just view teaching as a work they have to do to satisfy job expectations, but a valuable active that also contributes to the development of research and young generations of the country. The time conflict between teaching and doing research cannot be ignored but participants chose to work overtime to balance these two tasks, which brought an overload of work. Specifically, Ruizhen described how the double burden of workload and working pressures damaged her health:

I need to give lectures and that takes more time and energy, the teaching task is very heavy. Sometimes I feel that my body cannot keep up with the heavy workload. Basically, I spend most time preparing lessons and do research for a while after the lesson preparation is complete. What I can do is spend more time and energy on working through sacrificing my resting time. (Ruizhen, Associate Professor)

In order to ensure the quality of teaching and research outputs, Ruizhen had to maintain long working hours with the cost of shortening her own resting time. Working overtime damages participants' physical and psychological health, which may have consequences for their work. Considering that women academics also have to reconcile with family responsibilities, the extremely long working hours in the workplace and home squeeze their limited resting time (Lund, 2012).

Additionally, there was a clear order where teaching was ranked higher than research, even though participants recognised that research was still the determining promotion factor in universities:

Teaching is always first, because teaching is most important. I schedule my time as firstly preparing lectures, and secondly to do academic research, and the lastly to do administrative work. If there is not enough time, I work overtime to complete the tasks. (Jingman, Associate Professor)

Of course, preparing lectures takes most of my time, and there are always people suggesting I do less teaching and more research, because only research outputs can lead to promotion. But I chose to slowly conduct research, because only teaching make me feel the value of research. If one's desire for promotion is not very intense so that one doesn't pursue a research title or other things, I think it is better to do more teaching. Because when I looked back, I found that some research outcomes were not very valuable, but teaching influences people which was more meaningful than those research outcomes. I also asked my students, several years after they graduated, who they remember most clearly, and it was still those teachers who inspired them in class. At that moment, I felt that teaching helps me achieve self-worth, and my work is valuable for students. Some teachers that are good at research with the title of professor, still weren't admired by students because they lacked teaching ability or passion. And I observed that some new teachers who had just entered universities attach little importance to teaching but concentrate on research, since their focus is on publishing papers to gain a

research title. (Anping, Associate Professor)

Participants like Anping viewed their teacher identity as the primary identity in the workplace. This finding resonated with the previous researchers found, that Chinese women academics prefer to teach rather than research (Aiston and Yang, 2017; Gaskell *et al.*, 2004). In previous research, the given reason was based on the biological difference that women are better to give pastoral care to students, therefore more good at teaching rather than research (Aiston, 2014). While in this thesis, participants gave different reason, even though they clearly knew that research outputs was the key factor to get promoted, they nevertheless believed that the value of teaching students was a more worthy achievement than the value of promotion. The participants placed a great emphasis on their sense of teaching vocation when navigating the leadership labyrinth. Arriving at the centre of the labyrinth was not the only goal for these women, instead, they also aimed to achieve their self-worth as teachers even though they knew it will make their way to leadership slower.

As things have changed in recent years, universities have also started valuing teaching performance more than before – 'two types of professors' (research professor and teaching professor) have started to appear:

> *As for me, I spend more time on teaching rather than research, because I am more interested in teaching. Our university does have a promotion route for 'teaching type professors', but the number of places is very small, and it is very difficult to gain country-level teaching outcomes or write a lot of books. The requirements are higher with fewer indicators, which makes the advancement as a teaching-type professor more difficult than as a research-type professor. (Shuyao, Associate Professor)*

As well as utilizing research outcomes as the main criterion for awarding research titles, part of universities have also set up a route for academics who focus more on teaching to get promoted. It seemed to benefit women academics who preferred to pursue a teaching vocation, that research outputs were not the only standard to get promoted.

People who make a large contribution to teaching also gain a research title with fewer research outputs. However, as participants illustrated, it was also hard to reach the standard to get a teaching professor title. Therefore, even though universities aim to diversify ways for academics to get promotion, the high standards still confused women within the labyrinth.

Therefore, participants called for a reform of the teaching performance system:

> *I think the current evaluation system of teaching performance is not reasonable, when one is overwhelmed by the quantity of publications and teaching hours. I hope university might add relatively 'soft' criteria to relieve the pressure as well as improve teaching ability, such as paying more attention to how a supervisor trains students in research methods, how a teacher inspires students' confidence, and how well the students' aptitude is taken into account. (Shiyun, Associate Professor)*

> *Our university doesn't have an assessment method for teaching performance, our school just requires teachers to complete the requisite number of teaching hours. And the salary is unrelated to teaching performance, so some teachers do not make any effort in their teaching. (Congrong, Professor)*

Remedies from universities to solve these issues were called for by participants, to perfect the teaching performance evaluation system, to not just focus on teaching hours but on teaching qualities and adjusting the salary structure with teaching qualities. Participants hoped the value of teaching would be acknowledged and the quality of teaching would be guarantee, through universities' action of reforming teaching performance evaluations. Linking teacher qualities with salary structure would encourage more academics to value the importance of teaching. Hence, the reform of teaching performance evaluation system can bring about a change in organisational structures and culture, encouraging more teachers (no matter in which gender) to value teaching. From a gender perspective to interpret this kind of reform, it is also help to damage the stereotypical culture and gendered division of labour in academia that men are good at researching while women are good teaching (Aiston, 2014).

In sum, instead of teaching being considered as a factor that decreases research outputs, therefore impeding women's way to promotion, it is recognised as an opportunity for developing research and achieving self-worth in this thesis. It illustrates that in the labyrinth, women also pursue the aims of self-value and professional pleasure. However, although teaching and doing research are argued as not being in conflict with each other, the heavy workload and long working hours that come with those tasks still hurt women's health and squeeze their resting time. Therefore, the adjustments made by universities to diversity the promotion routes to a certain extent affirms the value of academics who contribute to teaching. In this section, a significant point is that even though women know producing more research outputs is the key factor for arriving at the centre of the leadership labyrinth, they still insist on spending their limited time and effort on teaching, to achieve self-worth rather than pursuing leadership positions at all costs.

4.9 Chapter summary

This chapter told the narrative of the participants' path through the leadership labyrinth towards its centre, focusing on discussing barriers and forms of support that participants encountered during this journey. Participants found the contradiction that the gender they 'do' mismatched the job's gender, so they do gender multiplicity in the workplace, but this process formulates more challenges on their way to leadership. For example, the merit-based research promotion system was influenced by gender-related unwritten rules; the reduced opportunity to build guanxi resulted in the participants losing vital access to key guidance and information; the work-family conflict was also emphasised, with most of the participants having experienced being required to interrupt advancing their own career development. Further, participants continually suffered from gendered stereotypes and discrimination, as their feminine behaviors and appearance were evaluated rather than their professional ability in the workplace. After encountering the barriers within the labyrinth, some participants lost the motivation to continue

navigating their way to leadership in the labyrinth. However, some participants claimed that it was an individual choice, even though it seemed that their decisions were shaped by the gendered organisations and society. It was found that the issues women faced constantly changed under external influences, such as policies from universities and country. For example, the work-family conflict was reported to be more intensive in the current climate, due to the practice of 'publish or perish' and 'two children'. Those obstacles reflected how the gender inequality regimes operated at both organisational and individual levels, but ultimately the failures in pursuing leadership were attributed as individual choices.

Across participants' stories it can be found organisations also provided some supporting policies, such as family-friendly policies, but those policies were evaluated by participants as not very effective. Some polices brought more pressures and even built new pressures for participants, which resulted in women's paths towards leadership becoming more winding. However, instead of giving up the navigation of leadership labyrinth, some participants struggled to attempt individual strategies to overcome challenges. Further, it was impressive to find that they also concerned themselves with their own preferences during this winding path; some of them started to think about the meaning of life, and some of them valued teaching to fulfill their self-worth as teachers above leadership.

Chapter Five: Narrative two: Learning while in the centre of the leadership labyrinth

5.1 Introduction

After travelling the path towards leadership as shown in the previous chapter, some women successfully arrived at the 'centre' of the labyrinth as they gained leadership positions. The narrative of this chapter aims to explore what those women leaders faced once they reached a position of leadership. The chapter is structured in six sections. Firstly, it shows participants' reflection of their leadership, including the process of constructing leadership web through developing relationships (Stead and Elliott, 2009). It was found that participants view 'a leadership position as a service position' as shaped by Chinese culture. Thirdly, some participants claimed that 'prefer to recruit men subordinates', even though they encourage and exhibit care for women subordinates. The fourth section called 'evaluation of women leaders' reveals the discrimination women leaders face, that they had a natural gender disadvantage that means they cannot be as good as men. As for work-family conflict, support from husbands is emphasised as helping participants a lot. But the multiple roles participants take still make them encounter the challenge of overcoming feelings of 'I am a selfish mum'.

5.2 'No matter how hard life is, I can overcome it': Women's reflections on their leadership

Following the framework of the leadership web presented by Stead and Elliott (2009), I argue that leadership is a result of the interaction of relationships which includes relationships with individuals (eg. family members and colleagues), place (eg. geographical locations and social status) and work (eg. professional networks and working experiences). Those relationships are developed and re-developed during periods before and after they become leaders. This section explores how the participants

use relationships to negotiate support from both professional and personal spheres, in order to successfully stay in the centre of the leadership labyrinth.

Developing a relationship to role models

Three participants from one university who hold positions of Head of School, talked about how the existence of a female Deputy President in their university functioned as a role model that guided and encouraged them to construct their own leadership web:

> *There is an excellent leader in our university, she is the only female president I have ever met. I learned a lot from her, and I found communication with a female leader more comfortable and beneficial, compared with communicating with male leaders. When I face difficulties about work or life, I usually ask her for suggestions, she always helps me analyse those difficulties patiently and sometimes gives me suggestions about my career development. But if I communicate with men leaders, we will just discuss the work without other things. I can understand that because they are men, they never can consider or experience what women face in the workplace. (Haiqing, Head of School)*

> *There are lots of women leaders in our university. We have four Heads of School and many Deputy Heads of school who are women. Among those women leaders, the female deputy president is the person I admire most! Her presence is like a shining light in the gloom to show that there is no gender discrimination at leadership level in our university. And the whole working environment and atmosphere in our university is very friendly towards women, which also encourages women to pursue career development. (Xiahe, Head of School)*

Both Haiqing and Xiahe mentioned a female Deputy President in their university and expressed their admiration for her. From a micro perspective, the female president guided and supported other women through helping to analyse barriers and providing suggestions about career planning (Madsen, 2008). As a role model, her personal attitude and behaviour were emulated by other women to make an upward comparison, which also improved their motivation and gave hope and aspiration (Hoyt and Simon, 2011). Considering that women are less likely to develop networking, especially upward networking as mentioned in the previous narrative, developing guanxi with a role model seemed a feasible approach to gain workplace sponsorship and emotional

support. From a macro perspective, her presence as a woman leader changed participants' viewpoints of leaders. Since the widely accepted image of an ideal leader was male, her appearance in the top leadership level was interpreted as a sign that women were also good at leadership. It not only fought the stereotype and discriminatory belief that women are incapable of being leaders, but also encouraged and inspired more women to pursue leadership, as a participant said – 'a light in the gloom'. As a result, those participants saw the changes women leaders brought, that the working atmosphere was more friendly for women, and the male-dominant structure of leadership was broken with more women participated in pursuing leadership. A role model's influence for women who aim to construct a leadership web is significant, they observe and learn from the role model first-hand which makes them believe that women can achieve as leaders (Stead and Elliott, 2009). And a role model's influence on organisations is also vital, through signaling the likelihood of women's promotion on leadership and their own leadership practice to change the organisational policies and cultures (Sealy and Singh, 2010).

Developing a relationship to leaders

However, women role models are still rare and not everyone have the opportunity to be inspired by one. But the lack of role models is also an opportunity for women to be ambitious, which can help them attempt various ways to pursue leadership (Stead and Elliott, 2009). Here a participant talked about how she constructed her leadership web (Stead and Elliott, 2009) step by step, through developing relationships with her leaders:

> *I just think guanxi does not necessarily have to be established through eating and drinking, it also can be made through communicating and consulting with others, right? I remember my first promotion as Deputy Head of school. This was a new school in our university that had just been established that year. The Dean of that new school knew me because I had discussed my thesis and career development with him several years ago. That was an opportunity when I established guanxi with him, and he also gave me a lot of guidance about my research and career planning. Through our communication during those years, he was impressed by my management ability and personal confidence. Moreover, he trusted my judgement and ability to make decisions. He praised me as a qualified and*

potential leader in the future, so when this new school lacked a Deputy Head, he considered me as the first candidate. Finally, I became the Deputy Head of the school because of recommendations by this leader and the university. (Xiwen, Director of research centre)

[After working as the Deputy Head of school for several years] I gradually came up with the idea of changing positions, I wanted to find a position that related to my major, so I found this education centre in our university. In fact, the centre was not really operated by our university even though it belongs to our university, but it was managed by another organisation outside the university. So, I directly contacted the leader of our university to communicate my thoughts about operating this centre inside our university. The leader is a person who attaches great importance to higher education, and he thinks it is very good that I demonstrated the initiative to ask to operate this education centre. Then, the university organised a meeting to approve the appointment, and I became the Deputy Head of this research centre. Actually, I did not get a promotion at that time because I was still at deputy level. And I did not require promotion, because I did not have the confidence to ask for promotion, I just wanted to lead this centre better than it had been before. After I came to the research centre, I recruited talents, formulated systems, and lead academics to do research. The research centre is operating well now, we publish a lot of papers and also cooperate with the Department of Education in China, and I was promoted to Director of the research centre. (Xiwen, Director of research centre)

From Xiwen's two experiences of getting promoted, the supporting factors that helped her construct her leadership web emerged, including her relationship with leaders, her negotiation skills, self-promotion, confidence, and her determination and career ambitions. Firstly, it was noted that she strategically sidestepped the traditional approach of establishing guanxi, directly consulting leaders and showing her working ability. Secondly, when she wanted to operate the new research centre, she negotiated with the leader and university with a high degree of self-promotion. She was not deterred by barriers such as gender stereotypes, but created an unusual road to gain leadership through maneuvering and negotiating (Stead and Elliott, 2009) with the leadership level in the university. However, she also mentioned that the move was not a promotion initially, because she did not have the confidence to ask for promotion. But this is also a strategy of 'waiting and proving yourself', and she finally got promoted after proving her ability as a leader by managing the research centre. Thirdly, it was her

strong determination and career ambition of leading the research centre well, which can be categorised as her relationship with the place where she worked. According to Stead and Elliott (2009), women's determinations motivate and sustain their focus on overcoming challenges. This kind of determination to make the workplace better also motivated Xiwen to construct and practise leadership.

Developing a relationship to previous work experiences

Participants also emphasised how their early work experiences influenced their path to leadership positions:

> *I have already accumulated lots of management and leadership experience in my early career, and I think these experiences are significant for me. I can be promoted as this leadership position today is inseparable from the accumulation of my early work experience, even the work experience when I was just a nonentity as an assistant. (Xiwen, Director of research centre)*

> *I can be promoted to Assistant of Head of school not because I meet the requirements, but the requirements are made for me, and the leaders' plan is not just to let me become the assistant but promote to Deputy Dean of school in the future. The leaders of the school asked me whether I wished to take these positions, because they are very satisfied with my work. I am a professor and I had administrative work experiences early in my career, and my ability and moral qualities are praised by the leaders and colleagues I worked with before. (Xiatong, formerly Assistant of Head of School)*

As the quotes above demonstrate, the accumulation of work experience facilitated women in constructing their leadership web, through exercising their ability and mindset to deal with various situations at work (Stead and Elliott, 2009). As Xiwen said, even when she was an unimportant assistant she still learned from this experience. As for Xiatong, her diverse work experience became the key factor to getting promoted. Those early work experiences not only develop abilities and expand the guanxi web, but also enrich the participants' professional CVs to ensure future promotion. Linking back to the participants in narrative one, who argued that doing low-level administrative work without authority is not real leadership but only brings great workloads that waste

the research time, what is instead coming out from the data here provides a different interpretation of those early work experiences. According to the different interpretation, they may have a positive influence on the participants' future career.

Developing a relationship to people outside the workplace

In addition, some women leaders emphasised that developing relationships with other people outside the workplace was also significant in constructing their leadership web:

> *It is easier to publish a paper if you have guanxi. In China, it is important to develop and keep guanxi, a personal relationship can help you to do lots of things, such as publishing a paper. If you know the editor of the journal, it is quite easy to get information quickly and correctly, such as which part needs to be modified to be published successfully. (Ailian, formerly Deputy Head of Subject)*

> *My personality is very outgoing, and I make friends very quickly. I have a lot of friends from various organisations. And I am willing to help others and also if I need help or some key information I will ask my friends directly. I like to attend academic conferences and not just limited to my major topic. I will make guanxi with people that I meet at the conference, for example by eating together, or exchanging WeChat details to maintain contact. There is a traditional saying in China that 'getting a new friend means getting a new path', and that is true, I have lots of friends who are willing to help me. (Jiashan, Director of research centre)*

These participants successfully developed their professional networks and alliances (Stead and Elliott, 2009) with people outside their organisations, claiming those relationships were beneficial to their academic career. The common strategy they used to expand their leadership webs was attending academic conferences. Socializing with the editor of a journal was realized as useful for participants to increase individuals' research outputs, which was still key factor in getting promotion. Making new contacts at an academic conference was presented as an effective way to exchange key information and resources. Moreover, participants noted an important point, which was to be unafraid to use the principle of reciprocity within the guanxi relationship (Barbalet, 2021), since it maintained a long-term and strong guanxi.

Developing a relationship to the self

As well as the three types of relationships Stead and Elliott (2009) outline in their theory of the leadership web – to others, place, and work – I propose that a fourth type be added: a relationship to the self. Based on participants' experiences, their success in achieving leadership positions cannot be separated from their continuous effort, self-encouragement, and persistence:

> *I often work overtime, and sometimes I don't go to bed until two o'clock, because I know I have to insist to work hard to achieve my goals. I think my greatest strength is that I am very resilient, no matter how hard life is, I can overcome it. I had a baby when I was doing my doctoral thesis, but I never missed a single class for my students or for myself. I always encouraged myself that I can do those things well. (Xiatong, formerly Assistant of Head of School)*

> *I think working in a university requires continuous learning to improve myself and adapt to the challenges brought by the new work environment. So, I never give up learning. I got a master's degree and doctoral degree during those years. Even though I faced various pressures at the same time – I needed to do administrative tasks, care for my children, write my thesis, and so on… but I persevered at them all. When I review my career, I am very proud of how I transformed myself from a management worker to an academic. (Xiwen, Director of research centre)*

These women developed their relationship with themselves through reflecting on the 'old self' and discovering a 'new self'. As participants said, they reflected their past experiences, even though they always encountered various pressures during the process, they chose to grit their teeth and persist. And, they continued to learn for a higher degree to adapt to the increasingly competitive environment in academia, because they realized that a higher degree was important for promotion with a view to the future. Faced with these challenges in leadership journeys, they showed great self-encouragement and self-trust, believing that they were able to overcome challenges successfully. Failure was not a stranger to them, but they demonstrated themselves as 'resilient' in continuing to try until they succeeded. Based on the findings, through continually reviewing, evaluating and communicating with themselves, participants understood their advantages and disadvantages, and encouraged themselves to be stronger, which

amounted in developing their relationship with themselves. This new category 'relationship to self' is overlapping and interwoven with the other three types of relationships. These women developed a relationship with themselves based on self-encouragement, self-trust and self-value, which became one of the key factors in constructing their leadership web.

In conclusion, this section has explored how women leaders construct their leadership web through developing relationships with role models, leaders, experiences, people outside their organisations, and with themselves. They also drew on their previous work experiences. From their successful experiences of developing relationships, there are three common features which can be found. First, they always proactively communicate with others, and show their confidence. Second, they had the long-term vision to maintain those relationships, for example by accumulating work experience for potential promotion in the future. Third, they had a strong determination to overcome the barriers they encountered within the leadership labyrinth, and they were less likely to devalue themselves even when they failed to find the right path. Finally, they navigated the path to the centre of the leadership labyrinth, regardless of the criticisms, pressures, and discriminations they encountered along the way.

5.3 'A leadership position is a service position': Women's view of leadership

In the interviews some common views around leadership emerged, including an understanding of the meaning leadership, leadership styles, and pressures that leadership positions bring.

Understanding of leadership

The participants who were leaders shared some commonalities regarding the meaning of leadership:

> *I think this [leadership] is a service position, and I think leadership is equal to*

service, doing service work for teachers, students, and university. And you can say that I am a 'silly' person because I never think about gaining money or fame from this position, I just want to do well in this position. I don't think men are better than women in leadership positions, a job is genderless and there is no saying what kind of job cannot be done by women. (Congrong, Deputy Director of University office)

A leader should not be selfish and just concerned about gains and losses in terms of self-interest since leadership is serving people and working for the welfare of people. A leader needs to borrow everyone's ability to lead people to work and live better. Of course, it is normal that sometimes my subordinates have different opinions from me, then I choose to take a step back and try to consider those opinions more objectively. There is a saying in China that 'leaders need to give up their individual interests for the greater interests of the whole team'. (Yinan, Deputy Head of School)

As the quotes demonstrate, participants viewed leaders as serving individuals and organisations, as placing others' interests above their own and showing strong moral behaviour (Hale and Fields, 2007). This servant leadership idea challenges the traditional concepts of leadership, emphasising that leaders should influence followers in an empathic and ethical manner, with the aim of leading by way of serving followers and organisations (Northouse, 2021). As for the underlying reason, the participants' belief in servant leadership implies the influence of the Chinese cultural context, from Confucianism to Communist ideology (Han *et al.*, 2010), as President Mao said in 1944 that '[leaders should] serve the people', which is a widely accepted view in China.

However, there is a difference between servant leadership as conceptualized in a Western context and Chinese servant leadership, including duties and listening (Han *et al.*, 2010). As participants argued, a leader can be viewed as a 'silly' person if they abandon self-interest in order to do work well, which implied that Chinese servant leadership highlights the spirit of sacrifice. Additionally, participants highlighted the importance of listening to others , which implies that Chinese servant leadership is more concerned with respecting than controlling followers. Linking back to narrative one, where we saw how some participants viewed leadership as command-and-control behaviour with masculine characteristics, here participants' view of servant leadership

provides a different insight into leadership in higher educations. Women do not have to deliberately imitate a masculine approach to leading, instead attempting to develop a more gender-integrated servant leadership model (Sims and Morris, 2018) to empower and equip themselves to navigate the stereotypes related to women and leaders (Powell, 2011). The participants emphasised that women can be good leaders and practise a leadership style which is not traditionally masculine.

Leadership style

When discussing their leadership styles, the most frequently mentioned description was 'friendly':

> *My leadership style is very friendly, I often exchange opinions with subordinates and show consideration for them. But I also feel this is not strict enough, so I am slowly adjusting my leadership style. (Hanyu, Deputy Director of University office)*

> *My leadership style is friendly so that people are willing to communicate with me. I think that is an advantage for women leaders, since men leaders are usually aggressive. So, it is important to have appropriate numbers of women leaders within organisations, because they can balance men leaders' aggression and make the organisation better. (Baiwei, Director of research centre)*

Participants showed they were 'friendly' as leaders by exchanging opinions and communicating with followers, and they viewed this style as an advantage for women leaders. Many meta-analyses of the literature on gender differences in leadership styles find that, women lead in a more democratic and participative way than men, which sometimes produces favorable evaluations for them (Eagly and Carli, 2007). However, friendly women leaders may be charged with not being assertive and decisive enough (Eagly and Carli, 2007), as in the case of Hanyu who said she adjusted her style to be tougher. As Gallant (2014) concludes, acting too masculine will result in women leaders being criticised as lacking feminine characteristics, therefore they may become trapped in a double-bind dilemma. But based on the participants' experience, they did not seem to be very bothered by this dilemma with regard to leadership style, as the quotes above showed, they also continually modulated their style to satisfy the demands of leadership

roles. Moreover, one of the quoters above also argued that women leaders lead differently from men (Eagly and Carli, 2007), however Baiwei viewed this gender difference from an optimistic perspective without devaluing her leadership style. She took the view that combining a feminine leadership style with a masculine leadership style made the working atmosphere more harmonious and boosted organisational performance under the guidance of Chinese traditional culture.

Pressures of taking 'double shoulder tasks'

Participants talked about the pressures of taking up leadership positions, especially mentioning that it included what they called 'double shoulder tasks':

> *I have worked here for 8 years, and I always take 'double shoulder tasks' meaning I need to teach and do the administrative work at the same time. At the beginning it was hard for me to adapt to this great workload, I met some obstacles such as the lack of time to finish both tasks, so I have to work overtime and sacrifice my rest time. I am still struggling to balance the tasks on my shoulders now. (Hanyu, Deputy Director of University office)*

> *The most difficult thing for me is how to balance the role as an academic and as a leader. As an academic, I need to spend a block of time to write papers. But administrative affairs always take my time, and as a leader I have to finish the administrative task first. So, being a leader that undertakes 'double shoulder tasks' is very tiring and stressful. (Zhaoni, Head of School)*

Leaders generally take on 'double shoulder tasks' in Chinese universities (Yu and Duan, 2018), which means they take on at least two tasks out of teaching, researching and administrative leadership. This system was praised as saving cost of human resources and promoting comprehensive development of individuals (Lin and Zhang, 2021). However, the participants complained that the role enlargement brought an overload of work that required them to sacrifice their resting time and work overtime to complete both tasks. As a result, the pressure of balancing tasks from various spheres damaged participants' physical and psychological health, which was also claimed to be one of the reasons why some women leaders resigned from leadership positions, as will be discussed in narrative three in the next chapter. Moreover, linking back to narrative one,

the major concern voiced by participants who claimed that they refused to pursue leadership, was that they were afraid to lose family time and research time by being leaders, and the importance of building their research profile was significant for their career progression.

In sum, there are three commonalities among the participants' view of leadership. Firstly, they viewed leadership as service to teachers, students and universities, and the spirit of sacrifice was emphasised under the Chinese culture. Secondly, they preferred to adopt a friendly style to lead teams since it promoted a more favorable evaluation. The gender difference in leadership style between men and women leaders was pointed out but the participants seemed not overly affected by this, which differs from what Eagly and Carli (2007) claim, that women are faced with dilemma of being seen to be tough enough but at the same time being true to their feminist leadership ideals. The participants as women leaders accept the gender difference in leadership style, and celebrated this difference rather than 'fixing' themselves. Thirdly, women leaders were overloaded because of taking on 'double shoulder tasks', which brought greater pressures to their lives.

5.4 'I prefer to recruit men subordinates': How women leaders treat followers

With regard to how the women leaders treated their followers, the behaviour was roughly separated into two categories: being role models for other women; and a more contradictory one, that caring other women but also preferring to recruit men. The latter is interesting, the same individuals sometimes showed these two behaviours simultaneously, they claimed that they cared about women but preferred to hire men.

Being role models for women followers

Some participants showed encouragement, care and support for other women, as role models:

I will communicate with women followers on my own initiative if they face certain barriers and need me to give advice. Besides work-related aspects, I will also discuss their personal career development with them, such as how to improve themselves, how to let others know they are a great person, and how to shape their image in the workplace. I used to just talk about work with my followers, but, as I grew older, I realized that I need to be more friendly. And helping them to grow up in the career path makes me have a sense of achievement (Xiwen, Director of research centre)

Because I know how hard life is for a woman academic, I am more inclined to take care of women followers. I am an editor of a journal; when I am reviewing an article, if the article is very well written and the author is a woman, I will read it more seriously, and then write more detailed feedback to support her in modifying the article for publication in the future. I think it is not easy for women academics to produce good academic outputs, and they must spend more time and energy than men considering they also take on more family responsibilities. So I am willing to support women. (Xiatong, formerly Assistant of Head of School)

As women leaders, participants were willing to share their experiences with other women. For instance, they guided and encouraged women subordinates about career development, including the ability of negotiation, self-presentation, and self-promotion. Xiatong, as an editor of journal, provided more detailed comments to support other women's academic careers. As identified in section 5.1, developing relationships to role models who already stand in the centre of the leadership labyrinth is a significant way to gain guidance and support that help to navigate the labyrinth (Eagly and Carli, 2007). That kind of guidance and support from women leaders is very important for women followers, since leaders have the ability to help them pay attention to potential opportunities and barriers (Wyatt and Sliverster, 2015). Moreover, being role models also benefited for participants to maintain their leadership web. It was introduced by other participants that, universities assess performance of leaders every end of a year, and how their subordinates and colleagues evaluate them was a vital part of appraisal. Women leaders draw on support from other women through offering guidance and encouragement, since this behaviour both showed leadership ability and credibility (Stead and Elliott, 2009). In sum, it is noticeable that it is important for women leaders to become role models during their passage through the labyrinth, which not only gain

supports and good reputations, but also like Xiwen said, can gain a sense of achievement.

A preference to recruit male subordinates

Interestingly, some participants claimed that they preferred to recruit male subordinates, but at the same time they also showed care for women subordinates:

> *I will give suggestions to women subordinates such as paying attention to their children's further education in life, adjusting their own positioning in work, and completing their work efficiently, because I know that many women are facing exclusion and conflicts in the workplace… I prefer to recruit men subordinates at work but personal ability is the most important thing. Because our work involves frequent on-duty and business travel, sometimes even a need to do fieldwork, it is more convenient and safer for men. (Xueqing, Deputy Head of School)*

> *It is kind of hard for me to work with women subordinates, because they have too many issues relating to family and children. Such as the woman whose desk is opposite mine, who originally had lots of work needing to be done today but instead she asks for leave because of childcare. I cannot deny her, so I let her go, but the result is I have to do her work. And sometimes when I assign more tasks to women, actually my intention is to give them an opportunity to show their ability, but if they use an excuse such as caring for children to refuse an assignment, I understand that they don't want to get promoted and have lower career ambitions. I would not force a woman [to do the task], but instead I give the opportunity to others. (Qiaoyun, formerly Director of research centre)*

Participants also provided some guidance and encouragement to women subordinates, while at the same time they expressed their preference for working with men, which manifested a behaviour of 'queen bee syndrome' (a term introduced by Staines *et al.*, 1974). The 'queen bee syndrome' refers to how women who are in high positions of organisations show a tendency of distancing themselves from the same-gender group and impeding other women's career development (Derks *et al*., 2011). Participants claimed that they understand women subordinates' dilemmas and were willing to help, which did not seem to match the characteristic of the 'queen bee'. However, they then gave negative evaluations, for example, that women subordinates were unable to satisfy job expectations such as going on frequent trips or doing fieldwork; and women

subordinates faced more work-family conflicts such as asking for leave for childcare. So, through those participants' behaviours of devaluing women while preferring the men, their identities as the 'queen bee' was identified by their maintaining of the gendered hierarchy (Derks *et al.*, 2016). Agreed with Derks *et al.* (2016), I argue that the appearance of the 'queen bee' phenomenon in this thesis is caused by gender stereotypes. Specifically, those women leaders who have already experienced barriers internalize gender stereotypes and reproduce them in their relationships with women subordinates, because of the gendered hierarchy from organisational level to individual level. As Nentwich and Kelan (2014) said, individuals 'do gender as do structures' within organisations, that those women who satisfy job's gender arrangements also ask others to do construct rather than dimmish the gendered structures.

From women subordinates' perspectives, even women leaders see through a stereotypical lens when evaluating women as unable to live up to the 'ideal worker' (Acker, 1990). From the women leaders' perspectives, even though they understood the dilemmas women subordinates encountered, they still cannot accept them as an excuse for refusing tasks. Those women leaders thought the women subordinates failed to show their aspirations and professional ability and gradually lost advancement opportunities. I call this kind of leader as 'partial role models' as women leaders fail to fully support women subordinates, as well as women subordinates being unable to gain encouragement and inspiration from women leaders. The reasons are incomplete communication between them, and systematic barriers within gendered organisations. Women subordinates are supposed to proactively establish guanxi with leaders to express their concerns, and women leaders need to communicate with subordinates directly to offer feasible suggestions, rather than making conjectures based on behaviours. This issue is also a result of the organisational culture and structures within gendered universities, according to which the image of ideal worker is still occupied by a man who is fully devoted to work without burdens from family.

5.5 'Women leaders are troublemakers': Evaluations of women leaders

It is well-established that women leaders suffer from evaluations based on gender discrimination and stereotypes (Heilman *et al.*, 2014). Participants told of the discrimination they had suffered yet sometimes devalued women leaders themselves.

A participant shared a conversation with a top leader (a man) about the question why there were fewer women leaders:

> *People always require that women leaders should act like men, but in some cases they still think women leaders are incapable of doing so. I have discussed with my leaders about why there are fewer women leaders. And why does the university always worry about appointing women leaders? The top leader told me that women leaders are troublemakers. There are some things that men leaders are more easily able to do than women, such as going on business trips, especially to some remote place, as the university always needs to consider the issue of safety if they send a woman. But, as a woman leader, I usually go on business trips by myself, and I think there is no issue with this at all. And the leader says, when women leaders work together it is easy for them to come into conflict with each other when there is some disagreement. Because women are naturally sensitive and petty, just like the saying 'three women are enough for a drama'. And people generally think women are more emotional and are more prone to showing that emotion openly when compared with men. But as a leader, it is immature and unprofessional to show emotions in public. Considering that society originally had a derogatory understanding of the word 'women leader', I avoid being wordy and emotional. So, you can see that women's opportunities to be promoted are limited by gender, and the university will also consider gender issues when appointing leaders. (Xiwen, Director of research centre)*

The quote covers many stereotypes, and Xiwen listed several negative evaluations of women leaders. For example, women were still viewed from a stereotypical perspective, as demonstrated by the traditional Chinese saying that 'three women are enough for a drama'. This traditional saying was used to portray women as constructing conflicts with each other. Women leaders here were described as sensitive, disunited and aggressive, whilst they also lacked working efficiency compared with men leaders. However, when talking about working ability, women were described as weak and

emotional, even Xiwen used her experience to prove that women could go on a business trip independently. It shows that women are judged based on gender stereotypes rather than based on their professional ability. Interestingly, the trait 'aggressive' that is usually used to praise men here became a derogatory term to criticise women leaders (Eagly and Carli, 2007). That is because cultural stereotypes put women leaders in a double bind (Catalyst, 2007), they are firstly categorised as women thus activating feminine associations (sensitive and emotional), which are mismatched with the expectation of an 'ideal leader' (usually the male image). But if they act like men to 'fix' themselves, they are seen as difficult to get along with as shown by the Xiwen's leader's description – troublemakers – rather than acquiring any praise for being competitive or assertive such as men receive.

Moreover, the incongruity between stereotypes related to women and leaders not only influences how society evaluates women leaders, but also causes women to internalize and in turn maintain those stereotypes (Powell, 2011). As several participants illustrated, they thought women were not naturally made for leadership:

> *Women are naturally less energetic than men, and women's rational logic is also less agile than men's. I think women can never be separated from their gender identity since it is inborn. We have to accept that the truth is that women are not as strong as men, and women have to take more responsibility for childcare as mothers. (Shiyun, Assistant of Party)*

> *I think women are not suitable for leadership by nature. It's good for women to take a deputy position as it is a supporting role, since women are more caring. Men naturally have the gender advantage that they are tough, bold and have the holistic vision that makes them suitable to become leaders. While women are born with gender disadvantages, they are too sensitive, emotional, and incompetent. (Ailian, formerly Deputy Head of Subject)*

It was unsurprising that women also devalued themselves as being unsuited to take leadership positions, since gender stereotypes are not only descriptive but also prescriptive in guiding people in how they behave (Heilman, 2001). Through internalizing those stereotypical beliefs, participants also accepted and reproduced

gender bias. Such as when participants said women need to take more responsibility for the family as mothers, and women were 'naturally' servers/subsidiary while men are 'naturally' leaders/dominators in the workplace. However, Eagly and Carli (2007) conclude that men are not natural leaders, and effective leadership is not established only by masculine characteristics or feminine characteristics but by a balance of those characteristics.

While admitting the professional ability of women leaders, it was also pointed out that only men leaders have discursive authority:

> *I don't think men leaders are better than women leaders, there are lots of excellent women who have courage, holistic vision and good working ability in China. But the reality is, the gender unequal phenomenon exists in the whole of society, not only in China but also in other countries. So, I think the leadership of the Women's Union should be held by a man, because only men's speech is valued. Appointing women as leaders of the Women's Union is useless, no one will really care about women's living conditions. (Yaqin, Director of research centre)*

Yaqin claimed that even though women can become excellent leaders, they are still viewed as less competent than men because they are not attributed with authority when speaking. This evaluation points to gender discrimination at a societal level, where men dominate women within a patriarchal system of social structures (Walby, 1990). Therefore, the Yaqin put forward the assumption that men should be leaders of the Women's Union, to deliver the voice of women. The Women's Union is an organisation that is established and operated by the government in China. According to law the aim of this organisation is to represent and protect women's rights. However, this kind of assumption further reinforces the patriarchal structure. Firstly, this assumption devalues women's ability to fight against gender inequality which forms a discriminatory perspective from which to view women. Secondly, men are less likely to experience what women go through which makes it impossible for them to speak for women. Transferring power to men with the expectation they can protect women's rights is infeasible. As feminists Leavy and Harris (2019) say, women are supposed to enact

social change to remedy gender inequities, by speaking for themselves. An underlying reason of why the participant argued this assumption, is the long-term societal disregard of women's voices and circumstances.

In sum, this section discussed the negative evaluation women leaders received. Those evaluations are filled with stereotypes, including by women leaders themselves. It is a reflection on how, after arriving at the centre of the leadership labyrinth, women still suffered in comparison with the stereotypical 'ideal leader' and were trapped into fixing themselves, which undermined both their ability to be leaders themselves and to support and encourage other potential women leaders' aspirations.

5.6 'I am a selfish mum': When women leaders encounter work-family conflict

Most participants praised how family members supported them in their pursuit of leadership, but they still encountered conflict between career development and childcare. Commonly, those participants argued that their success in gaining leadership positions was aided by support from family, especially their husbands' understanding:

> *I am too busy at work and have no time to enjoy life and care for old parents, so sometimes there is regret. I am an enterprising woman, and you know that being 'Nvqiangren' [a term used to describe women who have strong career ambitions and spend all their time and energy on work] in China will attract various criticisms. But, fortunately, my husband is very supportive of my work, and he appreciates my efforts at career development, I am very grateful to my husband. (Hanyu, Deputy Director of University Office)*

> *To be honest, standing in this leadership position, I feel very tired, and I feel I owe a lot to my husband and children, but they are really supportive of my work and never complain to me. And my husband always takes the duty of childcare, he will take the children to school when I am busy at work. And my parents give me a lot of help, including caring for my children and cleaning the house. (Meigui, Head of School)*

Participants here highlighted the support from husbands, and how it exerted great

influence in helping them pass through the labyrinth to the centre. The relationships with others in their family were also significant in constructing their leadership web (Stead and Elliott, 2009). In contrast with previous participants, who were faced with work-family conflict in narrative One, in these stories the women leaders' husbands did not require them to interrupt their career, nor did they abandon them to 'widowed parenting'. It is noticeable that sharing domestic duties with a husband is an effective strategy for women to resolve work-family conflict (Li *et al.*, 2020).

However, it does not mean that women leaders could entirely escape from work-family conflict, rather they faced a work-childcare conflict:

> *Another factor that makes my promotion slow is that I always feel like I have a way out. If my career development is not good, I will turn to disciplining my children well and managing my own family well, as it is also a kind of success. I am definitely a working woman but I'm still a mum and a wife, so I feel like sometimes I need to give up something. There was once when my child got a bad grade in school that made me feel very anxious. I think I am such a selfish mum, I put my all concern into work but ignore my child. I will feel guilty and hopeless if my child cannot live well in the future. So, at that time I delayed my promotion and started to study with my child. I studied for a Doctoral degree while my child studied for his high school course, we kept each other company during those three years. As a result, we successfully got what we wanted after putting in the effort. (Xiwen, Director of research centre)*

> *Spending too much time on working definitely means I cannot care for my family well. When my child was just 9 years old, I started to train him to take care of himself. He went home alone, ate dinner alone and did his homework alone. Because I was too busy at work and always came home late. I feel I owe a lot to my son because I was rarely there when he needed me. But my son told me I am his role model who is always motivated and strong (Congrong, Deputy Director of University office)*

Participants highlighted their guilty feelings towards their children because they were too busy at work which made them ignore their children. However, it was interesting to find that their efforts at work also brought a positive influence on their children's growth. As some participants said, there were two kinds of success in women's lives, that of

developing a successful career and that of managing a happy family. The Chinese traditional expectations of women leave a 'way out' for working mums. It is noted that women take multiple roles in life, and 'having it all' is a challenge for women who want both successful family lives and career development, which brings stress, strains and overload (Eagly and Carli, 2007). But according to an alternative point of view, working mums' attitudes to their jobs also acted as a source of positive meanings for their family, as the quotes above show. Consequently, success in professional roles can buffer difficulties in other roles (McMunn *et al.*, 2006). The women leaders' experience of encountering work-family conflict may provide new insights for participants who still suffer in taking on multiple roles on their path towards leadership in narrative one.

5.7 Chapter summary

This narrative has demonstrated how participants constructed and retained their leadership, and what they faced at the centre of the leadership labyrinth. These participants as women leaders highlighted the importance of gaining support from private and public spheres; as Stead and Elliot (2009) argued, these women successfully developed relationships with others, place, work and another new relationship – 'with self'– to construct their leadership web. Negotiating, self-promotion, accelerating working experiences, asking for support from their husbands, and self-encouragement were argued as being supporting factors in gaining leadership positions. However, even having arrived at the centre of the labyrinth as leaders, participants still encountered challenges, such as: being discriminated against by others; suffering work-family conflict; and, an interesting one, several participants played both the 'queen bees' and role models for their women subordinates, because they internalised gender stereotypes then used those stereotypes to devalue other women. These findings revealed that women leaders were still learning while in the leadership positions, but compared with the challenges they met in the last narrative there were some differences. For example, the issues of work-family conflict and the importance of support from husbands in family life was emphasised in helping to construct these women leaders' leadership. It

was int eresting to find that a successful professional role also brings a positive influence on the family role, as some participants were also role models for their children. Their narrative not only presented how women academics successfully negotiated the detours within the labyrinth on the path to leadership positions, but also provided an insight into how they were buffeted by cross barriers in the centre of labyrinth.

Chapter Six: Narrative three: Leaving the centre of the leadership labyrinth

6.1 Introduction

This narrative presents what women in this study encountered when they decided to leave their leadership positions, and their sense making involved in the leaving process. The participants in this section are women who formerly occupied leadership positions but then chose to leave those positions, either temporarily or permanently. The chapter is composed of three sections. Firstly, the organisational culture that influenced some participants to make the decision to leave leadership positions are illustrated, through identifying the participants' perception of how universities treat women employees, said by one participant as 'we are just ignored by the university'. After that, the reasons why 'I resigned from my leadership position' are explored. Finally, an interesting trend is found among participants regarding their life attitude shifting to embrace *foxi*: they become tired of competition in the workplace and choose to pay more attention to finding the meaning of life and to their own health.

6.2 'We are just ignored by the university': The gender issue is the elephant in the room

Through explaining how participants perceived their treatment by universities, the organisational culture that disadvantages women's leadership is gradually exposed. Participants said that universities usually hold activities related to feminine characteristics, such as makeup tutorials on International Women's Day, while what they really needed was leadership and career development. Most participants claimed that women's needs of constructing and maintaining leadership are ignored, which shaped several participants' decision to leave leadership positions.

Activities held by universities for women employees

Almost all participants said higher educations organised various activities for women on International Women's Day every year:

> *On 8th March, the university will prepare some activities for women workers, but these all focus on women's physical and mental health, and there are no lectures on career development or leadership training. Examples are: giving a bouquet of flowers to each woman and organizing a brisk walking campaign to encourage women to pay attention to their physical health. We also have funds for women to receive a free physical examination. (Yunqing, Professor)*

> *The university will arrange various activities for women on 8th March, including tea parties, painting parties, a cooking competition, and make up tutorials, and so on. I think those activities are interesting and I like to attend them. But, in fact, I think the university should also provide more lectures related to careers, such as developing leadership skills. There must be lots of people who would want to participate in them. (Ruizhen, Associate Professor)*

Activities for women on International Women's Day was the most common way for the employers to show their concern for their women employees. It can be argued that universities do care for their women employees from both physical and psychological aspects, through providing free physical examinations and lectures on psychology. In addition, participants mentioned entertainment activities provided by universities such as cooking, make up tutorials and tea parties that aimed to relieve working pressures. However, as those activities were mostly regarded as feminine and matched with the traditional gender stereotypes of women, rather than granting them a higher professional status as leaders, meanwhile, the participants wanted the organisations to offer leadership and career-related activities.

There were some policies that concentrated on maintaining set proportions of women leaders in higher educations, which were mentioned by several participants:

> *The university requires that women leaders should at least occupy one percent of the Party leadership group. (Xueqing, Deputy Head of School)*

Our government has a policy that suggests the university train more potential women leaders under 42 years of age. And in order to keep a relative gender balance in the leadership group, our university requires a balance of men leaders and women leaders. (Guling, Head of School)

As participants argued, such policies publicly encouraged women to pursue leadership positions, and some of them benefitted from those policies by being picked and cultivated as potential leaders. However, they also illustrated the lack of a systematic approach for them to learn leadership, even with those supporting policies:

But I have no way to learn leadership. There is no relevant training program for women in university, so what I can do is learn from books of how women develop leadership. I've also previously advised the university to hold a training program for us, but I did not receive any response, so I gave up. (Xiatong, formerly Assistant of Head of School)

No, there is no training program specifically for women leaders here. But I attend the leadership training and experience sharing meeting that is for all leaders, which is also effective for developing my leadership skills. You know that sometimes we need to be flexible in the face of this kind of thing. (Jieying, formerly Head of Subject)

The demand for leadership skills training for women leaders is evident in the quotes, but universities often do not pay attention to this specific need. That participants had to become flexible in finding ways to learn leadership skills can be seen as negligence on the part of universities. It reveals that simply having a requirement of a certain proportion of women leaders is not enough, but putting in place supporting measures such as training is also important. This can be understood as one manifestation of universities as gendered organisations. The majority of leadership positions are still occupied by men, therefore there is no consideration of how to cultivate potential women leaders, which constitutes subtle discrimination. This links back to section 4.7 in narrative one, regarding how some women refused to pursue leadership because they believed they had no leadership traits or skills. But if leadership training programs are available, they are given a possibility to change their minds through realizing their potential. Therefore, holding training programs is important for universities,

considering it not only boosts women leaders' leadership skills but also encourages more women to navigate the labyrinth. However, the risk of leadership training programs also has to be taken note of, namely that masculine leadership models may attempt to 'fix' and victimize women for their different leadership strategies (Ely and Meyerson, 2000). However, considering the possible changes to organisational cultures that training programs bring, they are also encouraging and valuing women's efforts of pursuing leadership.

Debating women-only professional activities

In contrast, differing from the above argument that higher educations should provide a career-related program for women employees, several participants claimed that it was unnecessary to implement such activities specifically for women:

> *We don't have activities such as career development for women, since it is unfair for the men in the university. And the university will not hold those activities I can say, since those things emphasise gender differences and may intensify gender conflict, which is a result that the university does not want to see. (Anxin, Professor)*

These contrasting quotes indicate that there are two differing viewpoints of whether universities should focus on developing women's careers. As seen above, some supported the idea that it was necessary to hold career-related training events for women in the workplace, since it not only provided guidance that filled the gender gap of mentoring and networking, but also delivered a message that universities as organisations encouraged more women to aim for higher positions. However, other participants who opposed this viewpoint gave as their reasons that it was unfair for male colleagues, and that career development was an individual choice. Participants felt guilty in accepting support from organisations that was just for women, since there were no activities that were just for men. In other words, women are not excluded from those men only events (such as boys' club) directly and obviously, but are ostracized in a more invisible and subtle way as Eagly and Carli (2007). As Anxin said, organisations

worried that holding women-only activities will undermine the current 'gender equality' situation in universities, even they knew this kind of equality is fake and at cost of sacrificing women's rights.

Additionally, participants told of other underlying reasons why there are no career-related activities for women:

> *When I was a visiting scholar in other foreign universities, I found they often promoted the ideas of women's leadership and gender quality. I've also attended those activities. However, our universities rarely emphasise those ideas and see it as strange to specifically encourage women to develop leadership. We are just ignored by the university. I don't think the university does it on purpose since they do not even realize that women could make a difference to organisational performance. For example, I have also done research on women and once I was invited to help analyse the organisational performance in a company. When I listed the proportion of women employees in the report, the leader was confused and asked me why I analysed it and what was the relationship of this proportion to organisation performance. You see, people did not even think that a higher proportion of women leaders could increase organisational performance. And it is the same in the university. (Helei, Professor)*

> *I think that how to develop a career and leadership are individual considerations. Maybe it is also the case that some women are unwilling to gain professional success. (Anxin, Professor)*

Helei explored the difference between foreign university and Chinese university, and found that the topic of women's leadership was rarely discussed in Chinese university. There were two reasons, as Helei argued, the first being that organisations did not intentionally discriminate against women employees but ignored the fact that women leaders can have an impact on organisational performance. Subsequently, this neglect results in the lack of career and leadership related activities for women. A second reason was put forward by Anxin, that developing career and leadership were individual concerns rather than organisational concerns. Based on the findings in narrative one, the responsibilities for failure in the meritocracy are transferred to individuals. Here, to pursue leadership and develop one's career are categorised as individual choices. Therefore, universities as organisations were less likely to hold professional activities

for women to encourage and guide them.

Also, some participants pointed out that it was not just an issue that existed in higher educations but in wider society:

> *Encouraging women to develop their career is rare to see, so actually professional women are kind of passive in society. I think there are few people who realize that women have the desire to develop a career, which is closely related with how society positions women. (Ruizhen, Associate Professor)*

> *I think the gender issue is just like 'the elephant in the room'. The university pays no attention to it, but it does not mean it does not exist. It is truly hard to change, since just adjusting one or two policies is not enough. What we need is a systematic reform in society to solve the unfair conditions women encounter. For example, most people still believe that childcare is mainly a women's duty and that has caused various discrimination and limitations to women's careers and personal development. So a systematic adjustment at country and organisational level is needed, such as increasing paternity leave to relieve women from the work-family conflict. (Yingzhen, Professor)*

With regard to why women were ignored, participants linked the reasons to social expectations and the position of women. Women were usually expected to be good wives and mothers rather than workers and were recognised by gender identity rather than professional identity in the workplace. Women's demand for support with developing their careers was neglected due to gendered expectations, such as women are not ambitious in terms of their careers, and many women internalize and reproduce these attitudes themselves. Yet, being ignored does not mean that the gender issue does not exist, the action of ignoring is also a gender issue.Or Even though universities try to keep a 'superficial gender balance' and a 'gender neutral' image through avoiding emphasising gender. As some participants argued, universities should pay more attention to women's living and working conditions. There was an expressed need for a systematic reform to release them from the dilemma of gender inequality, which is a complex but important task.

6.3 'I resigned from a leadership position': Reasons why women choose to opt out

Of those who had resigned from their leadership position, a majority said that they themselves took the initiative to do so. Key reasons for these decisions included a failure to carry out reform in the workplace; issues concerning childcare; a wish to focus on doing research; and being the target of gendered stereotypes.

Failure to carry out reform in the workplace

In order to improve the universities' performance and provide a better place for students and teachers, several participants mentioned how they tried to carry out teaching or administrative reforms in the workplace through leveraging their leadership positions. However, the results were varied. Some participants failed and decided to step back from leadership duties, while some succeeded in carrying out the reforms and stayed on as leaders. However, when analysing participants' stories, it was found that the failure of reform was just the final straw rather than the direct reason for their resignation, receiving no systematically support from organisations was the main reason.

The participants told of their experiences of failing to carry out reforms:

> *I was the Head of Subject because the leaders asked me to take it, and they thought I could develop a better department. I was willing to take this position at the beginning, but later when I really carried out teaching reform, I was thwarted by both my leaders and subordinates. As for my leader (the Head of School), he criticised my ideas about the teaching reform as wasting time and he asked me to just obey his requirements. Because of the leader's opposition, there was no one who supported me, not my subordinates or other teachers. (Jieying, formerly Head of Subject)*

> *I was the assistant to the Head of School, in fact, I was being cultivated as the next Deputy Head of School for the future. But when I took this position, I realized that it was not easy to do leadership. For example, when my leader carried out the reform, I conveyed those measures to people and helped put them into practice. But those people thought it was I who made those decisions and damaged their*

interests and objected to me doing my work. Meanwhile, my leader didn't explain about me to them and made me a scapegoat to take the blame for the failure of the reform. (Xiatong, formerly Assistant of Head of School)

As the participants who were leaders said, at the beginning of taking the leadership positions they both were valued highly and had high expectations placed upon them. But during the process of reform, when they were faced with challenges and objections, there was no one to support and help them. Drawing on their previous arguments about guanxi, both Jieying and Xiatong claimed they were less concerned with making and maintaining professional relationships in the workplace because of heavy domestic duties and traditional gender expectations of women. Therefore, their dilemma of being unsupported was partly caused by the lack of a professional network and alliances that are embedded within the leadership web (Stead and Elliott, 2009). It is necessary to update professional networks and alliances with changing roles and situations, since the leadership web needs to be continually reconstructed to accommodate women's shift in development (Stead and Elliott, 2009). In addition, as for Xiatong, who became a scapegoat for her leader, this is perhaps an example of women rather than men being more frequently placed in high-risk positions, which is called the 'glass cliff' (Ryan and Haslam, 2007). When faced with risks related to change, organisations tend to sacrifice their female executives by placing them in high-risk positions (Eagly and Carli, 2007). In sum, some of women who lack alliances at work may run the risk of being treated as 'outsiders' without supporters, which may result in them leaving leadership positions (Neck, 2015).

Participants also illustrated how failures to bring about reform made them feel about leadership, which directly affected their decision to leave:

So, I gave up the reform and lost my confidence in leading, and I resigned from the leadership position because it was so pathetic to be a leader that no one supports and respects. Maybe in the future, when the working environment is better and there is an opportunity given by the university, I do not rule out going back to a leadership position again and achieving the reform. (Jieying, formerly

Head of Subject)

I felt very hopeless at that time and it made me realize that I may have no leadership ability, so I gave the excuse that I was going to go abroad as a visiting scholar to resign this position and I refused the further opportunity of becoming Deputy Head of School. After this occasion, I decided to never take any leadership positions in the future, instead only focusing on researching and teaching, which I am better at. (Xiatong, formerly Assistant of Head of School)

The failure of reform was just the breaking events, After failing to reform, Jieying and Xiatong described their feelings of hopelessness and of being 'pathetic', that they felt systematically unsupported by the universities. They emphasised the destructive feeling of receiving criticism with no one in higher leadership team can support them. Such negative evaluations shattered their confidence as leaders and made them doubt their leadership ability, therefore leading them to resign from their leadership positions. Resigning appeared to be their own choice, but several underlying factors which influenced their decisions emerged from their stories, including the lack of professional alliances and networks, as shown above. Moreover, the gendered structures of the organisations should also be taken into account, which in some cases 'set the women up' for failure while placing the responsibility onto them. While both participants expressed their disappointment in their leadership experiences, they had different future plans regarding leadership. Jieying was still willing to take leadership positions again if the university asked her to do so; while Xiatong claimed that she will never again take any leadership positions. It represents two different paths in the leadership labyrinth after women leave leadership positions: they may just remap their journeys and return to the centre of the labyrinth in the future; or they may decide to navigate their way out of the labyrinth which also requires time and efforts.

In contrast, there were also some participants who successfully carried out reforms through updating their alliances in the workplace, and stayed in their leadership positions:

This leadership position requires me to continually undertake teaching reforms, so I usually face the barriers of gaining agreement from leaders and support from teachers. In case of that situation, I often hold talks to introduce the content and advantages of the reform, to change their minds. I rarely give up because there is always someone who is interested in the reforms. Then I will communicate with those people to gain their support and, in return offer other opportunities such as training to thank them. (Congrong, Deputy Director of University office)

The research centre is new so there are lots of regulations waiting to be applied. Of course, I encounter lots of obstructions during this process, but I usually communicate with those opponents patiently or hold talks to explain the reforms. If the barriers are too difficult to overcome, I will do other things and solve the problems later. (Hanyu, Deputy Head of University office)

What both these participants had in common was that they both used communication to gain understanding and support from their leaders and subordinates, and sometimes they offered benefits in return to their supporters based on the principle of 'exchanging favors'. It reflects the need to make guanxi with others, which helps them construct networks and alliances in the workplace. Moreover, even though objections sometimes blocked women's leadership, they also inspired women to develop their ability to negotiate and lead (Stead and Elliott, 2008). Exemplified by these different experiences of facing barriers as part of undertaking reforms, the significance of continually constructing professional networks and alliances is emphasised as an efficient strategy to maintain leadership positions, and to successfully navigate the labyrinth.

Childcare, wasting research time and gendered stereotypes

The reasons other participants presented for leaving leadership positions was that they shifted their focus onto childcare or producing more research outputs, and due to gendered stereotypes. Differing from the resignation reasons discussed above, the reasons discussed here influenced the participants in various ways in making this decision.

I was the Head of Subject, but I later resigned the leadership position by applying to go abroad as a visiting scholar. Being the Head of Subject was a stressed-out job, it required me to spend more time on working and take more responsibility.

> *In fact, the leadership group intended to train me as the Deputy Head of School in the future, but I refused because I didn't want to participate in this competition of interests. Firstly, I had to care for my son rather than concern myself with my own career development. Secondly, resolving administrative issues seriously affected my research time and ultimately damaged my academic reputation. Thirdly, I felt that men need leadership titles more than women do, because men have to support their families and those positions bring higher pay and social status, and men enjoy this game of power more. As for me, I don't want to take on those pressures of leadership positions, I prefer to accumulate research outputs. However, even though I don't want to be a leader, if the school needs my support, I will not refuse to take leadership positions again. But honestly, I am very satisfied with my current career status. (Helei, formerly Head of Subject)*

As this participant reported, the leadership position intensified the workload and pressures as she spent much time and energy on solving administrative issues. It illustrates that organisations are greedy for workers' time, especially for those who are in more senior positions (Eagly and Carli, 2007). While the demand for long working hours influences both women's and men's careers, it must be taken into consideration that women take on more childcare responsibilities than their male counterparts. Additionally, the long hours take away time from producing research outputs, which in the context of the 'prestige economy' is a key performance measurement. Apart from these constraints there were interestingly also claims made regarding men being seen as more appropriate candidates for leadership positions. As Helei argued, according to the traditional gender division of labor, men were perceived as more ambitious and competitive in obtaining the higher pay and social status that leadership brings, in order to provide for their families. Meanwhile, women were seen as having no need to take on the pressure of competing for leadership positions. This has echoes of narrative one, where some participants similarly said that they had no interests in pursuing leadership due to similar reasons of family duties, lacking access to networks, and enduring gender stereotyping. It reveals that certain barriers appear repeatedly, at different stages, to shape women's advancement in the leadership labyrinth. Even though some of them had reached the centre, they still felt pressured, with barriers continuing to appear.

In conclusion, due to these factors, participants who had been leaders had taken the initiative to resign from their leadership positions, however, it did not mean they thereby left the leadership labyrinth. Some of them were still willing to accept leadership positions in the future if the organisations needed them, while others expressed their determination of keeping away from leadership and concentrating on doing research. These career plans suggest that even those participants who proactively interrupted their leadership journeys were still in the labyrinth rather than instantly exiting it. They were still attempting in various ways to move towards the centre of the labyrinth.

6.4 'I have become more *Foxi*': A shift in life attitude

After leaving their leadership positions, several participants claimed to adhere to what is known as 'Foxi', meaning 'Buddha-like', an emerging contemporary term which signifies a particular attitude to life in China (Jiang and Li, 2018). Following foxi, people express that they feel tired of competing with others and pursuing winning at all costs; instead, they choose to refute the obsessiveness with money, power or fame. In some cases, participants had started to reflect on the 'meaning of life' and focused more on themselves. For example:

> *As a working mum, I have to take on both work and housework responsibilities. My life is very stressful, and I give up a lot of recreational activities. I even started reading books on philosophy and thinking about how to balance my life. I think this is a problem about personal life experiences. The increasing experiences of my collision with society has caused me to no longer pursue external fame and fortune, but concentrate on developing my inner mind, for example, listening to my own heart. (Jieying, 42)*

> *Another change is my mentality. As I grow older, I have become foxi and no longer pursue things like money, fame, and power. I realize that those things are not the true meaning of life, but that physical and psychological health are the most important things in my life. Women do not have to live a particularly tiring life worrying about everything, women can also live a good life and live for ourselves. As a woman, I have already sacrificed a lot for my family and society, but now I*

only want to do things that I like, and make decisions for my own life. (Ruizhen, 54)

The reasons claimed by participants for why they became foxi included: the heavy burden of housework and paid work; the increasing pressure of balancing those duties; and concern with their physical and psychological health. Another potential reason also appeared where women were tired of satisfying gendered expectations, and on reviewing their previous life experience where they struggled to play all the roles of ideal wife/mother, ideal worker, and ideal women, their aspiration to explore what they themselves wanted increased, to as they said 'live for themselves'. The overload of working long hours in both professional and family spheres caused long-term stress, which made participants start to consider themselves. As they said, they started to listen to their own heart and they shifted their attention from work and home to their own wellbeing. Therefore, money, power and fame that can be associated with leadership positions but which requires them to spend time and energy were no longer attractive. Instead, physical and psychological health were emphasised as the important meaning of life. It could be seen that age also contributes participants to become more foxi, that the older they get they start to concern more on themselves and thinking differently. Foxi is different to the Western concepts of self-care or self-help since their meaning is different. Foxi emphasises people's rejection of competition, while self-care highlights that people for example do exercise or to increase their quality of life (Dugan and Barnes-Farrell, 2020). Increasing self-care is one of the reasons that may lead to becoming foxi, but there are other factors that shape this life attitude, as discussed above.

It is difficult to categorise whether foxi is the reason or outcome of the participants' leaving leadership positions. It is like a state of being and this state may change with interactions between individuals, organisations and society. But it is certain that this attitude towards life affected their leadership aspirations, and it did not just appear at the stage of leaving leadership but also at the stage of pursuing leadership. For example, as shown in narrative one, some participants prioritized family life and being good

teachers, rather than concentrating on promotion. In all these cases, their career ambitions changed which slowed down the speed of being promoted, no matter which life stage they were experiencing.

Following the values of foxi decreases people's willingness to compete at work. Indeed, some scholars have defined foxi as a pessimistic life attitude that simply lacks a fighting spirit (Jiang and Li, 2018), but the participants' arguments refute this idea. They may lose the desire to gain money and power, but they are still willing to pursue things they consider worth developing. For example, Jieying expressed her wish to continue carrying out teaching reforms in the future if she gets the opportunity of being leaders again, but leadership here for her is not for a personal career advancement but for advancing her professional ideal. Jingzhu on the other hand decided to focus on doing research for the rest of her career rather than competing for promotion. Instead, she pursued the aim of being a good academic. Therefore, it was clear that the foxi attitude of participants changed their thoughts on leadership. They decided not to pursue being leaders, however, they still pursued other goals such as developing a healthier body, producing high quality research, and obtaining an overall better life.

6.5 Chapter summary

In this narrative, the experiences of women leaving their leadership positions were explored. Participants perceived that universities ignore women's value as leaders and workers; women's demands to develop their careers and learn leadership skills were ignored, which potentially informed a gendered organisational culture in higher education. Further, failing to construct the professional alliances and networks was revealed as the key factor that resulted in reform failure. It was found that being disappointed with leadership and having their leadership abilities devalued were the main reasons for resigning from leadership positions. Other contributing causes included childcare, wanting to focus on research and internalizing gender stereotypes. Some participants claimed that they would never take leadership positions in the future,

while a few argued that it was possible for them to return to the centre of the labyrinth again in the future. Finally, several participants mentioned a shift in their life attitude as they had become more foxi. They were tired of the competition for leadership, instead preferring to focus on exploring what they really wanted in life. This life attitude showed in how women started to be concerned more with themselves, without considering how to be good wives, mothers, workers, and leaders. All these are examples of circumstances which lead participants to leave the centre of the labyrinth. However, as presented by participants, it is also not easy to discover the way out of the labyrinth considering they still worked in gendered organisations.

Chapter Seven: Discussion

7.1 Introduction

Having presented the findings of the research, this chapter examines the findings in light of the research questions of the thesis, that about women's perceptions of their leadership trajectories, and the gendered interplays between them and organisations. With reference to its theoretical and conceptual framing, this chapter then goes on to discuss how the study's findings contribute to theorization. The changing context of contemporary China will also be considered, as part of the discussion on the empirical contribution of the thesis.

7.2 Summary of key empirical findings

From the three overarching narratives presented in the preceding chapters, key findings emerged concerning women's leadership experiences in Chinese higher education. The first relates to the research question that focused on women's perceptions of their leadership trajectory. Participants' experiences of leadership were continually influenced by various factors, which operated at both an organisational and an individual level; these included masculine discourses and practices, gender stereotypes, work-family conflict and lack of networks (*i.e.* guanxi). These factors negatively influenced participants' development of leadership, but some participants' leadership was enhanced due to having to develop responses to overcome such challenges. There were two sources of such responses: they either developed from within the individual themselves, through using their own agency to organise support for their leadership, or were provided by their organisation. Chinese universities had policies to support women's leadership and career development, but these policies were usually considered by participants as being insufficient and lacking effectiveness. Therefore, participants claimed organisations ignored women's demands, and they called for more

organisational changes could happen in the future.

The findings demonstrated the gendered interplay between individuals and organisations. The gendered culture and structures of academia greatly guided women academics' leadership way, such as practising meritocracy as main research promotion approach. Participants either accept or challenge those gendered arrangements structured by organisations. When accepting those gendered arrangements, it was found that participants tended to take responsibility for failures in their leadership. An analysis of the reasons for participants making such choices, however, revealed that many factors, including organisations' failure to take responsibility, had led to participants blaming themself. When challenging those arrangements, participants brought change to their organisation, whether they used their own agency, or they took advantage of the support provided by their organisation. Specifically, participants' efforts and successes in leadership encouraged other women and changed the perception of women as leaders.

Next, the key findings of the study will be discussed using the theoretical lens of the thesis, and an assessment will be made as to their place in, and their contribution to, the literature.

7.3 Conceptualising women's leadership trajectory through the leadership labyrinth and the leadership web

Based on the theoretical framework that combining 'doing gender' (West and Zimmerman, 1987) and 'gendered organisations' (Acker, 1990), this thesis focused on exploring women academics' experiences in Chinese higher education. These two starting points provided an important foundation for the thesis. Firstly, they provided a perspective of gender as being dynamic and something that is constructed relationally (West and Zimmerman, 1987), rather than as something that is an innate characteristic. Secondly, they provided a perspective of organisations as being gendered, rather than being neutral entities (Acker, 1990). Combining both perspectives in this thesis resulted

in a framework through which to view individuals' careers as shaped I by gendered organisations. Evidence was also found of organisational culture and structures both affecting and being affected by individuals' beliefs and behaviours. The interactional processes between individuals and the organisations within which they are situated, and the effects of those interactions, constituted the main focus of this thesis. Based on the understanding of the interplay between individuals and organisations, specific concepts of the leadership labyrinth (Eagly and Carli, 2007) and the leadership web (Stead and Elliott, 2009) were brought together to form a conceptual framework to analyse the findings of the study. Specifically, the leadership labyrinth was used to explore how gendered arrangements of organisations shaped women's leadership trajectory, while the leadership web was adapted to identify how women use individual agency to achieve leadership. The outcome of the analysis will next be discussed in relation to the stated research questions of the thesis.

7.3.1 Research Question One: How do women academics make sense of their leadership trajectories in Chinese higher educations?

Firstly, it was found that participants experienced various challenges in their leadership trajectory, causing it to be rather winding. Influencing factors such as masculine discourses and practices, gender stereotypes, work-family conflicts and a lack of networks (guanxi) first emerged from the requirements and expectations of gendered organisations, which guided participants' attitudes and behaviour in relation to leadership (Eagly and Carli, 2007). The findings showed that Chinese universities required participants to be 'ideal academics', spending long hours working to produce research outputs; and 'ideal leaders', showing an aggressive attitude associated with masculine characteristics. In order to satisfy gendered organisational culture and structures, participants internalised and reproduced gender inequality regimes (Acker, 1990) in daily interactions while performing leadership duties. Such practices included sacrificing personal time to concentrate on academic work (Lund, 2012), and avoiding displaying feminine characteristics at work to construct a professional identity (Smith

and Hatmaker, 2017). Those findings reflect the challenges participants faced that inhibited their way of leadership, both at an organisational and individual level (Ely and Meyerson, 2000). Specifically, based on participants' experiences, these challenges were first created by gendered organisations and society, and then were internalised by individuals, thus shaping their construction of leadership. The findings resonate with Eagly and Carli's (2007) argument, that women's leadership way is complex and difficult, that women face varied challenges that are structured by gendered organisations and society, and have to navigate the winding paths within labyrinth to achieve the leadership goal.

Secondly, it was found that participants were influenced persistently by the factors mentioned above, regardless of the nature of their leadership journey. Take work-family conflict as example; in narrative one, some participants said they were exhausted to make choices between work and family during their paths towards leadership; in a similar situation in narrative two, some women leaders described themselves as 'selfish mums' for concentrating on leadership affairs at the expense of their children's education; in narrative three, several participants resigned from leadership positions because of childcare issues. These findings showed that work-family conflict was a factor for both participants who were pursuing a position of leadership, and those who had already become leaders, with some even deciding to leave a leadership position. Those influencing factors were relevant throughout the journey in the leadership labyrinth, as this thesis has shown. While Eagly and Carli's (2007) argument of leadership labyrinth was limited to discussing women's leadership experiences of going towards and arriving at the centre of labyrinth, the current thesis has continued to explore participants' journey by investigating their experiences of leaving the centre of the labyrinth. This is because the study has found that women's leadership journey did not end when they arrived at the centre, since participants have continued being pathfinders and making leadership related choices even after becoming a leader, and some of them looked to exit the labyrinth after leaving the leadership positions. Therefore, this thesis presents a more extended understanding of the leadership

labyrinth in the context of Chinese women academics than Eagly and Carli's (2007) labyrinth.

Thirdly, as well as challenges mentioned above, that inhibited women's leadership journeys, evidence was found of positive factors that supported women and helped them to be successful on this journey. For example, even when faced with work-family conflict, participants could overcome the challenge through using a strategy such as the development of a relationship with their husband or their parents, to renegotiate the distribution of domestic duties, thus providing more time for research. Also, they can use organisational support policies such as maternity leave also eased the tensions between work and fertility issues temporarily (Galinsky *et al.*, 2008). The findings of the study showed that participants as individuals use their agency to actively develop relationships with family members and the workplace, to gain the support to overcome the challenges of achieving a leadership position. Even though Eagly and Carli (2007) claimed that challenges and opportunities both exist in the labyrinth, they overlooked women's agency for creating and seeking opportunities to gain support within the labyrinth (Moratti, 2020). Hence, the leadership web described by Stead and Elliott (2009) provided a useful additional perspective from which to examine women's agency, enabling them to gain support from both the personal and public spheres of their life, to construct and maintain their leadership web. Therefore, combining the leadership labyrinth (Eagly and Carli, 2007) and leadership web (Stead and Elliott, 2009) enabled the current study to identify both the challenges and the support mechanisms that women have at their disposal, which exist in women's leadership trajectories.

It was found that participants develop various relationships to gain support from personal and public resources during the process of constructing leadership, as Stead and Elliott (2009) argued. Some participants found that building and maintaining guanxi with their family members, leaders and other colleagues provided them with guidance and encouragement. Also, some participants were inspired by the local culture

such as the servant leadership in Chinese culture to become the appropriate leaders, while in turn considered how to contribute to a better workplace through practising their leadership. And, some participants identified the difficulties at work and actively searched solutions to solve those difficulties. Those findings have revealed that women can develop relationships to *others* (individuals), to *place* (culture and structures of physical location they lived in), and to *work* (working experiences), in order to construct and maintain a leadership web (Stead and Elliott, 2009).

Furthermore, this thesis found a new type of relationship that Stead and Elliott (2009) did not include, which I named as a 'relationship to self'. In other words, participants were found to continually develop a relationship with themselves as a component of building the leadership web. Some participants usually reflected on their past experiences to gain support from themselves. Such as when they were faced with obstacles, they would memorise past experiences of how they encouraged themselves to become resilient and not give up, which brought powerful support for them to solve currently faced obstacles. Also, some participants reported that they always prepared for future opportunities for promotion, such as improving themselves to gain a higher degree or accumulating a range of work experiences, which facilitated the accumulation of leadership skills and knowledge. These findings showed that through reflecting on past experiences, participants reviewed their past choices and the consequent results; and through discovering their future preferences and potential, they set up and practised related plans to achieve future career goals such as becoming leaders. Through the ongoing process of reflecting on one's 'old self' and discovering one's 'new self', participants developed a 'relationship to self', which enabled them to encourage, trust and value themselves to further construct their leadership. These findings indicated that women's successful navigation of the leadership labyrinth cannot be separated from their leadership web (*i.e.* their relationships with others, place, work and the new type 'self').

To summarise, the study has found women academics perceived their leadership

trajectories were full of challenges and opportunities, what Eagly and Carli (2007) have conceptualized as the leadership labyrinth. However, beyond the explanation of labyrinth claimed by Eagly and Carli (2007), the current study reported women continued to be the pathfinders within the labyrinth even they arrived and leaved the centre. Despite of varied challenges (*i.e.* the walls of the labyrinth), they also used individual agency to gain support to construct their leadership web as Stead and Elliott (2009) illustrated. While except for the three types of relationships Stead and Elliott (2009) argued, participants also developed a new one named 'relationship to self' that continually reflecting and discovering themselves to achieve leadership positions. Through combing the leadership labyrinth and the leadership web, women academics's leadership trajectories can be conceptualised as, navigating in the labyrinth with the leadership web they constructed by using individual agency. Based on this understanding, the second research questions about the interplay between individuals and organisations were discussed below.

7.3.2 Research Question Two: How can the gendered interplay between individuals and organisations be conceptualised in the context of women's leadership experiences?

It was found that the challenges to participants' leadership trajectory were shaped by organisational culture and structures. Participants could surrender to, or overcome, those challenges, so reinforcing or challenging gendered organisations. Surrendering to the challenges occurred when participants accepted and internalized the gendered arrangements of organziations. It was found that some participants used 'it is my own choice' to enable them to take responsibility for their failure in leadership, stating that they obeyed gendered rules set by organisations, such as working long hours, and blaming themselves and others for not working hard enough or for being less competitive than others. Their internalisation of the gendered organisational culture and structures would reinforce the walls of the labyrinth, prolonging the challenges impeding women's journey towards leadership (Eagly and Carli, 2007).

The findings also show that some participants used their agency to overcome these challenges. For example, some overcame a lack of access to networks by actively building their guanxi, with their leaders to obtain professional guidance, and with the editors of journals to help prepare for future research publications. Relationships developed in this way constituted participants' leadership web, which helped them to eventually achieve leadership (Stead and Elliott, 2009). In conclusion, although organisations set up numerous challenges for women, women still had opportunities to build social capital and organise resources to overcome or circumvent those challenges. Further, the study also found that women who have overcome challenges and become leaders have also become role models in organisations. Some participants said the existence of role models had inspired their aspirations to leadership, challenging the stereotypical viewpoint in organisations that women are incapable of being leaders, helping to change the male-dominated structure of leadership. Those findings supported the arguments that, the success of role models can inspire and guide other women to pursue a leadership position (Eagly and Karau, 2002), and can also improve organisations' attitudes towards women as leaders (Terjesen *et al*., 2009). It illustrated that women leaders who successful arrived at the centre of labyrinth, not only could provide useful guidance for other women who follow them as Eagly and Carli (2007) said, but also could change some certain challenges (*e.g.* gendered stereotypes of women leaders) of labyrinth as this thesis found.

Secondly, it was found that Chinese universities offered support to participants in overcoming the challenges they faced. This is a common trend in China today, where maternity leave policies and other forms of support have become more common (Ye, 2016). However, most of the measures in place were regarded as being both insufficient and inefficient by participants, and participants expected more helpful measures from organisations. For example, most participants reported that these measures provided only limited support by giving women more private time, but their workload still remained heavy, with tasks needing to be completed in the limited time. Some

participants were worried that taking advantage of such support policies would reduce their research outputs and damage their professional identity, choosing refuse to use those support and 'cover' the work family conflict to avoid 'professional stigma' as Smith and Hatmaker (2007: 304) said. However, their behaviours in turn reinforced the masculine way of working in organisations (Eagly and Carli, 2007), may resulted in organisations continually viewed those obstacles as individual issues. Additionaly, some participants argued that, in spite of those support policies, some universities ignored women academics' demands of developing leadership and career. Since projects related with women that universities offered, were still around women's gender identity rather than professional identity, such as make-up party. Therefore, participants suggested the need for women to learn leadership skills, expecting universities to provide appropriate training. However, it is also vital for both educators and women who attend those leadership training projects to take 'a critically reflexive stance', which encourages women to analysis, reflect and challenge their own experiences to continually learn leadership (Stead and Elliott, 2018, p.389). In conclusion, the process of gendered interplays between individuals and organisations were portrayed as, gendered organisations structured challenges for individuals that impeding their progression towards leadership, although individuals have the agency to either reinforcing or changing the gendered organisational culture and structures.

In sum, women academics' leadership trajectories have been conceptualised as they navigated in the leadership labyrinth with the leadership web. Their leadership journey were described as navigating a labyrinth, with the walls of the labyrinth being the challenges presented by gendered organisations that impede women's progress towards leadership. Opportunities also exist in the labyrinth, in that women can use their individual agency to construct a leadership web to gain support from private and public sources, to help them to navigate the labyrinth. And during the navigating process, women continually interplayed with gendered organisations, that their attitudes and behaviors of leadership were shaped by organisations, but they in turn can use individual power to either reinforce or change the organisations. Eagly and Carli (2007)

examined the difficulties involved with changing the solid walls of the labyrinth with less consideration of individual agency, while Stead and Elliott (2009) emphasised how individual agency could construct leadership, and provided insights into the possibility of changing the labyrinth. The following section will discuss how the answers to the study's research questions can help to make a theoretical contribution.

7.4 Theoretical contributions of the thesis

Through combining the leadership labyrinth and the leadership web for use as a framework, this thesis has conceptualised women academics' leadership trajectory. This section discusses how the study contributes to understanding women's leadership within gendered organisations through advancing some aspects of the leadership labyrinth.

7.4.1 A dynamic perspective on the leadership labyrinth

Eagly and Carli (2007) argued that women who pursue leadership usually enter a labyrinth that constitutes a winding path with walls all around, and that the women have carefully navigate a viable path towards the centre. This thesis has found, however, that women face more complex situations than those of the labyrinth described by Eagly and Carli (2007). Specifically, I argue that the walls of the labyrinth can be conceptualized in more dynamic terms: they sometimes move or disappear (*i.e.* become invisible).

According to Eagly and Carli (2007), the walls of labyrinth present various challenges to women who navigate in there, and explored how those walls shape women's way in detail, however failed to capture the dynamic changes within labyrinth. The findings of my study have led me to reconceptualize the leadership labyrinth in more dynamic terms, thereby adding to its complexity and enabling a more nuanced approach to understanding women's leadership trajectories. One sense in which the walls 'move' is

in the way in which women encounter similar, yet qualitatively different, challenges at any given stage of their leadership journey. For example, work-family conflict was the most frequently discussed challenge by the participants, intersecting all three narratives of women's journeys in the labyrinth. Yet, at the different stages, the degree of conflict was different, as for women who pursue leadership in narrative one they have intensive work-family conflict that sacrificing themselves to facilitate husbands' career; while as for women leaders in narrative two, they mentioned the support from husbands that taking domestic duties and providing encouragements, which effectively diminished their work-family conflict. The reason may be, as women continually constructed their leadership web (Stead and Elliott, 2009), their relationships with husbands (or other family members) were also developed that changing the quality of this challenge. Those challenges impeding women's advancement on their leadership path were shown to represent 'continually moving' walls, on the evidence of women's navigation of the labyrinth. This is because the gender inequality regimes were embedded in both the organisational level (through organisational culture, structures and logic), and the individual level (through daily interactions and the construction of identity) (Bates, 2021). Challenges as the form of gender inequality regimes are produced and reproduced through the gendering process of organisations (Acker, 1990). Therefore, I claimed that the walls *move* as they followed the women's navigation of the labyrinth, continually impeding their leadership way in slightly different ways.

A further finding relating to 'moving walls' is the way in which challenges facing participants are changed by external factors, such as policies originating from organisations and society. Such policies might change the structure of the labyrinth. For example, some participants said that Chinese universities sometimes suddenly changed promotion criteria, by increasing the requirements for research outputs. Participants could neither predict, nor prepare for, such a change, which led to them failing to obtain a promotion that they originally would have achieved. Here, the 'new wall', the suddenly changed promotion criterion, is moved into a woman's path to a leadership position, forcing them to find an alternative route. Moving walls do not, however,

always result in more challenges. For example, some participants argued that they had benefitted from a sudden change to promotion criterion, such as when the change was to require a better teaching performance, which they were able to meet. In such cases, the walls moved in those participants' favour, so that they could find a more direct route to leadership. The moving walls can results in different consequences in different individual labyrinths, which also resonated with Eagly and Carli's (2007) argument that each individual labyrinth is unique.

Second, the walls of the labyrinth can sometimes seem to *disappear*. As explained above, the walls of the labyrinth are created by organisational and societal structures that shape women's paths to leadership. Structural conditions are, however, sometimes perceived to be individual choices or failures (Acker, 2006). This is a situation that is often viewed as the outcome of current practices in academia, which emphasise individualised performance measures, so that individual incompetence supposedly for example leads to a failure to gain promotion (Coate *et al.*, 2015). 'Disappearing' walls are demonstrated when participants say, 'it is my choice' or 'it is my fault', attributing all responsibility to themselves and thus enabling systemic 'walls' to deceptively fade away. For example, in narrative one, most participants claimed that the research promotion system, as a meritocracy, was fair and that it was their personal inability which resulted in the failure to obtain a position. A deeper analysis, however, has revealed various underlying gender-related factors leading to such failures, such as participants' heavy domestic workload, which has left them with less time for research. This confirmes Sealy's (2010) evaluation of meritocracy as being a system that does not sort individuals based on personal ability alone. It is difficult for women to question a meritocracy, since the masculinist nature of it is not visible, but is hidden behind the definition of 'merit' (Knights and Richards, 2003). The women showed faith in meritocracy, meanwhile, this belief and internalisation reinforces its domination within academia (Sliwa and Johansson, 2014). The myth of meritocracy therefore can be seen as a mechanism that performs a 'vanishing trick' by rendering walls that relate to gender discrimination or stereotyping (*e.g.* having contacts in the 'old boys' network' or the

view that women do not make good leaders) invisible, as only merit is seen to matter. In the supposedly meritocratic leadership labyrinth, it is skill and knowledge that enable individuals to progress, but the findings of this study show that the labyrinth is not a meritocratic one. Instead, it is shaped by gendered assumptions and cultural values that place challenges, or walls, in the path of women.

A similar situation was found in narrative three, when participants stated that it was their own choice to leave a leadership position. As the analysis shows, however, other factors influenced the participants' decision, such as the long working hours that are required by universities and an organisational culture that ignores the demands of women academics relating to their development needs in terms of leadership and their career. Chinese universities fail to recognise organisational ability in changing gender inequalities in academia's structures and culture. As Morley (1994) argued, academia should not just be the source of oppression but also become a place that encourages the exploration of liberation and empowerment. When women blame themselves as being incompetent, the walls of the labyrinth that are structured by gendered organisations and society seems to disappear, since responsibility for failure is transferred to the individual. However, the walls have not really disappeared, but have merely become invisible, making it difficult or even impossible to challenge them. This is because the walls of labyrinth are still structured by, and individuals' decisions are also shaped by gendered organisations. Some of the participants realised that organisations and society should take responsibility for improving women's conditions, calling for more supportive policies to solve the structural issues that emerged in each narrative.

To summarise, this thesis presents a dynamic perspective to understanding women's leadership labyrinth, considering the labyrinth as a dynamic entity within which walls can deviously move and disappear rather than being stationary, as assumed by Eagly and Carli (2007). This perspective enables me to consider influencing factors of women's leadership trajectories as complex and as difficult to be recognized and predicted, as they are continuously crafted by both individuals and organisations.

7.4.2 The leadership labyrinth is co-constructed by organisations and individuals

The second contribution of this thesis is that the leadership labyrinth is viewed as co-constructed by both organisations and individuals. Based on an understanding of the gendered interplay between individuals and organisations, as discussed above, it has been demonstrated that gendered organisational culture and structures create the labyrinth for women. Meanwhile, women's agency as individuals to participant into constructing the structure of the labyrinth was highlighted above.

According to Eagly and Carli (2007), the labyrinth is already present before women enter it, and is made up of numerous obstacles, one of the source of obstacles they demonstrated is the organisational culture and structures. They argue the gendered patterns of behaviors and shared beliefs within organisations disadvantage women, therefore women need to be brave and smart enough to find the successful route to the centre (Eagly and Carli, 2016). Their arguments highlights the organisational contribution of labyrinth, while women seems need to adjust themselves to adapt the existing labyrinth. However, this thesis found that women also have the power to organise their resources to challenge and reconfigure the structure of the labyrinth to a greater degree than posited by Eagly and Carli. It was found that participants built 'upward guanxi' with their leaders, to obtain guidance in career development and the opportunities for self-promotion. In so doing, they pushed against some walls of the labyrinth, including the wall created by a lack of mentors (Powell and Graves, 2003) and the wall of gendered stereotyping that claims that women are less competent to be leaders (Hoyt and Simon, 2011). The analysis of the findings has revealed that women's construction of a leadership web (Stead and Elliott, 2009), through developing various types of relationship to obtain more resources, to challenge the existing structures of the labyrinth, making the labyrinth easier to navigate. On the other hand, it was found women can also participate in constructing new walls for themselves and others, such

as in narrative two some women leaders prefer to recruit men subordinates and devalue women subordinates, which made them lose some support and trust from women subordinates, and also impeding women subordinates' paths towards leadership. This finding illustrated that developing relationships does not always benefit women's leadership as argued by Stead and Elliott (2009). The inappropriate ways women used to build relationships may carry risks of damaging their leadership web, as findings showed they may lose the support from women subordinates, which form a vital part of professional alliances.

Women can contribute to changing the structure of the labyrinth based on their position. As Stead and Elliott (2009) state, developing relationships is an ongoing process that continues throughout women's construction and maintenance of their leadership web. For example, some participants stated that they developed relationships with role models, to receive guidance when they pursued leadership (Wellington, 2001). When they became a leader, they developed relationships with their subordinates, to gain support from them (Ozkazanc-Pan and Clark Muntean, 2018). Women can construct and maintain, and then reconstruct, their web to help them continually progress on their journey through the labyrinth. The continually evolving and updated leadership web that women maintain (Stead and Elliott, 2009), in this thesis can be seen as the infinite resource that helps women navigate the labyrinth and sometimes gives them the power to remove certain walls.

Returning to the theoretical framework of this thesis, the theories of doing gender (West and Zimmerman, 1987) and gendered organisations (Acker, 1990) provided a theoretical lens through which to explore the interactions between individuals and organisations. The finding that women also participate in constructing the labyrinth can facilitate understanding of the extent to which individuals have the power to enact change in the existing gendered order and arrangements within organisations. This co-constructive relationship is an asymmetrical one where organisations generally have more power than individuals. In other words, organisations have a greater influence on

individuals, with individuals being able to do no more than slightly change their organisations, by doing gender in a multiplicity of ways (Mavin and Grandy, 2013). This thesis has shown that individuals' power is limited but it can nevertheless change a gendered organisation in some specific ways. Change begins with daily interactions between individuals, and then proceeds to influence culture, finally effecting changes to gendered structures. This is, however, a long, hard process, but the individual agency of resisting gendered structures and culture has been shown to eventually have an impact. This contribution resonates with Stead and Elliott's (2009) argument that using a relational approach to conceptualize leadership, that leadership is an ongoing process that shaped between different relationships, also including the relationships between individuals and organisations.

To summarise, this thesis considered the labyrinth as co-constructed by organisations and individuals. Organisations initially present structural walls (challenges) within the leadership labyrinth, and individuals test these walls using their support mechanisms. The sources of the labyrinth are, partly, gendered organisations, as well as society, through policies, structural changes and social values. The labyrinth is, however, also partly a product of women as individuals and the resources they build through their continually evolving leadership web. Women do not simply accept the paths that are laid down by organisations and adapt themselves to the labyrinth. Instead, women use their agency to obtain power resources, to continually challenge and change the structure of the labyrinth. This means that individuals can slightly change gendered organisational structures and culture. As Acker (2006) stated, the gendered organisation is difficult to change, but it is possible.

7.4.3 Empirical contribution to the study of women's leadership in contemporary China

The thesis focuses on the leadership trajectory of Chinese women academics, a group that has received little attention in the existing literature. The findings of the study have

included evidence of some new trends, namely that individuals are concerned about their own feelings and agency, while organisations are showing a growing concern for women academics' circumstances and are gradually providing more measures to support them. These trends indicate that individuals, organisations and society are undergoing changes in contemporary China. Since the leadership labyrinth is co-constructed by individuals and organisations, such changes can lead to changes in women's leadership trajectory, providing new challenges and opportunities. The changing context in China might have an impact on the nature of both the leadership labyrinth and the leadership web in the country.

New trends at an individual level

One trend observed was that some participants were experiencing a shift from taking a self-sacrificing attitude, to focusing more on themselves.

A self-sacrificing spirit was prominent in many participants' narratives. For example, some sacrificed their own career development to support their husband's career, interrupting their own journey towards leadership to give birth and take care of children. Other participants sacrificed family time and leisure time to spend long hours working in order to satisfy organisational expectations of the 'ideal worker' (Acker, 1990). Such findings illustrate participants' attempts to meet socially-guided expectations of the 'ideal woman' and the ideal worker and leader. Traditional Chinese culture encourages women to practise such self-sacrificing behaviour. Self-sacrifice has been highly praised and encouraged in China, from ancient Chinese society to the present day (Xie and Zhou, 2021). Within the family, the traditional duties of a wife include submissiveness and self-sacrifice for the good of family harmony (Wu and Dong, 2019; Yang, 2001). Within organisations, the collective culture in China emphasises the importance of group goals over all personal goals, meaning personal considerations should be sacrificed for the benefit of the organisation (Triandis *et al.*, 1988). However, it is difficult for women to make sacrifices both in the home and in the workplace, so they usually choose to sacrifice their career to satisfy the expectations of the family and

the organisation. This requirement for a double sacrifice has intensified for Chinese women academics, now that the country has published the 'two/three children policy' to encourage childbirth, and higher education has a 'publish or perish' policy to require academics to publish research papers. These policies have increased the requirement for women's sacrifices in both the family, and the organizational spheres.

The thesis has however also uncovered an interesting emerging trend. Findings showed that some participants were more concerned with their physical and psychological health; putting their own preferences first and developing agency to achieve career aims, which may have added new challenges and opportunities for their leadership trajectory. For example, some participants had become more 'foxi' (Buddha-like), refusing to participate in competitions for leadership, instead being more focused on searching for other forms of meaning in life. 'Foxi' is a popular term in China, which refers to examining a type of 'life attitude'; it means that people lose the desire to obtain money, power and fame, and seek inner peace and happiness, to relieve the pressure of modern life (Jiang and Li, 2018). Therefore, becoming foxi changes women's understanding of, and attitude towards leadership, in that they may have less interest in gaining leadership positions. On the other hand, becoming foxi is also an expression of individual agency directed towards shaping a new relationship to the self, revealing an individual's reflections on leadership and their views on the pressures of professional life, which may bring new challenges and opportunities on their path to leadership.

When women academics become more concerned about themselves, this does not mean they completely stop making sacrifices; they continue to do so, but their sacrifices become subject to their willingness and choice (*i.e.* they make sacrifices for things they consider worth making sacrifices for). For example, some participants in the current study preferred to teach, rather than research, being certain that they could achieve their self-worth through teaching, even though they knew that producing research outputs was the key to achieving promotion. However, this situation is also changing in recent years, as some participants mentioned some Chinese universities had started to promote

‘teaching professors’, to reward academics who show excellent teaching performance. This is a new opportunity that enables women who prefer teaching over research to achieve both self-worth as a teacher and a leadership position. This individual shift is closely related with development of Chinese feminism in society that leading by the new generation of young feminists, which is different with the traditional Chinese women’s emancipation movement that is mainly guided by the government (Liu, 2017). The young feminists’ arguments are more radical, emphasizing the desirability of individual choices, and expanding the issues they focus on such as empowering women in wider spheres in society (*e.g.* labour market, family relationship), which significantly attack the foundation of patriarchal culture and also change contemporary women’s life attitudes in China (Evans, 2021). These new rising viewpoints are widely discussed by people through social media, newspapers, and activities in Chinese society (Wang and Driscoll, 2019), inspiring the women academics to continually reflect on themselves.

Although evidence has been found of women academics considering their own welfare, rather than continually making sacrifices as the patriarchal structures and culture require, this does not mean that they had found a way out of the labyrinth, since they remained in gendered organisations and in a gendered society. They still struggled in the labyrinth, but to a lesser extent than women who had taken on the great burden of self-sacrifice. This new trend of concern for themselves brought new challenges and opportunities for women’s navigation of the labyrinth and constructions of leadership web, as well as a new trend at organisational level below.

New trends at an organisational level

Based on participants’ narratives, it was observed that universities, as well as the country as a whole, have become increasingly concerned with women academics’ working conditions, but participants hoped that there would be further changes at both organisational and national levels.

Participants’ narratives showed that, in recent years, as higher education institutions

and the country, have gradually become more aware of the choices that women academics need to make, supportive policies and activities have increased. For example, periods of maternity leave for women academics have been extended (Ye, 2021), age limitations for applying for research funds have been made more flexible for women (Wang *et al.*, 2019) and the Chinese government has introduced laws and regulations to require that there should be at least one woman leader in the top leadership team of each university (Ye, 2021). Participants also pointed to the increasing number of activities, such as the 'women professors' party' and academic conferences such as the 'IT women's elite conference', which have been introduced to encourage women to share their organisational experiences.

Such findings reveal a new trend, at an organisational and national level, for women to receive greater recognition and encouragement. The structural and cultural changes described here, which are the result of efforts by individuals, as well as organisational and country efforts, are raising awareness of how women academics' circumstances can be improved (Yang, 2010). This trend in academia derive from the social culture and structures in contemporary China, that questions regarding women's status are attracting more attention now than previously (Evans, 2021). As for individuals, many Chinese women are noticing and questioning the patriarchy in daily life, as topics related with women such as gender equality and feminism have become more popular to discuss on Chinese social networking sites (Wang and Driscoll, 2019). In this context, women academics also reassess their value in the workplace and continue to deliver their voices through using activities hold by universities. The government continually updates the Chinese women's development plan and perfect the related laws, in response to women calling for enacting changes (Yang, 2008). Changes are happening, but not widely enough. Some participants argued organisations should further encourage and lead women to develop their leadership trajectories and careers. Although, one of the goals of Chinese women's development plan is training and elevating the women leaders, it seems harder to practise the policy in specific institutions considering the longstanding masculine structures (Ye, 2021). It is

important for active support from within organisations to be combined with supportive legislation and social change, to ensure that gender inequality issues are addressed (Acker, 2006).

To summarise, individuals, organisations and society are undergoing a process of change in contemporary China. Individuals are becoming more concerned with exploring their own needs, rather than continually making sacrifices, while organisations are beginning to pay more attention to improving women's working and living conditions (and are being asked to do even more). The shifts of individuals and organisations are closely related with the development of Chinese feminism in contemporary society and the updated supporting policies from the country level. And I am hopeful that those changes will continually happen in the future, like President Xi (2020) has said, China will continue to achieve the commitment of gender equality, through working on eliminating prejudice, discrimination and violence against women. These trends have brought new challenges and opportunities for women in their navigation of the leadership labyrinth and the construction of their leadership web, and they have already had an impact on their leadership trajectories.

7.5 Chapter summary

Through combining the concepts of the leadership labyrinth (Eagly and Carli, 2007) and the leadership web (Stead and Elliott, 2009), this chapter has discussed the findings of the thesis with reference to the research questions and the contributions. Women academics described navigating a labyrinth containing a number of challenges and opportunities, with gendered organisations placing obstacles in their way, but they also revealed how they can use their agency to help them to advance in the labyrinth. These findings have contributed to knowledge of women's leadership trajectory, and of how they use their leadership web to navigate the labyrinth. The study has also demonstrated that the walls of the labyrinth are dynamic, in that they can move and 'disappear' (*i.e.* become invisible); these walls are co-constructed by individuals and organisations,

enabling individuals to continually change structures of labyrinth. New trends have been identified in the Chinese context, with individuals and organisations both undergoing a process of change, which has introduced new challenges and opportunities into women's leadership path. This thesis has highlighted women's agency in the leadership journey and has made a theoretical contribution by using a dynamic lens to explore the gendered interplay between individuals and organisations.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

This chapter draws the thesis to a close and demonstrates the fulfilment of the aim of the thesis. It firstly reflects on the implications of the main outcomes of the thesis, to present a broader perspective on women's leadership in academia beyond the immediate context of the thesis. Secondly, it offers an appraisal of the value of analysing women's leadership experiences a through a dynamic lens. Thirdly, the limitations of the research are discussed, followed by recommendations for future research. Finally, I conclude with my personal reflections on doing this research.

8.2 Women's leadership in academia: Changes to challenges and opportunities

As discussed in the thesis, women's underrepresentation in leadership positions in academia has attracted researchers' attention in recent decades, although this research area remains dominated by Western academics (Aiston and Yang, 2017). This research has addressed this lacuna, providing insights into women academics' leadership experiences in Chinese universities. It has also responded to the call for more feminist research to be conducted in China (Gaskell *et al.*, 2004) The study has analysed Chinese women academics' leadership narratives, including the challenges and opportunities they face, and the gendered interplay between the women and their organisations on their leadership journeys. Women academics are navigating a winding path in the labyrinth, facing various challenges, but also creating opportunities to advance through using their individual agency to construct a leadership web. Empirical evidence has been presented of changes affecting both individuals and organisations in contemporary China. Individuals are becoming more concerned about themselves, while organisations have started to pay more attention to improving women academics' working conditions. Those changes are shaping women's leadership journeys, both currently and, arguably,

in the future.

The changes that are happening now suggest that current and future prospects for women's leadership in academia in China will likely improve, even though leadership paths will still be winding. With the development of Chinese feminism in recent years, the increasing number of women-focused events such as conferences are held in academia, encouraging women academics and students to participate in discussing women academics' working and living conditions. The discussions will no doubt continue in the future, as there will be more potential women academics (Tang and Horta, 2021). Even though the increase in the number of women academics does not mean their way towards leadership will automatically become less complicated, but the new generation of women academics has the potential to inject new blood into academia and paving the way for reform of the Chinese higher education sector. Women's increasing concern for themselves shown in this thesis also reflect a change to traditional family values. Women now have more choices, and they will continue to explore more possibilities in the future, beyond the traditional dichotomy of 'work or family' as in the past when they encounter the work-family conflict. Women academics can pursue leadership to achieve professional goals; or they can concentrate on research or teaching to achieve self-worth; some of them have chosen to become 'foxi' and prioritise life outside work, such as family. This trend of diversification of choices reflected by women academics' career development in this thesis, challenges Lu's (2020) argument that Chinese women academics create obstacles for themselves.

However, work-family conflict is still a challenge that women have to face in their leadership path, and may become even more intensive in the future. Due to the steady decline of the national fertility rate in recent decades, China will continue promoting childbirth incentives in the future (Ye, 2021), which will result in women facing more pressure from their family and society. Meanwhile, in the context of the academic prestige economy, competition in Chinese academia will intensify in the future (Jie, 2021), which will also cause women academics added professional pressure. However,

there is cause for cautious optimism, as there are signs that the Chinese government has started to draft welfare policies to mitigate future work-family conflict, such as encouraging men to apply for paternity leave, and taking part responsibility for childcare (Chen, 2021). Therefore, I envisage that more women academics will be able to advance their leadership ambitions in the future.

8.3 The value of this study

This thesis has presented rich narratives which have provided insight into the leadership experiences and working conditions of Chinese women academics, responding to Stead and Elliott's (2009) call for the need to enrich the literature on women's leadership experiences in diverse contexts. The thesis provides new insights into women's leadership experiences, using a 'dynamic lens' to capture the gendered interplay between individuals and organisations. The dynamic lens refers to how researchers should not only notice interacting processes between individuals and organisations, but also concerns the changes that occur in over time and in specific contexts. It should be recognised that the source of gender inequality within organisations lies in gendered practices, at both an organisational and individual level (Ely and Meyerson, 2000). Focusing on the individual only, runs the risk of blaming women for lacking leadership skills and traits (*e.g.* Eagly and Carli, 2007); whereas using an organisational perspective alone will emphasise structural issues without taking individuals' agency into consideration (Lester *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, it is necessary to understand women's leadership trajectories holistically, taking into account the interplay between individuals and organisations. The thesis has done this, through exploring how gendered organisations shape challenges for women and in turn how women respond, and influence changes to organisational culture and structures.

The use of a dynamic lens has made it possible to examine changes that have happened to individuals, organisations and society. The findings of the thesis have led to the conclusion that the structure of the labyrinth is unstable and at times unpredictable.

Women's leadership journeys should therefore be understood as a complex and ongoing process, with a dynamic lens being used to explore the constantly changing interplay between women and organisations.

8.4 Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research

Some of the limitations of the current study might be addressed in future research. The translation process is difficult and time consuming, which presents a limitation in the research process. All data were collected in Chinese and translated into English. While this on the one hand enabled building rapport between myself and the participants, there were also some difficulties in translating the original Chinese meaning into English, especially when participants used slang or ancient words to express themselves. This issue was addressed on occasions by keeping the original Chinese words (*e.g.* 'guanxi') and explaining them as clearly as possible, in comparison with articles written in English to see which translation most closely reflected participants' meanings of the words. To avoid skewing that might arise from language comprehension issues, I wrote the findings by using both Chinese and English transcripts to correct any misunderstanding of words and to ensure I retained the original meaning intended by the participants.

In terms of future research, new challenges and opportunities emerging as a result of changes in individuals and organisations are worthy of further exploration. For example, this study has identified a trend for individuals to become more 'foxi', which suggests a changing perspective on understanding women's leadership in contemporary China. This thesis gave priority to answering research questions related to women's perception of their leadership trajectories, explaining the presence of foxi. Further implications of women becoming 'foxi' are worthy of investigation in future research, such as in the context of changes to women's status after becoming 'foxi', and how long any change in status lasts. It would also be interesting to investigate the extent to which organisations notice changes in terms of women's 'foxi' attitudes and behaviours, and

whether they choose to intervene, such as offering more flexible working solutions to relieve women academics' pressure. These new trends in the findings would be valuable to explore in a follow-up study, to gain a richer understanding of contemporary women's changing perceptions of leadership in China.

This study has focused on women academics' leadership experiences and working conditions in comprehensive universities that offer courses in both traditional sciences, the social sciences, and humanities, in which faculty is quite balanced in terms of gender. There are, however, other types of universities in China, such as normal universities (*i.e.* aiming to train students to be future teachers) where women account for a large proportion of faculty; and scientific and technological universities (*i.e.* aiming to train students to be biological or technical engineers) where the majority of faculty is male. Using the framework constructed in this thesis, it would be fruitful for future research to feature other types of universities that are less or more stereotypically masculine or male dominated. It is anticipated that such a study would discover a different leadership labyrinth and leadership web than the current study, with a different organisational culture and structures.

Finally, this thesis is an exploratory study that aims to explain the phenomenon of women's underrepresentation in leadership positions. It does not have the primary purpose of recommending specific practical measures to change the conditions for women. Future research should therefore focus on the evaluation of existing measures to improve the proportion of leadership positions held by women, and the development of new measures. As Eagly and Carli (2007) state, without gender equality in leadership positions, it is hard to attain gender equality in the world in general. In particular, it is hoped that this thesis can open up opportunities for more researchers, especially Chinese women researchers, to investigate the conditions experienced by Chinese women in academia as well as in other sectors. As Chinese women and society are both experiencing a slow, but significant, reform in the context of gender equality, there is hope that the prediction of President Mao in 1944 that 'Women hold up half the sky'

will come true one day (soon)!

8.5 Concluding reflections

I believe and will continue to believe that researching women's academics leadership narratives is meaningful and important. I have been interested in this research area since writing my Masters dissertation four years ago. Women academics in higher education, are not only vital brains in society that generate new knowledge and create new contributions; but they also take great responsibility for educating and inspiring coming generations (Teague and Boddy, 2014). Therefore, their leadership in higher educations is critically important in shaping the future of society (Longman *et al.*, 2014). During four years of accumulating knowledge related to gender, organisations and leadership, I gradually developed a more critical perspective on understanding women's leadership experiences, and instead of just outlining what women encounter I wanted to explore how their leadership attitudes and behaviors are shaped by, and continually shape, the world.

Through writing this thesis, I have learned how to grow into a narrative researcher that presents a 'lived' world based on women academics' experiences (Rhodes and Brown, 2005). The 'lived' world findings which touched me were that, even if women academics' leadership trajectory is winding, their narratives are not defeatist tales, and the women are not trapped in the labyrinth, but are striving to pursue advancement of their leadership and their careers. I hope that their narratives presented in this thesis, will not only inspire other women who are navigating the dynamic leadership labyrinth, but will also push for the development of gender-related policies and practices in academia in China and elsewhere.

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Appendices

1. The introductory Email

Dear Teacher:

Hello,

My name is Feier Wang, I am a PhD candidate at the University of Glasgow (UK). The purpose of writing this email is to invite you to participate in my academic interview (the interview data will be used for my doctoral dissertation and will be fully anonymized), and I hope you can give me a chance. Through your profile on the school's official website, I know that you are a female academic with outstanding research achievements and rich work experience. Therefore, I would like to invite you to participate in the academic interview of my research ‘Women's Leadership in Chinese Universities’, and I hope to have the opportunity to hear your work experience. The purpose of this interview is to collect growth stories of women academic working in universities. If you are interested into this research, the first attachment explains the background of the study and the interview process, the second attachment is the proof of ethic approval letter from the University of Glasgow Academic Ethics Committee, and the third attachment is my curriculum vitae. If you agree to be interviewed, I will then send you specific interview questions for you to understand this research and we can discuss the time and location of the interview. I am currently in Beijing and can arrange interviews according to your schedule. Thank you and looking forward to your reply.

Best wishes

Feier Wang

2. The Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

My name is Feier Wang, and I am a doctoral researcher at the University of Glasgow. The title of my study is *Women's views on leadership in Chinese Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)*. You are being invited to take part in this research because of your experiences of leadership in Chinese HEIs. Before you decide whether to participate in or not, it is important for you to understand, why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Please take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this Participant Information Sheet.

This study aims to explore the issue of the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in Chinese HEIs. It seeks to understand the role of gender in Chinese HEIs, and the influences on women's leadership. This study invites you to attend a 1-hour interview to talk about your work, especially your experience of leadership. If you permit it, this interview will be audio-recorded. Participation in the research is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any time without prejudice and without providing a reason, you can refuse to answer questions if you prefer not to, and you can request me to stop recording and taking notes at any time.

Any personal information will be kept confidential, and your name will not be disclosed. Please note that assurances on confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless evidence

of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered. In such cases, the University may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies. The data collected during the research will be used for my PhD thesis, publication in articles, and conference papers. The digital data will be stored on my personal laptop that is password protected and any hard copies of transcripts will be kept in a locked drawer at home. The personal data of this research will be destroyed once the project is complete. The paper documents will be shredded, and the electronic files in personal computer will be deleted by professional removal software. The research data will be retained in secure storage for use in future academic research, and stored in the University of Glasgow internal system. The stored data for future use will be available from the researchers by personal request and anonymised all the time.

This project has been considered and approved by University of Glasgow College Research Ethics Committee. If you would like to talk to me about this project you can email me at @student.gla.ac.uk. If you want to pursue any complaint, you can contact the College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer, Dr Muir Houston, email: Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk.

Thank you.

End of Participant Information Sheet

3. The Consent Form

University of Glasgow
College of Social Sciences

Consent Form

Title of Project: Women's views on leadership in Chinese Higher Education Institutions

Name of Researcher: Feier Wang

I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

Yes ☐ No☐

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

Yes ☐ No☐

I consent to interviews being audio-recorded, but I reserve the right to ask for the recording to be stopped if I wish.

Yes ☐ No☐

I agree that the researcher may take notes during the interview.

Yes ☐ No☐

I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by pseudonym.

Yes ☐ No☐

I acknowledge that there will be no effect on my employment arising from my participation or non-participation in this research.

Yes ☐ No☐

I understand that all names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymised.

Yes ☐ No☐

I acknowledge that the material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.

Yes ☐ No☐

I acknowledge that the personal data (audio recording) will be destroyed once the project is complete.

Yes ☐ No☐

I agree that the researcher could retain research data in secure storage for 10 years for use in future academic research.

Yes ☐ No☐

I agree that the material may be used in future publications, both print and online.

Yes ☐ No☐

I agree to waive my copyright to any data collected as part of this project.

Yes ☐ No☐

I agree that other authenticated researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.

Yes ☐ No☐

I agree that other authenticated researchers may use my words in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.

Yes ☐ No☐

I agree to take part in this research study ☐

I do not agree to take part in this research study ☐

Name of Participant ……

Signature ……..

Date ……

Name of Researcher ……

Signature ……..

Date ……

…..…… End of consent form …….

4. The interview agenda

Professional background information

Age, married status, children status;

Years of working in higher educations;

Current and past positions;

Key career plans moving forward;

Main questions

When did you enter into this university? For which reasons? How do you feel about this workplace?

What kind of challenges and support did you face on the path towards research / administrative leadership positions?

How did you deal with this challenge? How do you feel about it? Did you report this challenge to organisation? How did it react? And what kind of support did you get? how do you got it? How do you feel about the support?

To what extent do you feel your gender has affected your progression? How and why?

How do you understand leadership and your leadership role? How did you get this leadership position? Please describing your daily leadership routines. How do you feel about your leadership practices? And why do you have these feeling?

What kind of challenges and support did you face during practising leadership? how about the relationship with other colleagues (leaders and subordinates)?

Do you see any measures that organisations take to help women to reach leadership positions? How do you evaluate them?

Did your experience change your view of leadership? What are your future plans?

What do you understand by gender equality at work? How does this play out in your own experience/university/context?

What has this interview made you think about that we haven't yet covered? Is there anything you would like to add? Has any of our discussion made you think about what you would like to do differently in terms of your own leadership – is so what would that be?

5. A sample logic diagram of reorganising story