



## 1. How women rise – female Chinese executives as global role models

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*How different readers can benefit from the findings of the Shanghai Women's Career Lab – What readers can expect from the book*

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Contrary to what we might expect, China has a higher proportion of women in senior executive roles than almost any other country in the world, far outstripping many Western countries – even though there's not a gender quota in sight. According to figures published in 2014, 38% of senior management roles in China are held by women, far more than in the USA (20%) and Germany (16%) and the global average of 24% (Thornton, 2014). Although other sources report slightly different figures (due to different data collection methods and definitions), the overall picture remains the same: more women attain senior management positions in China than in Western countries. This is surprising given that most publications paint a more negative picture of Chinese women in top management. The data showing a high proportion of Chinese women in senior management prompt the questions of whether Chinese women pursue particular career strategies that make them successful and whether their environment is more favourable for female executives than in other countries. Could female Chinese executives and their careers even serve as role models for other women and societies? The primary focus of the book is to describe the career experiences of successful female Chinese senior executives as fully as possible. The central question addressed here is: what do women need to conquer top management levels? Above all, what skills, behaviours and personality traits do women need to get to the top of global corporations? The Shanghai Women's Career Lab research project offers unique insights into the career determinants and career experiences of a specific group: 35 extremely successful, fascinating Chinese women who have already made it to the top levels. The focus of the project was to establish what distinguishes Chinese women who are able to conquer top management levels. To answer this question, the book draws on the study participants' accounts of critical determinants of their career development and their own experiences during their progression to a senior management role at a multinational company in China. They also provide examples of the attitudes and behaviours that highly successful women exhibit and utilise on their way to the top. A related question concerns the conditions that are needed for



more women to get into top management positions globally. These questions require complex, multifactorial treatment. Four major areas appear to be relevant at first glance – society, economic context, family situation and the women themselves. With respect to society, the key questions are how people respond to women in senior management roles and whether societal influences tend to help or hinder women's progression to such roles. Economic conditions and mechanisms define the women's main sphere of activity, and exert both a direct and indirect influence on the proportion of women in top executive roles. But ultimately, it is the women themselves who have to adapt themselves and their actions to the challenges, requirements and responsibilities that senior management positions bring with them. The research that this book is based on aimed to achieve a better understanding of the situation of women in top management roles in China and thereby reveal new avenues for women who are pursuing careers, for policy experts who want to bring about lasting social change and for CEOs who want to support women in their organisations. The idea is to facilitate 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.

If you glance at the literature on careers, it is striking that even today most books and publications focus primarily on men's careers and on traditional hierarchical career paths. There are only a handful of studies looking exclusively at the careers of women in management. This may be due to the fact that women only recently began to enter senior levels at companies. It is thus also unsurprising that many of the existing studies compare women's careers with men's, as it were making men's careers a benchmark against which to measure women's. Such approaches suggest that women need to be like men in order to get to the top of companies and achieve career success in the traditional form. Various factors are compared, such as women's career orientation and motivation or their image as leaders by contrast with men. As a result, findings on these matters in the existing literature are rather patchy. The Shanghai Women's Career Lab investigated the career paths of 35 female Chinese top executives who work at multinational companies in China (mainly in Shanghai) and the determinants that have influenced their careers. The overall aim was to explore and analyse critical determinants, and to describe the women's career paths and classify them in a typology. The research 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 findings of the Shanghai Women's Career Lab are not designed to offer generalising 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 who already were very successful in their careers. The emphasis is on understanding the actual career strategies of these female Chinese executives, who have had successful careers at global corporations, and on sharing their lessons with other women and business experts.

### **How can the findings of the Shanghai Female Career Lab serve different readers?**

The book intends to provide inspiration and guidance to women, enabling them to plan their careers in a more informed manner. It is thus aimed at women anywhere in the world who are interested in international research on careers, who are starting or in the middle of their own career, or who want to support other women in their careers. This book differs from conventional career guides for women in a number of respects. Firstly, it offers an overview of academic research into women's careers. Secondly, it allows readers to develop an alternative perspective on the issues facing them in their own careers by reflecting on the findings about successful Chinese women. There is not just one way for women to pursue a successful career in top management, but many. By describing successful Chinese women's career strategies, the book aims to offer readers new perspectives that allow them to develop or modify their own career strategies. The second main group that the book is aimed at is managers who have recognised that helping more women to reach senior management positions will give their company a competitive edge in the medium to long term. That's as true for companies based in China as for ones in other parts of the world. Ventolini and Mercier (2015) describe how the management of careers becomes a strategic parameter for organisations in order to stay competitive. In order to implement successful strategies over the long term, companies need the best and most effective executives – in short, the right executives. Accordingly, promoting successful female (as well as male executives) is a key priority for all globally acting companies – within China and all over the globe. In future, there will be no getting around the need for even stronger promotion of women. Multinational companies with offices in China are faced with a particular challenge: "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). 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. The findings 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 Shanghai Women's Career Lab. The descriptions given by the women and the interpretations derived from these descriptions may help company leaders and HR specialists both in China and beyond to develop a deeper understanding of the situation of women in senior management roles.

Last but not least, anyone who wants to bring about social and political changes that lead to lasting improvements in conditions for women and their careers will find this book a catalyst for ideas and discussion. Although social and political debates do not make up the core of the book but are included only where they are touched on in the interviewees' reports, the findings nonetheless provide plenty of material for discussion and alternative perspectives. 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. A glance at the global situation shows that there is not just one right way to support women and create more favourable societal conditions.

### **What can readers expect from this book?**

The approach that the current book takes to this wide-ranging topic is explained in chapter 2. Given that the topic of careers and career determinants can be variously interpreted from different perspectives, it is important to make clear right at the start which perspective is being adopted here, and to explain the model that the book's argument and structure are based on. In the research that the book is based on, this model functioned as a "roadmap" (Creswell, 2014) that guided the analysis of existing literature and research. It was also used to generate and analyse the data from the Shanghai Women's Career Lab. The description of the model is followed by an overview of the career determinants that have been investigated by previous



research 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.

In Chapter 3, readers can then learn 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 socio cultural aspects, family situations and the labour market. The focus of this book 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. Subsequent discussion then focuses on the context in which the Chinese women pursued their careers: namely, the liberalisation of the entire economy and the emergence of a new labour market.

Chapter 4 introduces the Shanghai Women's Career Lab, the research project from which the new findings documented in this book derive. It explains who the participants were, how they were recruited and how the study was conducted. For the project, 35 female top executives were interviewed and 800 pages of transcripts were collected. This material was then analysed using a theory-based methodology. Many researchers consider it difficult to conduct studies in China, since doing so crucially depends on being able to gain access to the right target groups. The Shanghai Women's Career Lab was able to achieve this successfully thanks to the author's extensive network from her work as an executive coach. The “right target group” in this case consisted of female senior executives, who were selected in line with the definition set out in this book. There is also a discussion of why Shanghai is such an ideal location for researching the careers of women in top management positions. Finally, there is a concise summary of the key points of the method used in the qualitative study.

Chapter 5 presents the key findings from the Shanghai Women's Career Lab. It looks at how female Chinese executives describe external career determinants. Selected external determinants for female careers are presented according to the Female Career Model that is being used here. Each subsection begins with a sum-





mary of existing research on the respective determinant. 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. After that, the findings from the interviews are presented, i.e. the concrete results of the Shanghai Women's Career Lab. 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 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 research 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.

Chapter 6 then addresses the individual success factors that facilitate advancement to senior management. The primary question here is what skills and personalities these Chinese women needed 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 section 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.

Chapter 7 looks at Chinese women's career advancement in relation to career paths. It starts by considering existing research findings on women's career patterns. The career paths of the 35 participants in the Shanghai Women's Career Lab are then described and interpreted. The chapter 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 three parts: "The start of the women's careers", "Moving up" and "Future career goals". The analysis covers geographic mobility, reasons for changing roles, decision-making processes and alternatives to actual career choices, and both planned and unplanned career decisions. It also investigates the career effects of the choice of company type in China. Particular attention is paid to the challenges that the women have faced in the course of their careers.

The book culminates in chapter 8 with a typology describing the typical career patterns of the research 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 Shanghai Women's Career Lab.

The main findings of the Shanghai Women's Career Lab are summarised and discussed in chapter 9. The focus here is on encouraging readers to learn and reflect, based on the experiences of the female Chinese top managers. The chapter offers suggestions for women in their careers and for the other target groups mentioned before. The particular emphasis is on the question how to support more women into senior management roles. 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 also based on a discussion of the study participants' views about the future for female Chinese executives and the Chinese economy.

The concluding chapter (10) addresses the question of whether Chinese women can serve as global role models for women's careers.





## 2. The Female Career Model

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*How female executive careers are analysed in this book – Determinants of women's career success*

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### Determinants of female career success

Career development is influenced by a variety of contextual factors. Careers are subject to the reciprocal influences of social conceptions of work and employees' expectations with respect to their careers. Many empirical studies attempt to include multiple levels in their research in the form of defined determinants. The challenge for researchers is to adequately reflect the complexity of these influences. Several studies have examined the impact of very specific constructs such as leadership motive patterns and mentoring. But very few have investigated a range of personal and situational determinants. According to Tharenou, Latimer, and Conroy (1994), determinants of managerial advancement have not been well established. Very few comprehensive theories of managerial advancement have been developed for women.

Various researchers (Tharenou et al., 1994; Ragins, 1989; Fagenson, 1990; Kirchmeyer, 1998; Melamed, 1996; Lyness and Thompson, 2000; Eddelston, (2004); Mayrhofer et al., 2005; Judge et al., 1995) have classified the determinants of career success according to a variety of different, but largely compatible, categorisations. Many of these studies attempt to identify whether certain determinants have more influence than others on the success of women in management, what combination tends to promote success and whether factors can have different effects for men and women. Eddelston (2004) claims that research that examines predictors of career success for both women and men has been inconclusive and contradictory in its findings.

Figure 1 presents a selection of categories of determinants that researchers have studied. Below, some studies on determinants of women's careers and these studies' main findings are presented.



Determinants of career success	Selected authors
<b>Human Capital</b>	Tharenou (1994), Eddelston (2004), Kirchmeyer (1998), Melamed (1996), Arthur (1996)
<b>Personality traits</b> Marketability	Kirchmeyer, Ragins (1997), Mayrhofer (2005), Melamed Eddelston
<b>Motivation</b> career centrality career motivation achievement motivation career impatience	White (1995), Judge (1995), Eddelston, Arthur White, Lyness (2000) Judge, White White, Lyness, Judge, Kirchmeyer, Melamed Eddelston
<b>Opportunity Structure</b> Macro Societal/Demographic	Judge, Arthur, Melamed, Mayrhofer
<b>Career Choices</b>	Melamed
<b>Organisational</b> intermediate organisational training and development micro job level	Melamed, Lyness Tharenou Melamed, Lyness
<b>Interpersonal/Social Capital</b> Mentoring Networking Supportive Relationships	Eddelston, Judge, Amdurer (2014), Ragins Eddelston, Judge, Mayrhofer Eddelston, Mayrhofer Judge, Amdurer
<b>Family</b>	Eddelston, Ragins, Mayrhofer, Kirchmeyer Melamed, Judge, Lyness, Ragins, Tharenou

**Figure 1: How researchers categorise “Career determinants”** (examples from selected studies)

A gender-specific career model showing different components of career determinants was developed by Tharenou et al. (1994). According to the findings, early educational encouragement, training and development can affect career development by developing knowledge and ultimately facilitate promotion of female executives into higher ranks.

Kirchmeyer (1998) subdivides career determinants into the categories human capital, individual, interpersonal and family. Human capital refers to the personal investment one makes to enhance one's value in the workplace. In contrast to Tharenou et al., Kirchmeyer found that education and work-related experience seem to have a stronger influence on men's progression. Women's accomplishments are attributed to luck or external factors such as affirmative action. Individual determinants relate to one's capacity to manage and include personality traits and other psychological factors. Research confirms that male managers are believed to possess more of the necessary traits than female ones. A high level of femininity (more empathetic, expressive traits) is only associated with low effectiveness for female supervisors. The third category describes interpersonal determinants. These