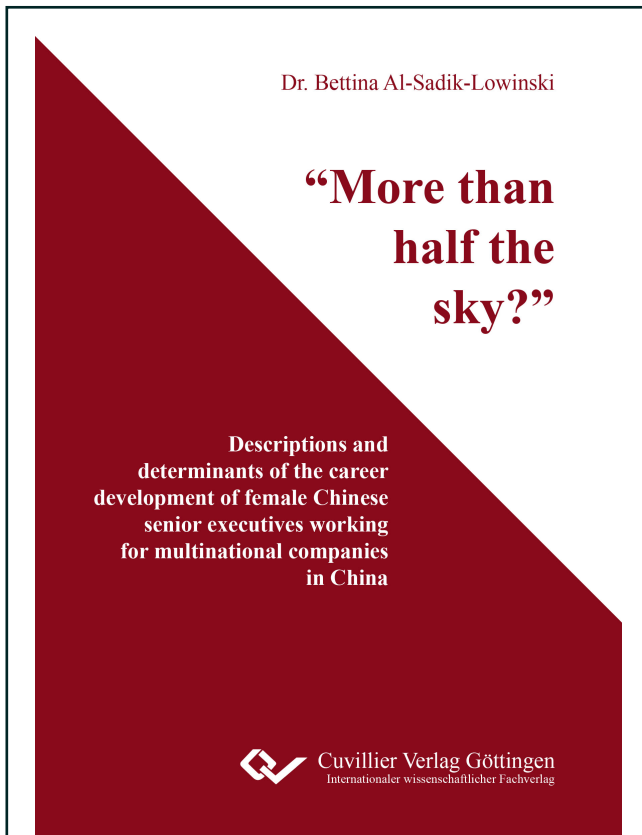




Bettina Al-Sadik-Lowinski (Autor)  
**“More than half the sky?”**

*Descriptions and determinants of the career development of female  
Chinese senior executives working at multinational companies in  
China*



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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Relevance of the study

“Women can hold half the sky” – Mao Zedong

“Women are the moon reflecting the sunlight” – De Mente

According to figures published in 2014, in international comparison China has among the highest proportion of women in senior management roles, on a par with several Eastern European and Asian countries. The studies show that 38% of senior management roles in China are held by women, far outstripping countries such as the USA (20%) and Germany (16%) and the global average of 24% (Thornton, 2014).

At the same time, however, many researchers paint a picture of disadvantaged, insecure female Chinese managers who, primarily due to the country’s traditional legacy of Confucian values and patriarchal structures, have to date only been minimally represented at the very highest levels of leadership in China.

The present study explores the disputed area between these two views.

The equal opportunities policy that has defined discussion in China since the middle of the last century is often characterised by reference to Mao’s famous remark about women holding up “half the sky”. Some researchers affirm a picture consonant with the figures presented above and describe China as offering a “more equal” environment with better opportunities for women in management than comparable environments in Western countries. However, a larger number of scholars point out the gaps that still need to be filled before the goal postulated by Mao can be achieved. These researchers take a more pessimistic view of the successes of women in management careers in China.

Against the backdrop of the unparalleled transformation of the entire Chinese economy and the rapid economic development it has brought in its wake, and independently of the comparison of the different situations of men and women in management, the question arises of how women develop and experience their careers in the context of the specific conditions that prevail in this environment.

Existing research offers only isolated findings on these matters: “There is little research done with focus on experiences and attitudes of Chinese female senior managers” (Liu, 2013). The available literature looks at individual aspects of the issue of women’s careers in China. Most of the literature takes a quantitative, comparative approach, comparing women with men or with women from different countries. Examples include studies



comparing the motivation or effectiveness of women and men. Studies have also been published on differences in pay between the genders and what impact having a male rather than a female manager has on a company's success. A few other studies have concentrated on specific industry sectors and women's experiences in these sectors. For example, there are a handful of studies on women in management in China's IT and hotel sectors.

Most of the publications on Chinese women and their careers date from the 1980s and 1990s, and many of them are in the field of gender studies. Since then, prevailing conditions have undergone a rapid and continuous transformation. Moreover, scarcely any studies have attempted to look at women's career development and career influences holistically. This may be due to the complex nature of holistic explanations and the difficulty of gaining access to suitable target groups in China.

Both in China and throughout the world, female executives are subject to a wide range of influences that affect their prospects for success in their careers. Very little is said in the existing literature about these determinants, context-specific factors and the career paths of top Chinese female managers, and hence there are almost no descriptions of the experiences of female Chinese executives. Accordingly, very few studies approach the topic and its various aspects in a holistic manner. However, in order to better understand the challenges and success factors relating to women's careers in modern-day China, what is needed are holistic approaches that investigate a combination of different factors rather than focusing on the effects of individual aspects.

This study focuses upon the career paths and career patterns of female Chinese executives as tangibly affected – to a greater or lesser extent – by these determinants.

The study can be classified as a work in the field of career theory, which encompasses both sociological and psychological theory and concentrates on analysing career determinants, career paths and career patterns. Since the study exclusively concerns women, its theoretical framework is also informed by gender studies. However, it cannot primarily be categorised as a work of gender studies, since it is not designed to identify ways in which women are disadvantaged. It is also not designed to offer generalisable conclusions about the situation of working women in China. Rather, the idea is to achieve a deeper understanding of the experiences and views of a highly select group of Chinese women in senior management. In pursuit of this objective, a qualitative, conceptual framework-based method has been selected that is geared towards a holistic perspective on the situation. The emphasis is not on representativeness and generalisability, but on understanding the actual career conditions and career paths of Chinese women in context.



## 1.2. Aims of the study

This study aims to present a holistic picture both of the career paths of a defined group of top female managers and of the determinants of their careers. It investigates a variety of aspects that are relevant to women's careers in senior management in China at a specific company type, namely multinational companies. Adopting a holistic approach, it describes and assesses the determinants that are relevant to the women's careers and experiences.

The study contributes to a greater understanding of the success factors and challenges that affect women's career paths in China. It investigates top female managers' experiences and attitudes as well as the factors which enabled them to rise to senior executive roles at multinational companies. The results show how the study participants developed their careers, and present the individual solutions they found for the challenges arising during their careers. The results also aid understanding of how the women achieved their management positions and show which factors can effectively support women in their careers.

There is little literature which includes Chinese women managers in the research data, even though women's work in China is becoming more and more important. (Aaltio, 2007, p. 228)

Tatli, Vassilopoulou, and Özbilgin (2013) also describe talent shortages and untapped female potential in China. Chinese university graduates increasingly prefer Chinese employers. The competition for the best managers presents HR departments at multinational companies in China with the challenge of how to attract more untapped female potential to their company and retain it successfully. These multinational companies are directly competing not just with private Chinese companies, but also with state-owned enterprises. In the context of international competition and the slowing down of Chinese growth, the question of how to select the right managers is even more critical than in the past. Ventolini and Mercier (2015) describe how the management of careers becomes a strategic parameter for organizations in order to stay competitive. The central elements of China's future economic strategy are home-grown innovation, quality and market leadership. In order to implement this strategy over the long term, the country needs the best and most effective managers – in short, the right managers. Accordingly, promoting successful executives is a key priority. In future, there will be no getting around the need for even stronger promotion of women, especially at Shanghai's many multinational companies.



This study aims to support companies' strategies for promoting women by providing holistic results that shed light on the determinants of successful careers for women. It attempts to paint a comprehensive picture of the situation of the Chinese women who participated in the study. The descriptions given by the women and the interpretations derived from these descriptions may help management teams and HR specialists both in China and beyond to develop a deeper understanding of the situation of women in senior management roles. The focus is on China and specific aspects relating to women's careers there. Companies and countries which still have very low proportions of women in senior management, such as Germany, could also make use of the results to draw conclusions regarding their own country-specific issues.

The study yields findings that are of relevance to the field of career theory in general and could be quantified or analysed in greater depth in future studies.

Moreover, the results are intended to provide inspiration and guidance to women at the start of a career in management, enabling them to plan their careers in a more informed manner.

### **1.3. Research questions**

This study investigates the career paths of 35 female Chinese executives who work at multinational companies in China (mainly in Shanghai) and the determinants that have influenced their careers. The overall aims of the study are to investigate and analyse critical determinants, and to describe the women's career paths and classify them in a typology. The study focuses equally on external and individual factors that contribute to career success and on factors that limit or have a negative impact on success. It also takes account of women's experiences, attitudes and individual perceptions.

The aim of the study is to achieve a better understanding of the situation of women in top management roles in the defined group and thereby develop findings that indicate new avenues for future research and facilitate HR strategies in China and other countries, so that in future more women can make it into senior executive roles. One possible incidental result could take the form of explanatory models for why, according to published figures, China has such a high proportion of women in senior management roles.

This study takes a qualitative approach that is described in detail in chapter 3 ("Methodology"). However, for the sake of clearer understanding, a basic outline of the core research questions is given here. Qualitative studies, unlike quantitative ones, do not start from hypotheses that they attempt to prove in a representative manner. Rather, "in a qualitative study, inquirers state research questions, not objectives [...] or hypotheses [...]"



These research questions assume two forms: a) a central question and b) associated sub-questions.” (Creswell, 2014, p. 139).

The primary focus of this study, which is qualitative in nature, is to describe female Chinese senior executives’ career experiences as fully as possible.

The central research question addressed by the study is as follows:

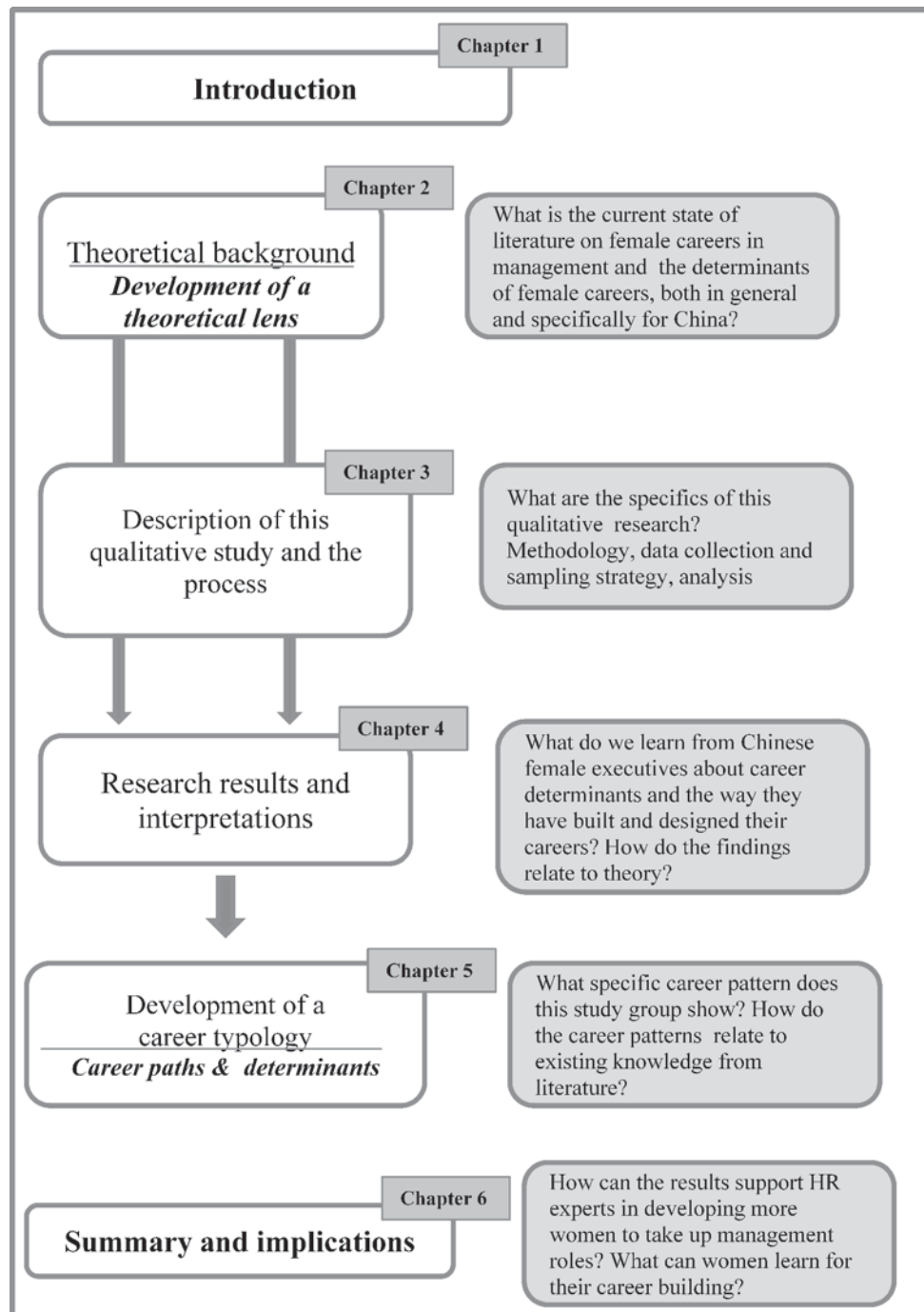
How do Chinese female executives describe critical determinants of their career development and their own experiences during their progression to a senior management role at a multinational company in China?

Associated subquestions are:

1. What external determinants of their career development do they describe?
2. What individual determinants were important for their career path?
3. How do they describe their career development and planning?
  - a) What planned and unplanned career steps did they take?
  - b) What were the main challenges along the way?
  - c) What typical career patterns exist?
4. What kind of career typology can be derived from the findings?

#### **1.4. Structure of the study**

This study focuses on the career development of female Chinese executives. This career development represents the outcome of various determinants that influence and shape the women’s career paths. As described in the opening to this introduction, research into women’s careers remains patchy overall due to the longstanding dominance of men in management careers. There are relatively few studies on the careers of Chinese managers overall, and almost no research, bar a few isolated studies, has been carried out into the career paths of female Chinese executives.



**Figure 1: Scheme of the thesis**

The study begins by explaining what is meant in scholarship by the term “career” and the concept of “career success” that is often associated with it. The variety of definitions makes clear the different perspectives that researchers bring to the concept of “career”. This is especially important given the fact that career theory as a discipline in its own right is still relatively young and primarily influenced by the Anglo-American context. Careers are influenced by a variety of contextual factors, for example sociocultural as-



pects, family situations and the labour market. The focus of this study is to investigate the specific features of women's careers in China. Accordingly, it primarily presents research approaches that are relevant to describing women's careers. More traditional concepts offer explanations of the forms that careers used to take in the past, while more recent career models explain the forms they take today. Two types of approach are especially relevant to the study. Firstly, ones that focus on determinants and influences in relation to careers. Secondly, research in the field of career theory that investigates women's career paths and attempts to provide better descriptions (and hence a better understanding) of women's careers through the use of typologies.

The findings of existing studies on female management careers in China are summarised in a separate section, with the intention of showing which issues relating to the careers of Chinese women in management have been investigated previously by other researchers and what conclusions these researchers arrived at.

The first chapter concludes with an overview of the career determinants that have been investigated by previous studies and the resulting theoretical perspectives developed by different researchers. Career patterns are the result of these determinants, and so studying external and individual determinants is of great importance when seeking to understand female managers' career paths.

The second chapter presents selected determinants of the careers of female managers. Where there are existing findings in previous research on the Chinese context, these results are specifically incorporated. However, due to a lack of published research on China, many aspects are analysed on the basis of Western research. A distinction is drawn between external and individual influences on careers.

In relation to external determinants, the focus is on historical and cultural conditions, the labour market context, the influence of the family and the role of mentoring and networks. The historical and cultural framework comprises Confucian values and traditions. Their significance for women's careers is described on the basis of findings from the literature. One significant determinant of women's careers is the political developments in China and the government's efforts to bring about equality of opportunity, which constitute the legal framework within which women pursue their careers. These efforts have also influenced Chinese society and its image of female executives. Hence, the issue of the local image of women in senior management roles is presented, *inter alia*, in relation to the "Think manager – think male" phenomenon from the perspective of the literature. The labour market context in China has been shaped by a probably unique transformation from a socialist planned economy to a government-controlled market system. Accord-





ingly, the subsequent section looks at findings in the literature regarding careers before and after China's economic reforms. The specific situation of women in Chinese management is described by reference to figures, the question of whether a glass ceiling exists and a general inquiry into the issue of equality of opportunities for female Chinese managers. The next subsection then addresses the question of whether and to what extent women's careers are influenced by their families. Three components are analysed: women's families of origin, women's own family situation (with a particular focus on the factor of motherhood) and the role of women's partners. Finally, the study considers mentoring and networking, which are important external career determinants. The literature shows that there are particularly pronounced differences between the effects of mentoring on men and women. Against the backdrop of *guanxi* principles, networking has a special significance in the Chinese context. These principles are firmly embedded in society and so are of far greater importance for careers than networking as understood purely in Western terms.

Section 2.3. addresses the individual success factors that facilitate advancement to senior management. The primary question here is what training and skills women need in order to rise up the ranks. A longer section addresses the connection between personality and career success. Psychologically oriented research identifies the personality dimensions more strongly associated with career success. These include dimensions such as conscientiousness, leadership and achievement motivation, openness to contact, team orientation, emotional stability and flexibility, which are taken from the Big Five, the Business-Focused Inventory of Personality (BIP) and other theories. In this context, aspects of exercising power, dealing with conflict and competitive behaviour are described in relation to career success. Finally, the study turns to the question of what image best helps women to progress in their careers.

The subsequent subsection looks at female leadership styles, since leadership behaviour is a key factor in career development at companies. Most researchers investigate the specific features of women's leadership behaviour in comparison with more characteristically male leadership behaviour. Differences and distinct traits that researchers tend to ascribe to female executives are identified, alongside findings about leadership behaviours that make women especially successful in their careers.

In section 2.4., the findings on career theory, external influences and individual success factors are combined into a theoretical model. The conceptual framework explains the main objects of this research (the key factors, variables and constructs) and the relationships assumed to exist between them. This "theoretical lens" provides the framework for



the study as a whole, including its analysis and conclusions, and is the central strand around which the remainder of the study is structured. (Creswell, 2014). According to Creswell researchers increasingly use a theoretical lens or perspective in qualitative research, which provides an overall orientation lens. A basic version of the conceptual framework is developed right at the start of the study, and is refined throughout on the basis of findings from the literature. Section 2.4. presents the final model of the theoretical lens for this research that results from this process. This model serves as a “map” that guides the research in the remainder of the study.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology that has been chosen for the study, with a focus on the specific features of qualitative designs and the reasons for choosing one. It explains why a qualitative methodology is essential for this study and what the advantages and disadvantages of this approach are. A special data collection strategy in the form of a multiple case study design with problem-centred interviews was chosen in order to enable a holistic approach towards the complex issues that this study addresses to be taken within the scope of the qualitative design. The corresponding sections describe the methods that have been chosen in more detail and provide theoretical justifications for them. This part of the study concludes with a discussion of ethical considerations in relation to the chosen design.

The study’s target group comprises Chinese women in senior management roles at multinational companies in China. This qualitative study is primarily characterised by its theoretical sampling approach, which focuses not on statistical distribution but on the composition of the phenomenon that is being investigated. The subsequent section describes the criteria according to which the target group was selected. The data collection process is also described. According to several researchers (Korabik, 1993, Tu, Forret & Sullivan, 2006, Cooke, 2009), the main obstacle to carrying out studies in China is gaining access to the right target groups. As a result, many management studies are restricted to students whom the researchers are able to recruit at universities. This study has benefited from the network of the doctoral candidate, who has lived in China for a number of years and so has had access to female senior executives. An explanation is given of precisely what is meant by “senior management” in this study and which women were selected for the interviews. In qualitative studies, the researcher has a particularly important role, since personal views and interpretations can influence the results; this issue is addressed critically in the subsequent section.



Section 3.4. describes the data analysis process. 800 pages of transcribed material were analysed using structured theory-driven content analysis. The different stages of the analysis are described in detail.

In chapter 4, the results of the study are presented and interpreted. In accordance with the theoretical lens, the first part of the study is reflected on almost in its entirety and the results are interpreted in the context of the findings from the literature described in chapter 2. Sections 4.1. and 4.2. present the women's answers and descriptions regarding external and individual determinants. Each subsection presents the corresponding results followed by an interpretation.

Section 4.3. describes and interprets the career paths of the 35 women who were interviewed. The section begins by clarifying what the concept of "career" means to the women in this study. In the career paths analysis, the individual stages of the women's careers are recorded in chronological order. The analysis is subdivided into four parts: "Recent positions", "The start of the women's careers", "Moving up" and "Future career goals". The analysis covers reasons for changing roles, decision-making processes and alternatives, and both planned and unplanned career decisions. Particular attention is also paid to the challenges that the women have faced in the course of their careers.

The study culminates in chapter 5 with a typology describing the typical career patterns of the study group. The typology incorporates findings about career development determinants and the results of the career paths analysis. The result comprises five groups of patterns that are typical for the study group. The patterns are developed by reference to the existing typologies from the literature that were presented in chapter 2.

In chapter 6 the main findings of the study are summarised and discussed; in line with the aims of a qualitative methodology, recommendations for future research are presented. The chapter also offers suggestions for HR experts on the basis of theory and practice, with a particular emphasis on how companies can promote women. These suggestions can be applied against the backdrop of the increasing competition for top talent at multinational companies in China or, in the wider global context, against the backdrop of the question of how to promote the advancement of female executives to top hierarchical levels and management boards at companies. These recommendations are based on a discussion of the study participants' views about the future for female Chinese executives and the Chinese economy.



## 2. Theoretical background

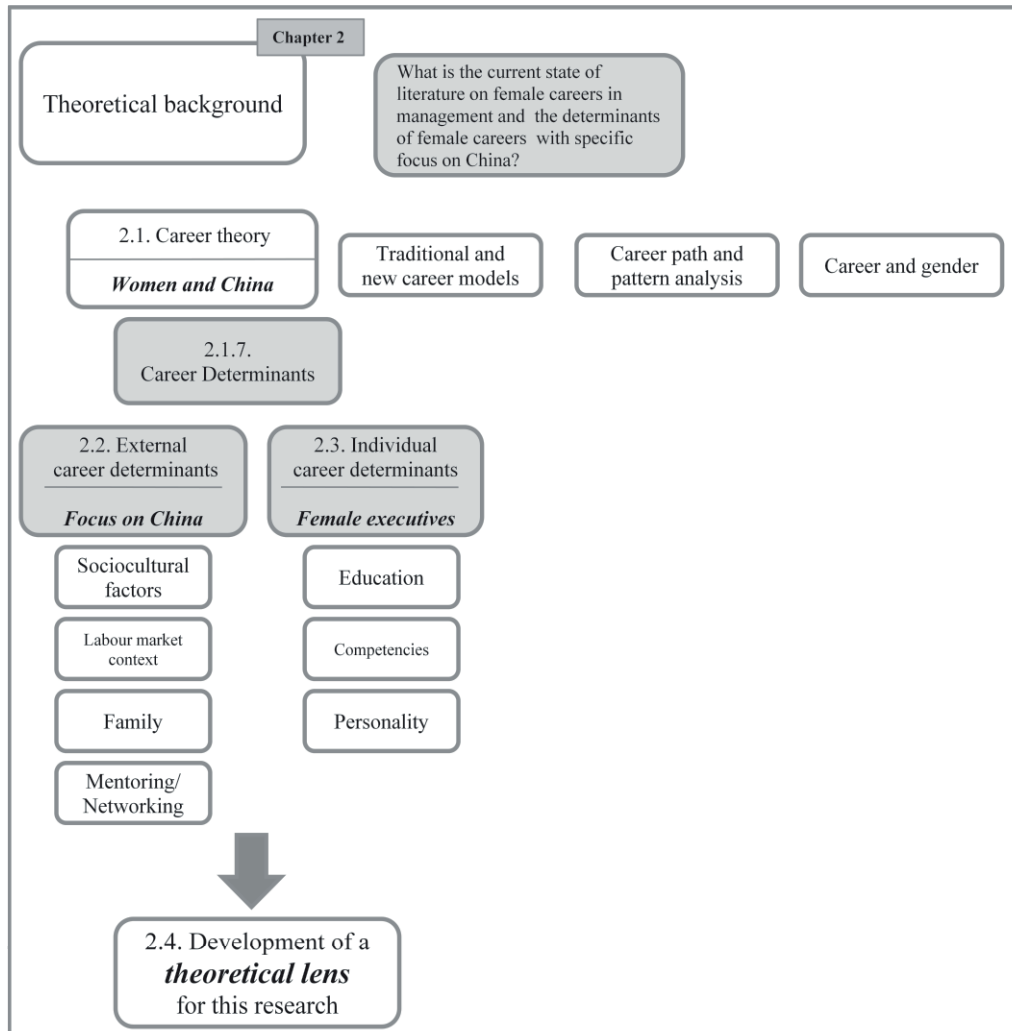


Figure 2: Scheme of literature work

### 2.1 Career theory and previous research (regarding the careers of female Chinese executives)

#### 2.1.1. Definition of “career” (theoretical perspectives on the concept of career)

The core of the present study concerns the career development and career patterns of 35 female Chinese executives and the factors that influence their careers.

For this purpose, the first task will be to define how the concept of career is understood in the standard literature and how the concept of career success should be viewed in relation to it.



The concept of career is defined from a range of perspectives by various researchers, leading to diverse definitions. The term “career”, at least when it refers to a person’s occupational history, is almost always linked to the idea of progression and rising up the ranks of a hierarchy; in this context, “career progression” and “being successful” are often used synonymously. The notion of career describes the professional stages and roles an individual has progressed through. It should be noted that the meaning of “career” in mainland Europe and the German-speaking countries differs from that in the English-speaking world. In the Anglo-American context, “career” is used to describe all possible forms that an individual’s working life may take. The term is neutral, simply referring to someone’s occupational history without necessarily implying a particular degree of success. Depending on the context, “career” can mean a person’s work history and, in some cases, their professional development. An individual’s “career” describes the work-related stations and positions they traverse. In German-speaking countries, by contrast, at least in the context of a person’s professional development, the term “career” is nearly always associated with the idea of professional progress and rising within a hierarchy; here, “building a career” and “being successful” are often used synonymously.

Rump (2003) observes that there is a degree of uncertainty when it comes to defining the concept of career. Currently, there appears to be something of a lacuna or vacuum. This indicates a paradigm shift. Nonetheless, the term “career” (at least in the German sense of *Karriere*) currently still tends to be used in connection with careers in leadership and rising up the management ladder. So the term “career” and conceptions of careers still include a notion of hierarchy. If there are typical career paths, at present they are to be found *within* particular career forms; permeable and hybrid career forms are still generally uncommon.

Schulte-Florian (1999) describes a career as an individual’s occupational history, which can unfold within a single organisation or across several. In her view, it is important that organisations have a hierarchical system, since this is the only way that sideways movements (lateral transfers), upwards movements (promotions) and downwards movements (demotions) can be identified in an individual’s professional development. Burchard (2000) explains the notion of a “horizontal career” and notes that, with respect to this career form or direction, we need to move away from the image of a ladder that employees aim to climb to the top of, rung by rung. Horizontal careers are instead typified by the “metaphor of a flat surface” and a constant process of learning on the part of the employee, rather than by a rapid ascent up the company hierarchy (as is the goal of a vertical career). In a horizontal career, career progression is understood in terms of developing



multiple skills. The aim is for individuals to develop an interwoven set of personal, social and professional competencies.

An organisational concept of career refers to any sequence of objectively ascertainable positions held by a person within organisational structures. Concepts of career that are more behaviour-based refer to changes in a person's internal and external behaviour over the course of their life. Such concepts of career link matters internal to the individual with external matters, such as ones concerning official positions. This includes the relationships between individuals and the providers of official positions (institutions or organisations) and the ways in which these relationships develop over time (Gerpott, 1988).

Auer (2000) proposes three conceptions of "career": "advancement-oriented career", "career as employment over the course of time" and "career as a universal form of life". As is clear just from the descriptions, these conceptions show there has been a shift in how the notion of career is understood: it is now also regarded as depending on individual motives. That is to say, individuals define the status that their career has in their life plan. The process is dependent on social changes, such as globalisation, and the uncertainty created by these constant changes, which make it harder to develop career plans.

Rump and Walter (2013) also regard the notion of career as caught between a rising pace of change, increasing complexity and shifts in social values. Accordingly, career planning increasingly involves choosing from an array of multidimensional options such as vertical, horizontal, and diagonal. The typical "career contract", where employees accept the prospects and career stages offered by a company, is disappearing. However, vertical advancement has a long tradition and is in many respects central to the notion of career. The old "boxes and steps"<sup>1</sup> model is still firmly lodged in people's minds. According to Rump (2013), in the coming years careers will become increasingly mosaic-like. The image of a mosaic illustrates the variety of different stages that individuals pass through in the course of their careers, alternating between specialist tasks, managerial assignments and projects. There can also be career breaks, which in a logic of this kind are not something negative but instead contribute to the development of skills. The mosaic also directly gives rise to an individualisation of career paths and career models. In future, careers will be defined against this background as lifelong professional and social development with a focus on one's strengths and the goal of making a valuable contribution. On this conception, a career consists in personal development.

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<sup>1</sup> Rump talks of the "alte Programmierung nach 'Kästchen und Stufen'" ("the old 'boxes and steps' programming") (2013, p. 52).



It is clear that there are diverse interpretations, definitions, opinions and views regarding the concept of career. What is probably still the most frequently cited definition describes a career as “the unfolding sequence of a person’s work experience over time” (Arthur, Hall, and Lawrence, 1996). This definition does not make reference to success, but success is nonetheless central to descriptions of careers. Hall distinguishes between “career as professional progression”, “career as vocation”, “career as a lifelong sequence of role-based experiences” and “career as the sum of positions that an individual holds over the course of their professional life” (Arthur et al., 1996). In the first of Hall’s conceptions, the focus is once again on professional advancement. “Career as vocation” refers to professions that are categorised as a career goal in their own right: that is, professions that enjoy such a high status (due to the high level of qualification and lengthy training that they require) that further career progression no longer seems essential. On the third conception of career, by contrast with the first, the emphasis is on individual evaluation of particular stages of a person’s career. The fourth conception looks at the individual positions that a person has held during their working life. The central theme of Hall’s definition is work and the significance it can have for individuals, organisations or societies. Equally central is the factor of time, which is intrinsic to the concept of a career. Accordingly, “career” should be regarded as a concept that reflects changes in context. As careers develop, they are subject to a number of factors pulling in different directions: on the one hand, the reciprocal influences of companies or organisations and social conceptions of work; and on the other, employees’ individual expectations with respect to their career and their actual well-being. They cannot be conceived without a social context, and so context at various levels plays a crucial role. Many empirical studies attempt to include multiple levels in their research (Mayrhofer, Meyer, and Steyrer, 2005).

A further distinction can be made between objective and subjective careers. An “objective career” refers to the individual positions a person has held during their working life, while a “subjective career” refers to the evaluative perspective from which individuals interpret their (working) life as a whole. This definition can also be applied to definitions of career success. “Objective career success” refers simply to the concrete and factually measurable course of an individual’s professional life over time, including (for example) salary development, progression through different departments and hierarchical levels within a company or changing to a new employer altogether. Career success is often equated with progression within a corporation and assessed in terms of personal income, hierarchical level and promotions (Kirchmeyer, 1998). Research on careers has focused on the traditional Western definition of success as climbing up the corporate ladder and seeking extrinsic reward (Tu, Forret, and Sullivan, 2006). Longitudinal studies have de-



defined career success as the number of promotions or the level of salary increase within a defined period, whereas cross-sectional studies have used objective measures such as current hierarchical position or salary, or subjective measures such as perceived career success and job satisfaction.

More recent research includes individual attitudes towards careers. It defines career success as the positive psychological or work-related outcomes or achievements one has accumulated as a result of one's work experience (Judge, Cable, Boudreau, and Bretz, 1995). So a "subjective" career refers less to concrete aspects of an individual's career and more to the psychological processes by means of which agents make their personal assessments of their own career (Arthur et al., 1996). The category "subjective career" can include things such as individuals' perceptions of the potential career options that are available to them, which in some circumstances may greatly diverge from the possibilities that are actually available. Individuals' satisfaction with their career path and profession also belong to this subjective dimension of career (Mayrhofer et al., 2005).

"Career" refers both to a system of positions that an individual has held throughout their life, and to the internal feelings, attitudes and beliefs that a person might hold about these positions. An occupation is a career if the individual associates their self-identity, self-definition and self-concept with it (Jackson, Hodge and Ingram 1994).

From a gender-specific perspective, it can be observed that men's and women's careers were traditionally viewed differently. Men used to have relatively static career paths after completing education or training. By contrast, women's careers historically consisted of short, temporary phases that filled up the time before marriage and motherhood. Some researchers have defined the role of housewife as a career option, while others have argued that this occupation should not be viewed under the aspect of "career" since it comprises unpaid work. Henning and Jardim (1987) view careers from a gender-specific perspective. They believe that men and women have different conceptions of careers. In their view, women regard self-fulfilment and growth as central aspects of their careers, while men are more likely to see careers as a continuous sequence of jobs.

The traditional linear developmental and hierarchical conception of career in the literature is, according to Patton and McMahon (2014), not adequate to explain women's perceptions of careers and their experiences of their working lives. It can be seen that the concept of career varies for women depending on their life context and life stages. The career development of women is found to be more complex due to a socialisation process that has emphasised the dichotomy of work and family. Following this perspective,